

to All Those We Help

by Roxanne Acquistapace

The food pantry in Santa Cruz opens 40 minutes late. I want to duck in and duck out so I arrive early. I do not want to sit on display in one of the many chairs lined up in the long hall.

I call in sick from work for the morning, as the hours at the food pantry are from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. daily. It turns out that most of the people waiting there as the time ticks by are also working, but do not have enough money for food.

"I've never seen you here before," one man observes. "Don't worry, they are very kind here. The paperwork is easy. You just need proof of address," he adds.

I panic. I have just moved and have nothing that shows my new address. I decide I will use my old address, the house I can no longer afford to live in. I wonder about people who have no address. Can they get food here?

The pantry opens and we are ushered in one at a time. Some people are beginning to grumble because they are going to be so late to work. We are on the honor system as to who is in what order in line. I fill out the short form required and begin to pick out my one can of protein, one juice, one cereal, a single candy bar, a few sweet potatoes, a bit of broccoli and some oranges. I am accompanied by a pantry worker.

Although everyone is very kind, I feel humiliated and speed away with my bag of food. Throughout the process of my business going downhill after 9/11 (I rely on people who travel as my clients) — losing my home, having to borrow money for another car when the old one died so that I had transportation to all my different job sites — my dignity was in shreds. Throw in a few personal crises and I find I am not handling things well, as the financial shape of my day-to-day reality has been changing for the worse over the last two years.

It is in this frame of mind that I decide to write this article and start talking to service providers and clients about dignity. Because I have picked those people who serve us as role models, I would be negligent if I didn't include what I have observed first-hand also.



Love and respect may be the most important ingredients in the food served to the poor, and in the shelter and services provided.

Art by Christa Occhiogrosso

When I sell *Street Spirit*, I am trying to support myself. I know I am dirty and ugly to some people. Do you think I don't know that? But I am still a person, a person that is dying a little every day from the withering looks and hateful things said to him by passers-by and the constant harassment by law enforcement.