

Sister Warrior

Bernie Galvin, conscientious objector to homelessness

PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

INTERVIEW BY ED BOWERS

SISTER BERNIE GALVIN's office, at 240 Golden Gate, is inside the Service Employees International Union, which is surrounded by crack addicts, junkies and alcoholics attempting to kill their pain from losing too many games in the United States of Sports. I used to belong to that union while working an unspeakably painful and demeaning job until, after being downsized for the second time in one year, I was allowed to wander free from the plantation to do interviews and worry about my future, which, since I've moved to San Francisco, is always threatening me with homelessness.

In other words, I'm in the same sinking boat as thousands of other citizens of this city. So it was a pleasure interviewing Sister Bernie, a thin, bespectacled elderly woman who, upon initial impression, appeared shorter than me. But the longer I talked to her, the taller she seemed to become, until I found myself looking up at a nun whose stature is grounded both in Heaven and on Earth.

This nun is a warrior.

Bowers: So how long have you been here?

Sister Bernie: I started Religious Witness With Homeless People in 1993. I used to be a union and community organizer, and I quit to work with homeless people. I started walking the streets trying to discern what direction my ministry would take, and in August of '93 Mayor Jordan started that cruel Matrix program, and what I saw absent was the united voice of the interfaith community in responding to unjust treatment of poor and homeless people.

So I called together the leaders of the Buddhist, Moslem, Jewish and Christian communities in San Francisco. We now have almost 2,000 religious leaders and members of the interfaith community, including other supporters from the broader community.

Bowers: You must have seen a lot of changes since '93.

Sister Bernie: It's gotten much, much worse.

Bowers: If I came in here and I was homeless and had everything I owned in my backpack and asked for services, what could you do for me?

Sister Bernie: This is not a service organization. There are plenty of good service organizations, but not nearly enough. The crisis that we are facing from homelessness results from our not having over the last 10 or 20 years produced truly affordable housing for ordinary folks in this city. And that's why we find ourselves in a crisis, and that's why even the good programs the city has like the shelters, are only addressing the symptoms of homelessness and not its cause. And unless we have housing, then even good programs are ineffective because you don't have the stability of a living environment.

Bowers: So one of the purposes of your organization is to lobby for affordable housing?

Sister Bernie: We try to influence the creation of just and compassionate policies in this city. Matrix is not a just and compassionate policy. It's expensive, ineffectual, and it's been in existence for nine to 10 years. We try to take action to address the causes of homelessness, mostly truly affordable housing.

Bowers: What kind of action do you take? It seems to me there's a lot of indifferent politicians here now, career politicians who appear to be to the right of Mussolini.

Sister Bernie: Gavin Newsom has yet to deal with us. He's only started, and he's started on the wrong foot. And I will do everything to work against him, who cares, in my opinion, as reflected in Proposition N, nothing for poor people. I don't want somebody like that in the mayor's office.

Bowers: Do you demonstrate?

Sister Bernie: We have a memorial service every year for homeless people in the Civic Center. We set up tombstones for them so we can remember poor people who have died on our streets. And for the last three years, we've set up the Memorial Wall. It's about 86 feet now. We also had a three-year demonstration at the Presidio. The federal government started tearing down town houses above Baker's Beach to the tune of \$1.4 million with outside contractors, non-union, and that's especially offensive to me. So we immediately launched a campaign to stop the demolition of that housing. We wanted to at least get a fair share of it for poor and homeless people. We united hundreds of members of the community, including religious leaders of different traditions, plus the members of their congregations, and other supporters like tenants and ordinary folk. And we conducted public fasts. We even had homeless people fasting with us.

Bowers: Nobody should have to sleep on the streets in this city with all the money there is in this country. Nor should they be required to go to a shelter; when I did the Census, I saw the shelters. And most of the hotels I did were not pleasant to live in either.

Sister Bernie: Even if all of them were perfect, there's only about 2,000 shelter beds with about 12 to 13 to 14,000 homeless people. The treatment programs have got 1,000 to 1,400 people waiting for help. So we lobby. We call hearings. When Angela Alioto was president of the board in 1995 we got a resolution passed unanimously opposing the Matrix program. We do very dramatic actions. A Memorial Wall is dramatic. The last event we had was in the Civic Center. We had a giant puppet of St. Francis calling for the spirit of St. Francis to be revived and the city to be guided by the principles of justice and compassion.

Bowers: How do you get your funding?

Sister Bernie: We take no government money at any level whatsoever. We have gotten grants from the San Francisco Foundation and the Vanguard Foundation.

Bowers: Are you associated with the Catholic Church? Does it give you any money?

Sister Bernie: No. I am a Catholic, and I'm in good standing as a Catholic nun, and as a member of the church.

Bowers: But you don't get any funding from the church?

Sister Bernie: Not from the church and not from the diocese, but from my religious order, which is the Sisters of Divine Providence from San Antonio. They pay my rent and food bills. They've totally subsidized me for the first seven years of this organization to do this work for nothing. So that's how it's been able to happen. We didn't have to pay someone to do what I do. But now we're having to move in that direction since I'm not going to last forever. I'm almost 70 years old! (She says this with glee.) I'm 69 years old!

Bowers: You'll be around for another 30 years.

Sister Bernie: You know, fightin' keeps you young!

Bowers: You're right about that!

Sister Bernie: But we do need to get that in place. So that when I move out, we'll have somebody who does need a salary.

Bowers: What do you think elevated your consciousness in life?

Sister Bernie: I had a good start in life. I was born Democrat, Catholic, union. My dad was a plumber who belonged to the



union. Every time he went on strike we were hungry. I was born poor, and I know what it is to struggle.

Bowers: So you have the precious talent of being able to empathize.

Sister Bernie: Yes, yes. So it's so easy for me all my life in my ministry, whether it's in teaching, or working for various unions in Appalachia and Louisiana, or with the sugar cane field workers and mill workers there and organizing them. But then I burned out and came here on sabbatical to go to the Graduate Theological Seminary for two years. I signed up there but they never saw me. I free-lanced for two years. It was great. I rested, I prayed, I stayed out by the water, in the woods, and renewed my spirit. Then after that I wasn't sure what I was gonna do, and then the union offered me a job with Local 250, which was in this building actually, and I worked for them for two years, but I was drawn more and more to working for homeless people, so I quit. But all of these moves grew out of this natural empathy growing from my own experience of what it means to be poor. So I will always be there with the poor people.

Bowers: That's beautiful. Thank God you're here.

It's simple. If politicians had a vision like Sister Bernie, this world would be a kinder place to live, less cruel, and full of life. Yet that is not bound to happen in the near future, and for most of us it will be a continuous fight to maintain equilibrium on a road exploited by Brioni suits, corporate greed, and mediocre music.

There should be more Sister Bernies on this planet. In a universe that appears to be based on war, she is a warrior in the truest sense of the word.

Fighting does keep you young, and in San Francisco, Sister Bernie has discovered the Fountain of Youth. ■

Sister Bernie

next to a photo of Religious Witness with Homeless People's 1999 annual memorial service in Civic Center — tombstones for the 1,599 homeless people who died on San Francisco streets.

Tribute to grieving mothers

THIS Mother's Day, Religious Witness with Homeless People joins with The Mourning Mothers, a professional drama group, to honor the grief of mothers—Iraqi women whose children have died in front of them, American women whose children are returned to them in flag-draped coffins, poor and homeless women everywhere. Called "A Ceremonializing of the Great Mothers' Day Proclamation," the event takes place May 11 in Civic Center Plaza, 3:30 to 4:15 p.m. The proclamation is Julia Ward Howe's 1870 call for women to rise up and oppose war in all forms, which begins, "Arise, then, women of this day! Arise all women who have hearts!"