



# A Home Away From Homelessness

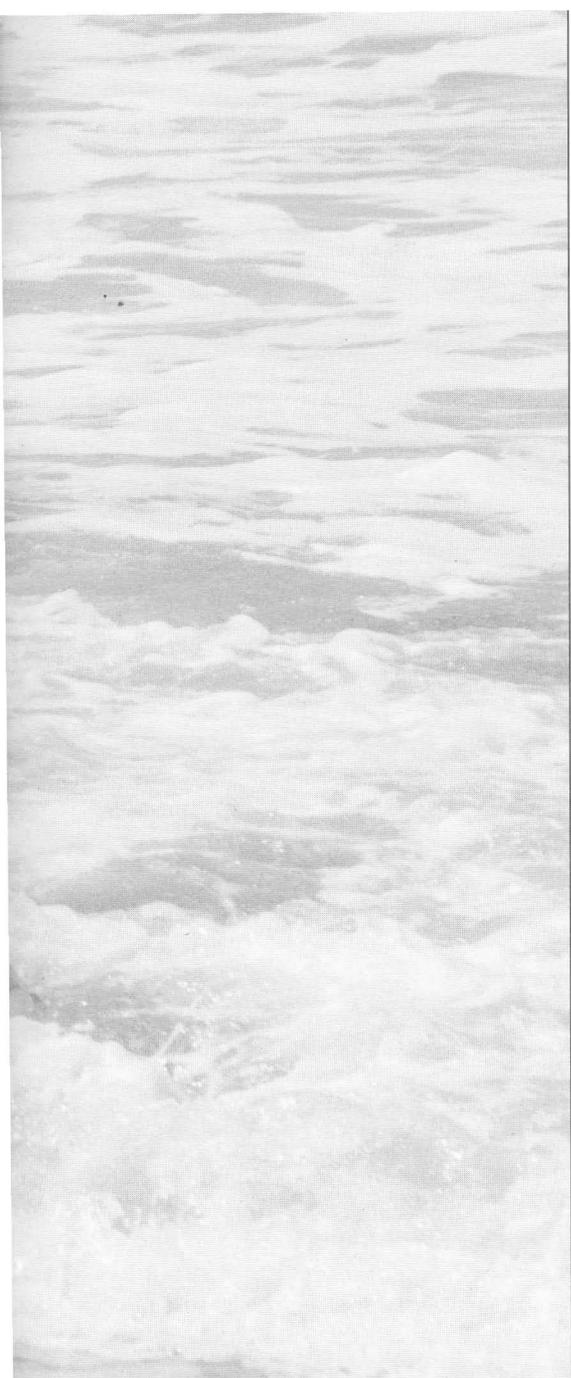
BILL O'BRIEN

*Photographs by Jay Jones*

**T**HE WHITE VAN SNAKES ALONG the winding roads of the Marin Headlands, just north of the Golden Gate Bridge. The moment it stops at the white cottage above Rodeo Lagoon the doors fly open and half a dozen exuberant children explode into the sunshine. "Bikes! We want to ride bikes!" some shout, while a pint-sized Barry Bonds finds a baseball glove on the lawn and begins searching for a bat and ball. They run hither and yon for a few minutes, until an adult asks, "How about some snacks?" then they dash up the steps and inside for chocolate cookies and lemonade.

Since 1994 this cottage, known as the Beach House, has been a place where homeless children come from shelters in San Francisco to be wild, safe, and free, cared for, and indulged, if only for a few hours. It is part of A Home Away From Homelessness, a unique program founded and led by Jeanie Kortum-Stermer, a writer, children's advocate, and former preschool teacher.

On the wall by the front door a ceramic plaque reads: "Welcome to our home away from home." Inside, sunlight streaming in through the windows reflects off pastel yellow walls. Stuffed animals perch on soft



chairs and couches; other playthings and books are within a child's reach on shelves and in baskets. It feels like a cozy home, and that's what it has been for many homeless children since 1994.

Several years ago, Jeanie Kortum-Stermer was working as a volunteer at one of San Francisco's downtown shelters. She started to take some of the children on outings to her family's dairy ranch in Petaluma. Their delight inspired her. Was there a way to give a similar experience to more homeless children? She knew that there were empty buildings at Fort Cronkite and thought that perhaps one might be put to the use she

envisioned. She talked with Rep. John Burton, then with Brian O'Neill, superintendent of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA), who offered a cottage near the beach. It once had been the base commander's house but at the time was standing empty. Although it needed work, Kortum-Stermer was sure she could get it in shape with the help of volunteers and donated materials.



RASA GUSTAITIS

Jeanie Kortum-Stermer

"I thought it would take a couple of weeks," she recalls with a laugh. "It turned into six months." At one point, the whole enterprise was close to foundering. But then the *San Francisco Chronicle* ran a story; a local contractor read it, "pulled in all of his buddies," and got it finished.

In 1994, Kortum-Stermer formalized Home Away as a nonprofit organization and became its executive director. Since then about 100 children aged five to 10 have come here each month from 13 San Francisco shelters. They are picked up on a rotating basis six days a week. Some have come numerous times. The Beach House was there for them as their families moved from street to shelter to shelter. (Shelter rules limit family stays from overnight to at most a year.)

GGNRA, pleased at what was happening, accepted the group as a Parks Partner, joining the Marine Mammal Center, the Headlands Center for the Arts, and the Bay Area Discovery Museum, all of which use former military buildings in the Headlands. Today Home Away has five full-time and three part-time employees, a corps of eighty vo-

unteers, and occupies four buildings in the GGNRA.

In the Headlands, a second building has been renovated to house a mentor program, a respite program for parents and preschoolers, larger group activities such as holiday celebrations, and for the occasional overnight stay. At the Club House (also the organization's headquarters) in San Francisco's Fort Mason, homeless families can drop in for emergency help, including food and clothing. On June 15, another Fort Mason building, the School House, was opened as a learning center. Here after-school tutoring and a variety of enrichment activities are available to a group of 15 homeless children age 10-15, in partnership with the San Francisco Unified School District. This four-day-a-week program includes Beautiful Sites field trips, which take children to various natural places.

Kortum-Stermer has a unique understanding of the world these children live in. In 1989 she and her husband, Dugald Stermer, adopted an eight-year-old girl who had lived for several years on the streets with her mother, a heroin addict. Her close

## An Irresistible Situation

ON A GRAY DAY GETTING GRAYER, fog and wind coming off the Pacific, photographer Jay Jones and I arrived at the Club House in Fort Mason and were immediately enveloped in warmth and color. Adults and children were bustling around, some preparing for the day's trip to the Beach House, all wearing smiles like those beaming from the murals, photomontages, collages, and cutouts that surrounded us.

Sarah Kennedy, who was in charge of the day's excursion, introduced us to everyone, then, while Jay took pictures, led me off to see the newest Home Away building, a two-story duplex

being readied as a center for middle school-age children. Bright murals—some by children, many by professional artists—were nearing completion in the art studio, computer room, game room, locker room, stairways, and halls. Photographs of children and staff had been taped here and there to be meticulously copied onto the murals.

After this tour, we drove across town to collect the day's children from a shelter. Sarah asked us to stay outside, and cautioned us that two of the children were first-timers and had shown some problem behavior. When all five children were aboard the van, she introduced us. The smallest boy, four or five, clutching a Transformer, had several cuts and scrapes on his sullen face.

Jay and I drove separately to the Marin Headlands, arriving at the Beach House to find sunshine and volunteer Charles Catalano, who had just gotten there. As we chatted and Jay snapped pictures, the van pulled up and instantly there were children everywhere, digging through toys, searching among the multitude of opportunities for fun to find just the right one for the moment. They quickly paired off with volunteers to set up furniture in the big dollhouse, turn out bright wet paintings, or ride the swings. The snacks on the table inside were ignored—there was too much to do. That smallest boy stomped through the cottage whacking stuffed animals and scattering toys from a bucket.

After a bit, Sarah, Charles, and Jay took the bigger kids for a bike ride while I stayed behind with volunteers Cody Russell and Lauryn McCreddie and the smaller children. Lauryn, who was washing dishes, asked me to bake a cake! Soon I'd filled two paper pans with chocolate cake-mix batter loaded with chocolate chips. My reward was immediate—as soon as the cakes were in the oven, the tough little boy appeared and handed me a paint-

ing. "This is for you." He'd been quietly working away with Cody while I baked.

I went outside for a few minutes to enjoy the weather and untangle a kite string. The bike riders returned after a stop at the beach, and within minutes someone was calling, "Let's climb the mountain!" This idea eventually infected everyone, so we set off across the road and headed up the gentle slope—though not without some delays. Two brothers clearly did not want to be engaged in the same activity at once, and it took separate efforts to convince them. Only the smallest boy needed help up one

steeper slope covered with rust-colored gravel (mostly because his hands were full of toys and jellybeans). Cody wound up carrying him till we got back down.

The first climbers to reach the peak danced in the wind. "You have to do a dance when you get to the top," said Cody. He wasn't kidding, we learned as we reached the peak. The wind was strong enough to keep us moving and make us want to soar with the gulls and pelicans. The only little girl in the group wanted to explore the far side of the hill, so we followed her down a ways, with warnings to watch

for poison oak. On the way back up she wanted help, so I became Uncle Hal and toted her over the crest on my back, her hands clasped against my Adam's apple. She didn't even squeak when I slipped on the steep gravel and went down on one knee, and she didn't want down until we reached the swings. She did want a push.

The volunteers were setting out pizza and cake when Jay and I had to leave. I found the smallest boy climbing up on a chair to retrieve toys from a shelf in the back room. I said, "Good-bye, it was nice to meet you." He didn't seem to understand how we could leave early, but a minute later he came out and told me, "Nice to meet you."

Jay and I were grinning as we thanked Sarah. Jay asked how he could become a volunteer. Sarah was delighted, saying they need more men, especially men of color, and that she hoped we'd come again. We had become part of the family.

—Hal Hughes

For information or to volunteer, contact A Home Away From Homelessness, Fort Mason, Building 9, San Francisco, CA 94123; (415) 561-5533.





## Four Generations of Fighting Kortums

**CREATIVE LEADERSHIP** is a family tradition. Jeanie Kortum-Stermer's great-grandfather Louis Kortum was the first winemaker in Calistoga and in 1886 helped to incorporate the town. In the 1950s, her grandfather Max Kortum persuaded Caltrans to reroute Highway 101—Caltrans had planned to bulldoze a hundred or so chicken ranches. At that time, Petaluma boasted it was "The World's Egg Basket." A family with five to 10 acres could send the children to college on the income from eggs. Max Kortum led his fellow chicken farmers to Sacramento, and the freeway route was shifted east, into the hills. As a result, motorists today enjoy expansive views of the valley as they travel between Petaluma and Cotati.

Jeanie's mother, Jean Kortum, was a major force in the Battle of Bodega Head, which blazed the trail for the 1972 Coastal Initiative. Her father, the late Karl Kortum, founded the National Maritime Museum in San Francisco. Her uncle, Bill Kortum, is a

veterinarian in Petaluma and a longtime leader in conservation battles. When asked to write down his occupation, he has been known to list it as coastal advocate. He has been fighting for more than 30 years to keep the coast "a commons for all the people" and to keep dairy ranching in Sonoma County alive and well. "The dairy farmers are the great keepers of open space," he says. "Unless we have a strong dairy industry, we will lose the open space."

Now Jeanie has combined her love for children with love of nature and crafted her own unique coastal access program. Her uncle says she started to drive up from the city with carloads of children on weekends, and there would be these "wide-eyed kids lying in the grass, flying kites, blowing bubbles" on the family ranch.

"I hardly see my family now, I'm working all the time," Jeanie says. "They must wonder, 'Where does this thing with the children come from?'"

—RG



The historic ships at the National Maritime Museum can be seen from Home Away's Fort Mason Club House.

friendship with the mother gave her insight into the personal struggles of the homeless, and continued until the mother died. Her adopted daughter is now 16 and thriving. "But she had a mean, mean childhood," says Kortum-Stermer.

The philosophy underlying Home Away's programs "is not that these people are broken and we are going to fix them," she emphasizes. "They come in and they're treated like real people."

In a 1997 letter to friends and supporters she wrote, "Though it seems on the surface like 'just fun,' what we offer—memories, community, ritual—goes deep inside the hearts of our clients. There is a hunger in both the adults and children for the beauty, joy, trust and decency that we provide through our different programs, a mandate different from what other agencies provide for the homeless."

**T**HIS IS ONE GIRL'S FIRST VISIT to the Beach House. She squeals at the sight of a spiderweb on the porch. As she hikes up the hill, the loud, cold wind seems to bother her more than it does the



By nightfall the children were back at this shelter.

others. When she reaches the top, she begins to cry and hurries back down, clutching the hand of an adult volunteer.

Many homeless children rarely get out of their immediate neighborhoods, and some don't even have words to describe the ocean, volunteer coordinator Sarah Kennedy said. She has had to explain what waves are, and a few children were surprised to learn that the water is salty. One girl was afraid to touch a tree: "She told me it was covered with bacteria." But when this girl returned to the shelter where she and her family were sleeping at the time, she stepped casually over the foot of a man in police handcuffs who was lying in the doorway.

One of the boys on today's trip, a bit taller than the rest and, at nine, the oldest, stays apart from the others, quietly throwing rocks off the bluff. Earlier in the day, at the shelter, he'd had to watch as authorities took his best friend away from his parents. Shelter life is full of noise—arguments, sirens, and other discord. Dozens of bunk beds are crammed into a single room, and children have no quiet place to retreat to. That's why adults at the Beach House will often simply let a child hang out on the lawn, draw a picture, or spend time quietly alone.

Rodeo Beach is a mere half-hour's ride away from the grim streets where the children live, but it can open up a larger world. "Nature doesn't have to be something foreign," says Jeanie Kortum-Stermer. "Dark skies at night don't have to be menacing." ■

*Bill O'Brien is a freelance writer based in Oakland.*

