



## HOMELESS IN HOLLENBECK

by Chantal Allan

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During the Thanksgiving holiday, thousands of homeless people in Los Angeles lined up for free meals given by non-profit organizations and church groups.

For those who were homeless in East L.A., a local church named Victory Outreach handed out bowls of a traditional Mexican breakfast soup called menudo at four different places, including Hollenbeck Park.

As people lined up for the soup, church volunteer Michelle Cash scooped it into plastic bowls.

To her, this was no ordinary meal.

“That’s the bait,” said Cash, nodding her head to the red broth with bobbing pieces of beef tripe and corn. “They may think we’re filling their stomachs, but we’re actually filling them with a solution.”

Cash said the hope is that some of the homeless people will want to get off the street and will ask to be placed in the church’s rehabilitation homes.

That’s how she turned her life around 14 years ago.

As a teenager, Cash was strung out on heroin and often roamed the streets of East Los Angeles at night.

When she entered the rehab home, she stopped using drugs. It’s something she credits to God.

But Ruben Escobedo, 53, didn’t see any deeper meaning in his bowl of menudo.

For him, the thought of getting some free food was all he cared about.

Escobedo works as a roofer and isn’t technically homeless – for the past 10 years, his boss has rented him a bedroom.

But since he doesn’t have a fridge, stove or microwave, he eats fast food meals at places like McDonald’s, or eats burritos and junk food.

As he pushed away his empty bowl, Escobedo said he didn’t really see the point of churches giving out one free meal a year.

“It helped for the day, but that’s it,” he said. “So then what do you do? You know you’re not gonna go back to the same place because they gonna pick up the tables, they gonna go and say, ‘Thank you. God bless you everybody. See you next year.’”

On the other side of the table, Harry Tapia had a different perspective about the free meal.

Seven months ago he was kicked out of his apartment because he could no longer pay the rent, even though he works at Sears, scanning invoices.

Now Tapia’s a vagrant, moving from place to place.

To him, the free Thanksgiving meal was a reminder that he has to get off the street.

“I can’t imagine how long they’ve been coming every year,” said Tapia, gesturing his hand toward the dozen or so people eating their soup. “I mean, ‘Harry, it’s not going to happen to you, is it?’ Get a job, go back to school, that’s all I can do to get outta here.”

Maryann Cary lives for comments like those.

Cary, 67, has called East Los Angeles home since she was a toddler.

She grew up in a family that nurtured five generations of gang members and at one time, she was part of a gang too.

But the turning point for Cary came after four of her nine children were shot on her front lawn by rival gang members.

From then on, she fought to keep her children and grandchildren out of gang life.

She succeeded and now she wants to help others.

As Cary looked at the homeless people she had served, tears welled up in her eyes.

She too knows what it's like to scrounge for food to survive.

She remembers her husband digging in garbage bins behind grocery stores to find enough food for the family.

But the feisty great-grandmother doesn't dwell too much on the past.

Instead, she focuses on the future and the fact that everyone who ate soup at her tables could change their lives too.

"If they really have the desires, they can do it," she said. "Because I've done it myself. I've done it at 50 years old. Went to school, got my GED, got a job with computers."