

Dad wants to help the homeless

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By Tom Dalton
Staff writer

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SALEM — Two years ago, Andrew Acampora's 18-year-old son announced he was leaving home.

"I'm going to go live with my friends," he said.

Since that day, the young man's struggle to survive on the street, in homeless shelters, in garages and in friends' apartments has taken the Acampora family to places they never expected to go.

Like a Lynn cemetery.

"We would meet him at the cemetery and drop food to him," said Acampora, 59, a retired Sylvania manager who lives in Swampscott.

Through it all, he and his wife have tried hard to maintain contact with their son and to get him help, although there have been periods when they have not known where he was living or how he was doing.

Sometimes the phone rings and their son is on the other end. Often he needs something.

Once, the call came at 1 a.m. on a Saturday. It was freezing rain outside. Their son and several friends had been thrown out of a homeless shelter. Could they spend the night? Acampora brought them home.

"They all came in with their black garbage bags and their belongings," he said.

Acampora and his wife, Magret, have five children. The homeless child, whose name the family did not want used, is their youngest, adopted at 3 months.

"We realized very quickly there were some learning issues," Acampora said.

But nothing prepared them for the dramatic change that took place when he hit his teenage years.

"He was a model child until he was about 14," Acampora said. "Then, all of a sudden, it was like somebody flipped a switch. ... He became completely withdrawn from everyone."

The boy was in and out of hospitals and eventually dropped out of high school, cutting one more tie.

The journey the Acamporas have taken into a dark world they never knew existed has been painful, but it also has led to a revelation.

Their son is not alone. They are not alone.

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There are 2 million homeless people between the ages of 12 and 24 in this country, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, a nonprofit agency in Washington, D.C.

This experience also has led Acampora to change the direction of his life. He hopes now to help not only his son, but other young people on the North Shore who are homeless. This sense of mission may come more easily to him. Since retiring, this longtime Catholic deacon has become the pastoral associate at St. John the Evangelist Church in Swampscott.

Over the past year or more, Acampora has talked to the Salem Mission, sat down with Bridge Over Troubled Waters, a program in Boston for homeless youths, and made contacts with Family Continuity, a nonprofit mental health agency with offices on the North Shore.

He has formed a nonprofit organization, Journeys of Hope; recruited friends and others to serve on a board of directors; and made plans to open a day program for the homeless. The program would hire counselors and arrange for services with outside agencies.

"As I started to look at the statistics ... it just jumped out at me that this was a real problem on a national level," Acampora said during an interview in the rectory at St. John the Evangelist.

"Homelessness is an issue in general, but programs for late teens and early 20s is an issue that is not addressed well."

He has met, among others, with Salem Mayor Kim Driscoll because he wants to open the day program in Salem, either later this year or early in 2010. Salem, he said, has a homeless shelter and access to transportation and social services.

While searching for a site, Acampora is also lining up services and has received some commitments.

"We are supporting the effort of Journey of Hope," said Robin Risso, regional director of Family Continuity. "Our intent is to ... provide some mental health services once they are able to open their site in Salem."

Journeys of Hope has secured an \$8,000 grant, Acampora said, has applied for other grants and is fundraising. There is an event tomorrow in Beverly Farms.

Acampora knows the economy is bad, but he is plowing ahead nonetheless.

"This is the worst time to be doing something," he said. "But you know what? The need is there. This is a niche population that has fallen through the cracks. We need to be successful at this, and we will."

If You Go

What: Antiques Appraisal fundraiser

To benefit: Journeys of Hope, a program to help homeless people 18-23.

When: Tomorrow, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Where: The Hastings House, 14 Oak St., Beverly Farms (across from Beverly Farms train station)

Cost: \$15 per item, or three items for \$25

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Photos



Andy Acampora, a pastoral associate at St. John The Evangelist Church in Swampscott, is hoping to open a program in Salem for homeless youths. Staff Photographer