

**Cassidy: Motel rooms shelter some of valley's hidden homeless**

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Motel 6 neighbors Michelle Mitnick, 49, and LeAnn Jessup, 47,... (Maria J. Avila / Mercury News)

Who knows how many broken lives dwell behind the numbered doors of the hard-luck motels scattered along Silicon Valley's busy thoroughfares?

Places like the Motel 6 on a congested stretch of El Camino Real in Santa Clara. It's a \$50-a-night spot where the desperate and the demoralized check in with no idea where they'll go when they finally have to check out.

I went there to see Michelle Minick, who promised to show me a hidden kind of homelessness.

These are earnest folks who are not very different from working people everywhere. Decent individuals and families with dreams and determination. But they also have life stories that are unsettling, illuminating and difficult.

It's early September and Minick and her 17-year-old son have been at the Motel 6 for three months.

"I know there are 20 or 30 people here," she says. Meaning a few dozen of the uncounted many who put a different face on the homeless - weary souls who can scrape up enough for a motel room, but not enough for a month's rent and deposit. Good people who live one day to the shaky next by working cell phones, laptops and Craigslist to line up odd jobs and look for permanent work.

**"These working poor families, I'm telling you, they're a beautiful, tragic, amazing community of people," says Jennifer Hodgson Loving, of EHC LifeBuilders, a San Jose emergency housing organization. "I've always found them to be so heroic."**

On any given night, more than 7,000 homeless people roam Santa Clara County looking for a place to sleep. No one knows how many more live on the margins in motel rooms here and across the country - though a spokeswoman for Motel 6 acknowledged that population.

"Everyone has a need of a place to stay, whether it is short-term or little bit longer-term," said Janice Maragakis, vice president of communications for Motel 6. "A lot of times we're a solution for that until they can save up to put a deposit on an apartment."

Homeless advocates say motel dwelling is widespread.

**"I think it's sort of that hidden homelessness," Loving says. "People are living in this state of night to night, month to month."**

People like those who come into Minick's room to talk to me about their netherworld. There is LeAnn Jessup and her 20-year-old daughter; and Shelly who lives with her 16-year-old daughter; and Roger Becker, a man on his own.

They are not winos, ex-cons, junkies or the sad, mad souls who wander around screaming at demons. They are mothers, high school kids, the overwhelmed and underemployed.

### **Motel Seven**

The group - call them the Motel Seven - tell stories providing the broad outline for the stories of so many others. They've endured breakups, breakdowns and medical nightmares. Minick, 49, was once a Peninsula socialite. Now she's a woman needing a new liver and a new hip.

Shelly, 36, was an engineer at Lockheed before debilitating depression cost her her job. Jessup, 47, was a dental assistant before rheumatoid arthritis made the work too painful. Becker, 37, diagnosed as bipolar, has just lost his sales job, his girlfriend and the apartment they shared.

"I know there are stereotypes of homeless people," Minick says. "But if you saw us walking down the street, you never would have guessed."

Yes, there is help available, but it is not one-size-fits-all and it comes with a confounding bureaucracy. The kaleidoscope of social programs and their regulations can be maddening to the newly homeless.

There are income limits and asset limits. There are programs for seniors, another set for parents, a different set for singles. There are food stamps. There are medical benefits for those under 21, over 64 and those with children or a disability. Sorting through the programs can be overwhelming for those who are emotionally shattered.

"You have to be able to focus," says Shelly, who asked that her last name not be published. "If you have these disabilities, you can't do those sorts of things."

The Motel Seven have patched together government services. They've borrowed from friends and relatives. Some receive child support. Becker gets \$147 a month in general assistance. Some have had temporary jobs. Minick cleans houses. Becker and Jessup briefly counted cars for a company that does traffic studies.

A month at the motel costs about \$1,500 - enough for an apartment even in Silicon Valley. But landlords don't take the rent \$50 at a time.

Shelly recently landed a temporary \$20-an-hour test technician job at Hewlett-Packard. But she still can't find a place to rent because her credit is shot.

"If I were a landlord," she says, "I wouldn't want to rent to me."

Sometimes the dreams of the Motel Seven are as heart-wrenching as their situation. Becker wants to start an Internet business to allow sports fans to swap promotional trinkets. Jessup figures she and her daughter can save for a mobile home. Minick wants to start a non-profit to help the homeless.

Their lives are all about ingenuity. Shelly buys frozen dinners at the supermarket and takes them to the 7-Eleven to microwave them.

"Sometimes you just have to have a hot meal."

They've turned Craigslist into their own social services provider. Shelly found a mini-fridge on the site for \$40. Now she and her daughter can have milk and make sandwiches with mayonnaise. Minick finds housecleaning gigs on the site.

### **A fragile family**

One Craigslist ad the group thought up held a plan that was equally inspirational and heartbreaking.

"Random Acts of Kindness," it began, "We Need One."

The group wondered if they pooled their bits of money whether someone might rent them a house where they all could live.

"We, all of us, are all hard-working folk that never knew one another before and have now come together to be a 'family,' " the ad said.

But life on the edge is fragile and so is the notion of family. Allegations soon arose that one person had stolen cash from another and that some were blowing money on alcohol. Within a week, the big house idea was dead.

When you live day-to-day, every decision is monumental. If you have \$5, do you buy gas? Food? Put it toward the motel room? Every setback is devastating.

A week after I met Minick, she was panicked. Her car had broken down on Highway 101. If the CHP towed her car, it was all over. Yes, because the car got her to whatever work she could find. But also because the car would become home if she lost her motel room.

A tow-truck driver on Craigslist said he'd get the Sable back to the motel for \$20. A relieved Minick cried.

"Somehow," she says, "we do get blessings."

Not many in Minick's case. Her health is a mess. She's diabetic. She says she's paid at least \$100,000 in medical bills in recent years. The expense contributed to the financial collapse that landed her at the Motel 6 - a million miles from a life Minick once enjoyed.

Twenty years ago, she was married to an executive at a local car dealership. They lived in a hillside home on an acre in Los Altos. They owned a share of a private jet. They vacationed in Maui. They were regulars on the local social circuit.

A 1986 Mercury News society column described Minick and her husband hobnobbing with politicians and sports figures at a charity auction where they bought a Waterford lamp.

She and her husband had a daughter who graduated from the University of Southern California. Minick keeps a "USC Mom" coffee mug as a reminder.

"We had a good life."

### **A life in free-fall**

But Minick drank. A lot. She wasn't happy in her marriage. The divorce settlement was generous. She met another man, her son CJ's father, and they married in 1989. Her new husband blew through her money in ways she still doesn't understand. In 1996, they divorced. They've rarely spoken in the past five years.

Minick worked office, retail and sales jobs. In early 2004, she was troubled by a hiatal hernia, which began her medical free-fall.

Other diagnoses followed as did the hospitalizations and eventually an eviction.

Minick says she hasn't had a drink since January, when a doctor told her that one more would kill her. She spends little time feeling sorry for herself. She talks tough, except when she talks about her boy, CJ.

"Many times," she says choking up, "he says it's my fault and that I'm a failure. And that's hard to swallow."

Imagine being 17 and living in an 8-by-12 motel room with your mother.

"It sucks," CJ says. "You worry about how long are you going to be able to stay here. What are you going to eat? How much money can we spend?"

CJ is a tall, fit kid wearing standard-issue teenager uniform: knee-length shorts, white T-shirt and a baseball cap. But the issues he's dealing with are hardly normal: poverty, homelessness, a mother who might be dying.

"My mom always figured something out," he says, "but luck can only take you so far. I don't blame her. Her health is so bad. Anything that can go wrong, does go wrong for us."

A week after I talked to CJ, luck had run out again. Minick said she was sure she'd be on the street or in a shelter in no time. She couldn't put her son through that. He'd need to move to Texas to live with his father.

"He's been here all his life," Minick says, "and he's just going to have to pick up and leave everything behind, all because I can't take care of him."

A number of the Motel Seven started our conversation talking about how quickly homelessness happens. But that's not it exactly. It takes time to go through savings and friends and family willing to let you sleep on the couch. But at some point, the slow slide into homelessness picks up speed.

Within a month of the September day that I first drove up to the Motel 6, Minick had lost her room. She was staying with a friend and worrying about where to go next.

"I'm watching the turning of the leaves and how cold it's getting at night."

After losing his job counting cars, Becker couldn't hang on. He left the Motel 6. He hasn't returned my calls. Jessup was still at the motel living on her daughter's waitressing money.

Shelly was doing well at HP. And she had just discovered \$20,000 in her 401(k), which she'd lost track of. She was hoping to find someone who would rent to her if she pays several months at once.

Until then, she and so many others will keep trying to hang on in the pale light from a roadside sign on a hard-luck motel.