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Refuge From Real Life

Grounding kids in nature at the Headland's
Home Away From Homelessness

COVER STORY

BY JEANIE KORTUM

At Home With the Horizon

Can a weekend home in the Marin Headlands lend homeless kids a sense of self?

DIANA

Diana* is clinging to my neck, squeezing so hard I can barely breathe. “I don’t wanna go,” she cries, inches from my ear. “Don’t let them take me.”

The three cops clench and unclench their hands at their sides. They look embarrassed.

Diana’s father yells at his kids: “Run!” he tells them. “If they get you I’ll never see you again.” It’s the first time I’ve understood the expression “foaming at the mouth.” He’s desperate; so uncertain of his standing that he’s become the center of a drama so life will swirl around him, even if it’s under our scornful eyes. His children are props in his theater.

This is desperate theater. Everyone here knows it. Could even get dangerous. “Come on, dude,” one of the cops cajoles, shaking his head. “You’re just making it harder on your kids.”

Diana’s older brother Rob, with Tom Sawyer freckles, squirms under some desks. A couple of his buddies egg him on. “Go, Tom!”

Go, Tom? Where? We’re all in one crowded room in an emergency shelter for homeless families on Waller Street. A cop blocks the exit.

A social worker tries putting the brakes on this rapidly escalating scene.

“Calm down, everyone,” she says in studied mellifluous tones. “Calm down.”

No one listens. Diana’s two little sisters, both in diapers, begin to scream.

Diana had spent the afternoon at the Beach House out in the Marin Headlands. The house is part of a program I started 11 years ago in partnership with the National Park Service. We were eating pizza with other kids when my friend Deirdre English and I received the call from the staff of the homeless shelter where the children were living. “The cops are here to separate the children from their father. There’s been a complaint. Get them back here and keep them calm.”

That afternoon, Diana had forgotten all about being a homeless kid. She had stretched her arms and spun on top of the mountain. She made a wish from the wishing bridge. Even at 8, she possessed a resolute seriousness that chastised anything frivolous in her path. She was the one who comforted her little sisters when they were sad, playing mommy because mommy wasn’t there.

**the names of the children in this story have been changed.*

Eyes like scraps of the sky. A ponytail that rushed down her head as if spilt. Like many homeless children, she hoarded everything that belonged to her. She sat on the top bunk at the shelter and placed a picture of her mom next to a postcard of a boat, a pink ribbon, her bedraggled teddy bear. She existed, see? She had a family.

And then this night.

When someone suspects that a child is being abused, they report them to Children Protective Services. If the complaint sounds valid or if there are a number of complaints from various sources, CPS will pick the children up. They are taken to San Francisco General Hospital and then usually placed in an emergency foster home. The social worker assigned to the case, and then later the courts, decide whether the child should be returned to the parent, sent to relatives or placed in a foster or group home. Or, in some rare cases, emancipated for adoption. A child cannot be separated from his parents just for being homeless.

“What’s happening?” Diana whispers in my ear and then I can no longer hear her because once again her father is screaming. “F — you!” He extends one finger toward the cops, pure flame. The faces of his children grow transparent with fear. One of the cops places his hand on the father’s arm, recites the phrase of the hour. “Calm down, man.”

But the father’s not calming down. He picks up a glass. “Dude,” warns one of the cops, reaching for his handcuffs. The children know what he’s going to do with the glass before anyone else does. He smashes it on a table. Chips of exploded glass say what his words can’t.

Still foaming at the mouth, the father is pulled out of the room. The children are led down the shelter stairs to the two patrol cars in the parking lot. I carry Diana, English carries the smallest child. We file past somber mothers and fathers and their children. Though everyone is quiet, they hold pieces of the father’s scream in their mouths; this is their worst nightmare, too.

No more sound from the child in my arms; not the fulfilled silence of this afternoon but a dangerous, shut-down, don’t-let-in-life kind of quiet. Diana’s screams have taken up too much room. Now she’s trying to make herself small. I stroke her hair, notice the tears still glittering on her lashes. “It’s going to be all right,” I say.

“The worst thing is people saying that they’re going to take us away from our father. My father ended up raising us all by himself for almost five years. He’s a really good dad and he tries to help us as much as he can. We really need our family to stay together.” – Joshua, 8.

But she's withdrawn and I think I know what she's thinking. Lies, she's telling herself. More nice-lady talk. Better to make myself invisible. If people's eyes run past me, maybe nothing will happen to me.

Though she is trying to disappear, Diana is absolutely visible to me in the parking lot, her face an ivory cameo pinned against the darkness, so lost, so sad. I'll remember that expression for the rest of my life. This afternoon she tasted freedom, childhood, possibility, but tonight she is alone. "I just wanted my family to stay together forever," she whispers.

The cops indicate that we may follow them to San Francisco General Hospital, where the processing, categorizing, scrutinizing and examining of our city's abused kids happens. I remember cheerful colors, kind adults, a plastic doll's stove complete with glossy hamburger buns. But despite the solicitous smiles, a pervasive, tired smell persists.

Diana doesn't ask about her father. She sits down in my lap and asks if she will see the beach house again. "I'll try," I say, and eventually she falls asleep, swaddling this new pain in short-lived oblivion.

Two days later English and I are able to keep this promise. When we pick Diana up from her new foster home in the Western Addition, fatigue still glazes her eyes. She exhibits the withdrawn quietness I've seen many times in children undergoing trauma.

It is improbably hot that day in the headlands. The heat has boiled every growing thing into the air; breathing is almost like eating. Diana seems not quite there, newly cautious. She walks through the day as if stunned.

Where is the valiant, sturdy, serious girl I first met? The shimmering girl from two days ago? In one long scream of a night she has moved from the dubious status of homeless child to the even more dubious status of foster child. The first thing she does is to sink to the carpet of the beach house, a place she has been to only twice before. "I'm home," she says, more to herself than anyone else.

She dons an orange life jacket and walks tentatively out into the ocean, afternoon light glazing her face.

"Why did you do it?" she asks, stomping on a wave.

"Diana?" I ask. "Who are you talking to?"

No answer.

"I'm mad," she says.

I hold onto the back of her life jacket but Diana is gone, engaged in an entirely different conversation.

"Why did you do it?" she repeats. "I'm so mad!"

Twenty minutes? Thirty minutes? I'm not sure but when she returns she smiles with new resolve. Some kind of psychological shift has occurred. She knows who she isn't — the Diana whom those nice, tired people saw the other night as they wrote her name, checked her pulse, processed her through the system. She isn't just a homeless child and she isn't just a foster child. She is this person, standing in this wave, in this forgiving, homelike place.

Diana will need resolve for the life that is about to come. Eventually, she will be returned to her mother in another state. She will inherit a new father and another little sister, she will gain weight, take dance lessons, continue to mother her sisters. And then her family will be destroyed forever. Her brother and her mother will be convicted of murder. She and her little sisters now live with another relative.



"We were a happy lower-middle-class family and now we're living in a shelter? That kind of stuff only happens on TV." – Tony, 17.

A Home Away From Homelessness began as an impulse of the heart. Eleven years ago I approached then — Sen. John Burton. "How about a place to take homeless children out to the Marin Headlands?" I asked. He steered me toward Brian O'Neill, the superintendent of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, who immediately supported the idea. "Go out to the headlands and pick yourself out a house," he instructed, and on that day our program was born.

The kids designed the cottage. One of our children became chairperson of the house committee. She was very mature about it, even selling cookies in the projects to raise money. "We need a fruit bowl," she announced, "and a clock that ticks. We need family dinners, we need family albums, we need a bell to ring for dinner, we need a dog and we need a garden. The house should have yellow walls."

"Isn't it a shame to take these kids out of their own environment and drop them into another world?" people sometimes ask. "Doesn't it make it too hard to go back?" That's missing the point. This world is theirs. It's a national park and we are all stewards. When a homeless child grasps that idea — that nature is a feast that is always available, even to them — they are stunned. It's as elusive and gigantic a notion as infinity, especially to a child who has lost everything and, worse, doesn't believe he deserves anything.



A Home Away From Homelessness has grown from that one house into four sites with four distinct programs, serving hundreds of homeless children in Marin and San Francisco. Along with the Beach House we now have the School House, which provides an after school tutoring program for middle-school homeless children, and a mentor program in which we match people from the community with a homeless child for a year's commitment, plus an advocacy program working for change for homeless children within our city's educational system.

“The hardest thing I've done in my life is when my daddy kicked my mother in the stomach. When mommy was pregnant daddy kicked her on her stomach, that's why she had the baby early. I was crying and had to help my mother. I got a knife. I stabbed him on his foot.” – Lynn, 7

The girl in the baggy pants with the long ballerina neck gets off the 49 Van Ness bus, walks through the gates of Upper Fort Mason by San Francisco's marina. A boy in cornrows follows her. “Race you!” she challenges. “No, you're too slow,” he taunts and takes off. Another boy, with sagging pants and a pair of scholarly glasses, enters the fray. “You know what's for dinner?” he asks. “Spaghetti,” the girl responds. She stops to pick a dandelion.

“You mean those kids are homeless?” a young professional asks, as the kids race past her on their way to the School House. “What are the homeless doing in San Francisco's prime real estate?” and somewhere, the spirit of late Rep. Phil Burton, the man who saved the park from development, chuckles.

These children don't live in Upper Fort Mason, but for some of them this duplex is the only consistency in their lives. Every afternoon, they pour across the wide lawns and enter the School House. “What's for dinner?” they ask, spilling their books on their desks and heading for the fridge. Questions from the staff, “How did your report on the Constitution go?” “Want to help with snacks?” reach out and lasso them into the domestic routine that is our program.

Some people call San Francisco the most beautiful city in the world. Buildings scatter over our hills like crumbled seashells, the sky fills with golden light. But look into the shadows. Who are those children? “San Francisco's beautiful on the outside but not on the inside,” a little homeless girl once told me.

This is a story about children who happen to be homeless; some 4,050 of them at last count, according to San Francisco's Homeless Education Plan. This underground tribe washes through our city, living in buses and bus stations, freeway overpasses and homeless shelters, tiny hotel rooms and dark cars. These are not the romantic hobos of the past but the detritus of our society, the throwaways, spun off by the great centrifugal force of poverty into a parallel universe that expands by the day. It's composed of children who don't know where they are going to sleep that night, children coming home from school to a motel room, pushing through the noisy commerce of prostitution and drug deals. It's a world where babies sleep in plastic milk boxes and children ride the bus all night because there's no place to sleep, get dressed in the restroom of the bus station and show up at Herbert Hoover Junior High to try to pretend their life is normal.

Right now, San Francisco is striving to end homelessness. Vans, outreach, social workers and places to stay — all are being mustered, at least for single adults. But there are 4,050 little nomads living among us who had nothing to do with the forces that brought them here.

DONALD

Donald took a trip to the Beach House one day. He was one of those tough hurt boys, face soiled with anger, eyebrows so heavy it gave him a perpetually hooded expression. Though he was only 10 he had already been robbed of boyhood, so somewhere along the line he had decided to fight like a man. The wild

uncontrolled parts inside made him a little dangerous. I knew something of his story; he had discovered his mother, dead, leaning against the door.

He did all the right things at the Beach House. Put the seat-belt on in the car, washed his hands before eating, “Yes ma'am,” “No ma'am.” He helped carry in the packages, even caught an errant plastic bag in the wind. But despite these small gestures, he couldn't quite hide unguarded feral moments that revealed a hard, taunting energy below the surface. It was there in the way he ate — with great, ravenous bites, possessing an appetite that no food could address — and when he talked too roughly to the younger kids. He had a kind of Third World intimacy with death, and regularly referred to dead bodies and violence.

We were on a hike when he disappeared. “Donald,” I called. “Donald!” He didn’t answer and I began to worry. Had he fallen? Run away?

When he emerged from some bushes down the road I saw immediately something was up. There was a new looseness in his walk, bordering on cockiness. He told the kids and me to line up, he was going to show us something. Of course we did. We were all a little afraid of him. He led us, single file, across the wishing bridge and down the path. But before crawling into the bushes he told us we needed a secret password. “Our Beach House,” the kids chorused. He nodded and we ducked inside.

We had to crawl, hunched over, down a long narrow tunnel of bushes. Eventually, we reached an open space by the stream where we could stand up. It was breathtaking. In some secret moment, Donald had filled a picnic basket and draped this green enclosed place with balloons and laid placemats on the ground.

Without being told, with a kind of hushed solemnity, each kid went to sit by a placemat. “Pick up the birthday hats,” Donald whispered. Underneath, there were kazoos. Everyone put the instruments in their mouths and began to hum.

A car went by, only a few feet away, but we just smiled. No one would find us. We were safe. When we crept out we were surprised to find it almost twilight. The red-wing blackbirds had settled into the trees by the Beach House. All the kids looked up as we drew near and then suddenly, as one, the birds rose into the air. Epaulets of red glinted on their wings and filled the sky. Once again the kids were silent, shocked by the unexpected beauty of this place. In that moment I felt that we, like the birds, were marked — by the red surprise of the blackbirds, by the unexpected surprise of Donald’s compassion.

I’ve been in this line of work for more than 20 years. Twenty years of Dianas and Donalds. Twenty years of whispered confidences, 20 years of goodbyes. I have held children already so broken by life their only release is to cry, as Rilke puts it, “from the inconsolable source of tears.”

The stories are horrendously cruel, soul-depleting and they make you wonder how our society stumbles forward if these children are the pollinating seeds of our future. “I should’ve just let you run down my leg,” one mother told her daughter, planting the self-loathing that years later will materialize in self-mutilation and, eventually, marriage to a man who beat her.

Some of the stories hit you like a blow to the head. The 18-month-old baby who woke up in a transient hotel. The father, after cleaning the needles off the floor, thought it was OK to let his son crawl around but the young boy found a used condom and put it into his mouth. He had to be checked for AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases.

The fragile woman with luminous eyes who had just escaped a firebomb her husband had thrown, igniting the house, herself and her son.

The tearful mother, barely able to tell the story of her ex-husband who had hung her little boy from the door ledge and laughed delightedly when he finally dropped.

The woman who punished her child by keeping him from sleep and when he did finally drop his head, firing off a gun over his head.

The worst of it is that the kids think they deserve this. “I’m bad,” they often say. “My mother doesn’t want me. If she hadn’t had me we wouldn’t be homeless.”



“People always ask me how it feels to be homeless. What a stupid question. That’s like asking how an orange tastes.” – Luna, 14.

But there is hope. There’s a quality of being wide open to life inside many of these hurt, damaged children. They want so desperately to be loved and for their lives to be normal.

One of our kids had been molested by a police officer. He was only 13, living at that time in a van with his parents. Curling eyelashes, strong cheekbones, long ears, almost always wearing a quizzical look. His story was confirmed by some other kids who came forward to testify about the officer as well. But the District Attorney really needed this kid’s testimony.

The boy was terrified. I brought him a jacket and some slacks. “No matter what happens, we’re going to have a victory party out at the Beach House afterward,” I told him.

In court he looked the officer in the eye and told what had happened. The case resulted in a hung jury but the boy claimed victory for himself; he was going to walk into adult life knowing he had told his truth.

But that’s not the main story. He was strangely quiet on the ride out to the Beach House afterward, picking at his new pants and then, immediately on arrival, grabbed a bike and took off.

“Oooooohh...” he roared, emitting a strange, guttural sound. We all stared. “Oooooohh...” What was it? Grief? Anger? Joy? Whatever had gathered in his chest was too large for him. He became pure motion, everything he saw with his eyes he wanted to touch with his body.

In seconds flat, his body sharpened into a blade, he reached the top of the mountain.

“Ooooooh,” he roared.

The sound frightened me. Was it grief because his testimony had only resulted in a hung jury? Was it rage because the police weren’t supposed to do that to anyone, but especially not to a kid?

Something’s wrong, I thought, watching him move beneath his ceiling of sound. He’s combusting, falling apart. But then I remembered something I had read about the blue whale, who also sends out her voice. For the longest time scientists didn’t understand why. But then they decided that the whale was sending her voice across the ocean floor so it would touch the edges of the continent, bounce back and tell her where she was.

“I want to be a writer, a ballerina and a comedian. I’ll go to bed at midnight, wake up at 8:30, then I’ll be a ballerina till 10:30. Then I’ll be a comedian till 1, then after that I’ll start being a writer.” – Rebecca, 8.

A few moments later the boy came back. “We need more cereal,” he said calmly. His face looked clean, purged. “Can I have marshmallows in my hot chocolate?”

He’s all right, I thought to myself. The boy was spreading out his voice so that he could feel where he left off and the world began.

You know what you have the most of when you’re a homeless kid? Secrets.

One little girl with a spray of freckles and a southern twang got on a bus in Nebraska with her father, carrying a secret with her to San Francisco. Her mother was lost to the street and her father was lost to himself, a victim of the foster care system with wounds so deep he was made meager and selfish in his loving and his parenting.

At first she was just one of the many kids at the Beach House

Secrets of the Homeless Child

Secrets. If you are a homeless child you know you aren’t supposed to talk about some things. Like the secret about what made you homeless in the first place.

You don’t talk about the needles or the hitting and you don’t tell anyone when you’re hungry and you haven’t eaten all day and you certainly don’t talk about something as incidental as feeling sad.

Secrets. you don’t talk about what those boys or that uncle did to you. Nobody really cares anyway. And don’t try to make a new friend because you can’t bring them home after school.

And don’t tell your teacher you’re homeless, because she’ll think you’re going to cause trouble because you’re angry and stupid and you don’t do your homework and she’s right because lately you’ve found it kind of hard to concentrate.

And your aren’t going to tell your troubles to the a nice social worker either, or the volunteer who gave you a teddy bear. They’ll just get all worried, get that wiggly voice on, you know, the voice that moves around, gets all soft. And their eyes get really big with concern and maybe even kindness, but you can’t trust that either because nothing changes, nothing lasts. So before somebody else takes you away, you get there first, you take yourself away. Reserve grows up around your heart. Nothing gets in, not even love. Nothing goes out, especially not love. A locked-down heart, and no amount of teddy bears or nice wiggly talk is going to make you trust enough to talk. — J.K.

climbing mountains, pushing bikes, gorging on cereal, shrieking happily. But later, on a hike when she stood too close to the edge of a mountain, I recognized her stance. Not exhilaration, but leaning too close to the emotional and physical edge.

I was not surprised when half an hour later she broke apart, revealing a secret she had brought up on the bus. She had been raped recently by a pack of schoolyard bullies. She was 8.

Something about the headlands helps these kids to open up and dream a little. I think it’s the ocean, the horizon. Horizons provide an edge to live next to. By defining an outside, a horizon gives us an inside place to rest, a home.

Many of these children have never seen a horizon before, for they never leave the radius of five urban blocks. “What’s that

blue shiny stuff?” a little girl once asked me, pointing toward the ocean. Something magic and deeply primitive happens inside a homeless child standing in the ocean, gazing toward the horizon. I’ve seen it over and over again. With deep instincts, the kids register the fact that the ocean is a force they can lean against, find themselves in relationship to, the way cavemen painted animals to possess them. They know that the ocean should be celebrated and respected.

“You’re me!” Jason, age 8, screamed to the ocean.

“It moves!” Daniela, age 6.

“Today I found my freedom.” Ben, age 12.

“Every time I try to move, it just pulls me back.” Alice, age 9.

“The ocean is like a head with nothing in it.” Robert, age 8.

“I can breathe easier here,” Juan, age 7.

“This is so soft, I wish I could feel it all day long.” Chloe, age 8.

This work is not depressing because you witness first times almost daily - primitive, unplanned moments of true seeing, true being and spontaneous joy. Clinical studies on the seeds of resilience have chronicled people who have grown up in terrible poverty and devastation and gone on to build huge lives. They often identify a neighbor, a teacher or an aunt who took an interest in them and made them feel special. And the relationship doesn’t even have to be sustained for a long period of time; it’s just the fact that they were chosen, made visible by someone else.

Homelessness is a convenient umbrella term but it means more than a lack of architecture. For some of our kids, it is a psychological homelessness; they don’t even live within themselves. Some are so unacknowledged there’s not even the outline of self. Thus, it is extremely powerful when someone says: “Chris, you are such a good brother.” Or “Jasinia, that’s a beautiful bouquet of flowers you made.” I believe that, in those moments, you kindle self.

LISA

Lisa, 13 years old, attends our School House program. Her earliest memory: “I was sleeping in the back seat of a car and when I opened my eyes I saw snow. I was only 4 and had never seen snow before. I looked in the front seat and saw my father and his girlfriend. They had stolen me and my brother. The cops were after us and the girlfriend told me to lie to them if they caught us. ‘Tell them I’m your mother,’ she ordered. When I shook my head she leaned over the seat and ripped out my earrings, the ones my real mom had given me. I still have slits in my ears.”

Though she's recently moved into a foster home, Lisa's been homeless for as long as I've known her, moving from crack hotel to crack hotel, one summer a van by the beach, then a Tenderloin apartment crowded with garbage. At one point, she lived with a girlfriend whose mom was doing heroin. Someone tried to stab her mother right in front of her, her father tried to strangle her, she's heard a million broken promises. "This is the one," her mother says as she goes off with yet another man. "We'll be a family soon. We'll have birthdays and family dinners and go to the zoo together."

It's dangerous listening when Lisa talks this way, it makes you want to promise her anything. She doesn't want your sympathy. What she wants is harder to provide, she wants you just to hear her out.

Her mother has given her life a quality of waiting — "soon, soon," is the whisper on the wind of her many exits — yet Lisa is mature beyond her years. "My mother's been hurt by life," she says. "She's always waiting for the next boyfriend to save her. Sometimes I'm angry but mostly I feel sorry for her."

Maybe it's talking about her mother, but what you've feared all along in this conversation begins to happen. Standing right in front of you, Lisa begins to disappear. She's starting to lose herself to one of those eddies that threaten to pull her down into dangerous gray indifference. Eyes big and blank, hair constricted in a tight bun, conversation reduced to a short "yes" or "no" to your questions. But just as she starts to leave, somehow, heroically, she catches herself. Very deliberately she plants something

optimistic in front of her. "Dinner's going to be so tight tonight," she announces, tight being her favorite word. "We're having macaroni and cheese." "I got a B on a book report!" And Lisa's back in front of you again, vivid, lit from within, determined to live her best life no matter what has happened to her. She throws back her head and laughs, almost startlingly alive, her eyes now a beautiful, piercing blue, and then, as if to frame what she is saying, she loosens her hair. Strawberry blond abundance spills across her shoulders.

Of course our program can't take full credit for this brave girl, she's got good stuff in her DNA. Some great and gorgeous will to not merely exist but to flourish breathes inside of her, along with an almost mystical capacity to forgive. Not counterfeit forgiving, the easy kind, but real forgiving, generated from authentic wisdom.

When I'm feeling sorry for myself, bent over some minor pain, I think of Lisa and she makes me braver. Take hold of life, she instructs, you're in charge.

Despite hunger, sexual and physical abuse, and insecurity as immediate as not knowing where they're going to sleep that night, these kids still manage to live days filled with hope and possibility. We will all encounter loss in our lives, our days painted light against dark, pain against joy, but these homeless children have taught me not only how miraculous and strong our species is, they've also helped me to recognize the little bit of mystical light that flickers inside us all. ♦

The Shameful Statistics

The average homeless person in this country is 9 years old. Between 35 and 40 percent of the nation's homeless people are families, the fastest growing category within the homeless. The knee-jerk response is to blame the parents, but it's not that simple. These little nomads and their parents are merely symptoms of a great sickness in our society. To understand the root of homelessness you must become a geologist, moving ever deeper toward the center of our society, the great molten core that is poverty and racism. Homelessness reflects tectonic shifts in the globalizing economy and the ever-widening chasm between rich and poor as workers' wages shrink or disappear.

Today, 14.4 million American families (according to San Francisco's Homeless Education Plan), one out of every seven have critical housing needs, says the Coalition on Homelessness, San Francisco. The majority of homeless families are headed by single mothers. Two-thirds of homeless mothers report experiencing domestic abuse, more than one quarter needing medical treatment as a result.

High stress, extreme poverty and

homelessness can have devastating long-term effects on every facet of a child's life. Homeless children are more likely to experience developmental problems, educational delays, behavioral issues and learning disabilities. National research has found that homeless children are twice as likely to repeat a grade, while 45 percent do not attend school on a regular basis. As a result, they are less likely to acquire the skills and capacity they need to escape poverty and homelessness as adults. Compared with all children, homeless children are twice as likely to experience hunger, have four times the rate of asthma or other respiratory infections and five times as many stomach infections. Homeless children between 6 and 17 struggle with very high rates of mental health problems. Nearly a third

have at least one major mental disorder that interferes with their daily activities; nearly half have problems such as anxiety, depression or withdrawal. (All statistics on mental health from the Better Homes Fund, Homeless Children International and the National Center on Family Homelessness.)

San Francisco's housing crisis is in part due to the fact that it costs a family of three more than \$69,000 to live in the city. In 2005, 100 families will wait three to five months to get into a full-service shelter. More than 450 families and 760 children are living in San Francisco single-room occupancy hotels. Eighty percent of children in SROs are between the ages of newborn and 12, with many having spent their entire lives there. The average SRO family consists of 3.4 people who have lived in their 10 x 10 room, without a kitchen or bathroom, for more than four years. After paying for rent and food, the average family has \$290 to make ends meet for a month, with averages as low as \$63 in the Mission and \$37 in the Tenderloin. (All rent statistics from the Citywide Families in SROs Collaborative.) — J.K.



Jeanie Kortum founded A Home Away From Homelessness in partnership with the National Park Service 11 years ago. She is an occasional contributor to The Chronicle and the author of one novel. Home Away can be reached at www.homeaway.org.