

## Father Joe continues his 'hustle' even into retirement

May 27, 2011 12:00 am • [By DEAN NELSON For the North County Times](#)



Two homeless men were headed to the lunch line recently outside of the St. Vincent de Paul homeless services agency in downtown San Diego ---- also known as Father Joe's Villages ---- when they saw what looked like a priest on a red motor scooter navigating through the adjacent construction zone.

The priest's black shirt was open at the neck, white collar insert flapping perilously to the side. One of the men approached and said, "Good morning, Father Joe. God bless you, man." He touched the Catholic cleric's arm and then reverently stepped away.

"Good morning! God bless you, too," came the reply, along with a big smile.

The second homeless man said to the first, "Really? That's the guy? He's the priest here?"

The first said, as if he had just seen a celebrity,

"That's the guy!"

Over the next two blocks that Father Joe motored back toward his home, across the street from one of the low-income housing complexes he built, no fewer than 20 people stopped and wished him well or shouted "God bless, you Father Joe!" from passing cars. One inebriated man even walked alongside the scooter for several feet asking for advice.

### **The next chapter**

The Rev. Joe Carroll may have retired in April as CEO of the Villages, but he is still present and visible to thousands of people in downtown San Diego who are having difficulty getting off the streets. And he's sticking around to keep raising money for the meals, the medical care, the housing, the job training and transitional help that he has been overseeing since the mid-1980s.

"We have donors who have given \$50,000 to \$100,000 to me for years without ever having met me," he said. "Imagine how much more they'd give if I meet them!"

By his own admission, he is shameless in his approach to raising money. He has been called a hustler, a wheeler-dealer, a used-car salesman and a huckster. And those are just some of the terms he uses to describe himself.

"Everybody I know has been shaken down by him," said Monsignor Dennis Mikulanic, laughing. Mikulanic is pastor of San Rafael Roman Catholic parish in Rancho Bernardo and a longtime friend. "But not a dime is for his own personal benefit. When we had the fires in our neighborhoods a few years ago, truck after truck after truck rolling through here came from the St. Vincent de Paul Center with water, masks, shovels, toilet paper and whatever else we needed."

### **Changing the model**

Father Joe already had a reputation as a high-octane salesperson when he was appointed by his bishop in 1982 to move downtown and develop a program to serve the poor. But the reputation went viral in the public's mind when Channel 10 aired a commercial in 1984 where he appeared on the screen in his priestly garb and said, "I'm a hustler and I'm going to hustle you out of some money."

"When I did that, the next day I was out buying a hot dog and the guy selling it to me said, 'Hey ---- you're that funny priest on TV!' That's when I realized the immediacy of television," he said. "That commercial came on right after Steve Garvey hit a home run that put the Padres in the World Series. From then on, people knew me as a hustler." He says it with pride.

But he isn't all hustle. There's efficiency, too.

"When I got this assignment to develop a program for the poor, we had a system where homeless people would come to our thrift store for a pair of shoes," he recalls. "Theirs were torn and their feet were bleeding. Our policy was to send them to Catholic Charities 20 blocks away to get a voucher, then carry it back to the store to get the shoes. If they were late getting back, we were closed. But the voucher was no good the next day. I said, 'Excuse me? Why not just give them the shoes in the first place? We were going to do it anyway!'"

This frustration developed into what he calls a one-stop shop for services, which is exactly what the Villages provide. Within a few square blocks of downtown, struggling people can now find food, housing, medical, dental and psychiatric care, job training, schools, nursery facilities and other assistance to help people transition away from living on the streets.

And the facilities aren't shabby. That's why the Villages have a budget of nearly \$40 million per year and nine different corporations.

"In the old model of homeless shelters, people would say, 'If we can't use the hotel for anything else, let's give it to the homeless,'" he said. "That gives the message that you're trash. Picture a family going into that place and the kids saying, 'Mom, Dad, do we have to stay here?' What is their estimation of Mom and Dad in that moment? I have walked into some shelters where you could just feel the roaches."

Father Joe vowed that his facilities would always be built new, would always be owned by the Villages, and would always be beautiful. The facilities have courtyards, fountains, playgrounds; some are built on the old Catholic mission model that welcomed travelers.

The balcony of one housing facility is held up by pillars shaped like baseball bats. One wall is patterned after a Roman aqueduct. One five-story wall is a giant painting. The food preparation is overseen by the former chef for an admiral.

The rule is that if Father Joe won't stay there or eat the meal, then it isn't good enough for the clients.

"I see kids saying, 'Mom, Dad ---- we get to stay here?' Half my job is done," he said. "The dignity of their parents has been restored just by walking in the door. That makes it much easier to work with them. The homeless aren't stupid. They come to St. Vincent's and they know we're spending the money on them, not taking advantage of them."

### **Staying involved**

The work of running the center and raising the money to keep it going has been wearing on Carroll for the past several years. He has a history of knee problems, and diabetes has caused infections and made his feet painful to walk on. Because of the pain and the difficulty of getting the scooter in and out of a car to attend meetings at City Hall, banks and elsewhere, he chose to focus on his best trait ---- shaking people down.

The country's economic downturn means it's taking more effort to keep the services going. He's having to shake harder. The Villages have laid off more than 100 people in recent months. They now employ just under 500. The Villages' board is conducting a search for a new CEO. The board is looking for two people to handle the job that Carroll has been doing for more than 25 years.

"I really need to concentrate on what I supposedly do best, which is find money to keep the doors open and expand," he said.

He is carefully watching and participating in discussions regarding the possibility of a new Chargers football stadium downtown. The one site being discussed for that region is across the street from his Villages. He is lobbying in favor of that site so that the Villages' property values will go up, allowing him to borrow more money at a lower interest rate.

Chris Megison, founder and CEO of Solutions for Change in Vista, an agency that focuses on homeless families in North San Diego County, said Carroll's vision for dealing with homeless people helped shape his own vision.

"Father Joe has a comprehensive approach to dealing with people," Megison said. "It wasn't just a transactional relationship of giving people some help and a pat on the head. He looked at a much bigger approach, in a more holistic way.

"Social service agencies often have a tendency to do symptom relief. That has failed us and the homeless. Father Joe shows that you can look at the whole person, not just address piecemeal needs. He's got the big vision."

Sometimes Father Joe's approach to that vision has some hard edges to it. Richard Gentry, the CEO of San Diego's Housing Commission, has been across the table from Father Joe during some intense negotiations for property that would provide housing for the poor.

"He is not an easy man to deal with if your feelings are easily hurt," said Gentry. "He's direct, insistent and focused. That's not a bad thing, especially when you're dealing with something that doesn't garner much sympathy with the public. You don't get things done in this world if you're passive, reactive and pleasant."

### **Tough upbringing**

Father Joe's brusque approach can be traced to his upbringing in the Bronx, where he grew up with seven brothers and sisters in a two-bedroom apartment where the heat was turned off at 10 p.m. and his childhood arthritis made it painful to get out of bed in the morning.

"During the winter, I was shriveled and crippled every morning," he said. "When I saw a picture postcard of Santa Barbara, I said, 'I'm gone.'" At 22 he went to the local pawn shop, bought a suitcase, and flew to California.

His physical infirmities have made him more empathetic with those who come to the Villages for help. All of the buildings have electronic doors to accommodate those using wheelchairs.

"I understand what it feels like to need to have someone help you when you're used to being independent," he said. "To constantly need someone yourself makes you more aware of the clients we have who may have mental problems or alcohol or drug problems. They need someone to help them."

He also identifies with the original St. Vincent de Paul of France, a priest in the 1600s whose original path had him serving wealthy people. Vincent was captured by Turkish pirates and sold into slavery. Eventually he escaped, and even while serving the wealthy, established missions for the poor, slaves and prisoners.

"Because he had been a slave, he really understood the concept of poverty and dedicated his life to working with the poor," he said. Then a smile came over Father Joe's face. "I was sort of sold into this work by my bishop, who just said 'Go!' I figured I'd be in a parish in La Jolla or Rancho Santa Fe by now!"

He wasn't insulted by the order, even though his training had been to baptize, preach, hear confession and administer the Eucharist ---- traditional parish work.

"The call is to serve the Church," he said. "This is part of the deal. You give up your right to choose what you want, even though you don't understand it, for the current Christ mission, which is the Church."

But while he may identify with the original St. Vincent de Paul, he more deeply identifies with Abraham of the Old Testament. When Abraham was visited unknowingly by an angel, he insisted that the angel spend the night in his home. He gave the angel shelter. Then Abraham had the fatted calf prepared for a meal.

"That's what we do ---- Abraham was the perfect host, which is what we are, hosting our neighbors in need, with the best accommodations," he said.

### **Serving a need**

Sometimes, though, it seems like there are simply too many angels to accommodate. The Villages provide nearly half of all overnight shelter services in the city of San Diego, and provide other services to more than 15,000 people per year. The problems seem endless, increasing and insurmountable. He knows that these problems will exist long after he is gone.

"Whenever someone says he has a plan to end homelessness in 10 years, well, there is a guy called Jesus who said the poor will be with you always," he said. "I'm not going to argue with Jesus. Sometimes I drive home and see the streets just piled with people, and I wonder if I have done anything for the last 28 years."

He compares his frustration with what doctors must experience.

"Doctors would love to see a cure for cancer, but they know they see kids who are going to die from cancer," he said. "Does that frustrate the doctor? I would say yes. But maybe at the same time, he gave the kid four more years of life."

One resident of the Villages, whose identity the staff asked not to reveal, told the North County Times that he was a single parent, and that he and his two children, 14 and 11, had been living in the family facility for four months.

"I got injured on my job and was facing life on the streets, and my children were about to become wards of the state," he said.

The resident is taking job-training classes and his children are in school. They even have a small savings account so they can eventually become self-sufficient.

"This place has washed away the stereotype of the homeless bum," he said, tears filling his eyes. "If Father Joe were sitting across the table from me right now, I would say 'You saved my life.'"

The ultimate motivation for Father Joe is stories like that one. Those, and the admonishment from Jesus in Matthew 25, where he honors those who have fed the hungry, provided drink for the thirsty, clothed the naked, and visited the imprisoned. Jesus says in the passage that anyone who has done those things has done them for him as well.

"Jesus didn't ask for a valid ID, or ask if the person was qualified, or if they'd done their nightly prayers, or even if they'd heard of Jesus," he said.

"And which one of them was Jesus? We don't know. It might be all of them, so we'd better serve everybody."