

**FIELD NOTES**

# Marriages at Life's Margins

By **FRANCESCA SEGRÈ**

**S**AFE lodging and hot meals are among the benefits of checking into the Coalition of Service and Charity homeless shelter in Hollywood, Fla. And more recently, weddings can be added to the list.

Five couples have been married over the last year and a half with the help of the shelter and its founder, Sean Cononie. Three of the couples met there.

"I've done so many funerals, 50 or 60 in the past 12 years, it's about time we did something happy," Mr. Cononie said. "Homeless people should be entitled to the same dignities that people with money can afford."

Robert Tobin, who runs Sacramento Cottage Housing, a transitional housing community in California, says in his near decade on the job, he's heard of nearly 100 weddings among the homeless population (including the couple featured in Vows this week, Jennifer Keen and Paul Sousa).

"They often feel unmoored and disconnected from society," Mr. Tobin said. "Weddings, graduations and other rituals can tie them to the greater community and give them a sense of belonging and status."

Daletha Davis, 20, said she had dreamed of such a ritual since her childhood. But the vision of romance and a traditional wedding seemed far-fetched. "I was in and out of foster care and I never had anyone to depend on," she said. "It's hard for me to trust anybody."

At 18, she was turned out from her foster family, and in September 2008, she wound up at the Coalition of Service and Charity, looking for a place to spend the night. Not only did she find a bed, but she also met her husband-to-be, Nicholas Davis.

Mr. Davis, 37, who had lost his job as a cook, had been living at the shelter for almost two years. "I was lonely," he said. "I'm not going to lie to you."

Soon, they were sharing their struggles and secrets. On May 23, they married at the Hollywood ArtsPark, a few blocks from the shelter where they share a room.

Michael Stoops, director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, who attended a wedding at the Hollywood, Fla., shelter in April, says weddings among the homeless remain unusual. But, he said, "It's likely to increase as homelessness increases in this country due to the economy."

The latest research from the Department of Housing and Urban Development shows that individuals (versus families) make up roughly 70 percent of America's homeless population.

Married life can prove practical for those individuals. Benefits from Social Security vary from case to case, as it does with programs for

the poor like food stamps. Mrs. Davis, who wants to go to school for nursing and save for a home of their own, said with marriage, "the goals seem closer than they were when I was by myself."

"I have someone there to help me out," she said, "and I can help him with getting out of here and getting our lives together."

Mr. Cononie said that one of the couples who married last year at the shelter now lives in an apartment of their own, which helps others realize "there's ability to have a normal life outside of shelter."

Mr. Tobin pointed out that, "for all the reasons people normally get married, it's more heightened among the homeless: stability, safety, security, companionship, financial and spiritual."

For example, when tackling substance abuse, couples can reinforce their sobriety; two incomes open more possibilities than one;

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For homeless couples, a trip to the altar, a promise made and a hope for a place of their own.

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when fighting for child custody, a married homeless couple may appear more stable to social workers than a single parent. "The desire and need for companionship is much more clear when you are living day to day than for people who are less vulnerable and exposed," Mr. Tobin said.

It's difficult to estimate the longevity of homeless marriages compared with others, but Mr. Stoops said: "Anyone who can survive together while they're homeless, they're tough characters. They put up with a lot from society and community."

The Davises in Florida saved up about \$500 for their wedding from their jobs working security and housekeeping at the shelter. The charity and other residents donated about \$1,400 more, including gold and diamond wedding bands. Mr. Cononie posted signs at the shelter and made repeated announcements inviting all 150 residents to attend the wedding. Neither couple had family members present, but about 25 people witnessed the ceremony, and another 25 joined the celebration back at the shelter with a chocolate cake topped with a miniature bride and groom.

"A lot of people think just 'cause you're homeless, you shouldn't get married," Mrs. Davis said. "But I think it shouldn't matter where you are or your circumstance."