

# Miracle of Mind and Heart



**A History of COTS  
1988 – 2001  
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draft**

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“There is no despair so deep as the despair of a homeless man or woman. To roam the roads of the country or the streets of the city, to feel there is no rood of ground on which the feet can rest, to halt weary and hungry outside lighted windows and hear laughter and song within -- these are the hungers and rebellions that drive men to crime and women to shame.” (Hamlin Garland, “Under the Lion’s Paw,” Main-Travelled Roads, 1891 141)

## **Introduction**

Some of America's most important public policy issues are shaped by the nonprofit sector. Nonprofits advocate powerfully for social change and help to allocate social value. Judging by the steady growth of Committee On The Shelterless (COTS) since 1988, Petaluma's homeless services provider has been shaping public policy very effectively. Like most nonprofits which address the problem of homelessness, COTS was called into existence by a number of changes in American society: the shift from an industrial to a service economy, a business-led effort to contain wages and a governmental push to reduce social welfare. Other structural and local problems such as housing shortages, unequal educational opportunities, racism, and California's deinstitutionalization policies, have exacerbated the problem. Although an array of factors – including illness, disability, substance abuse, domestic violence and job loss – can make a person vulnerable to homelessness, the common denominator in most cases is low income. Those at the bottom of the income pyramid are hard-pressed to find and keep housing.

COTS has brought help to our most disadvantaged citizens, estimated nationwide at 7.4% of the population or about 13.5 million people. Each year, COTS helps over 1,000 South Sonoma County residents.

COTS recognized three facts early in its history: first, the homeless are not a homogeneous underclass typified by those huddled in doorways or panhandling on the street; second, most homeless people are part of a family; and third, there is not just one solution to this complex and intransigent problem. These insights account for the enormous community support the organization enjoys and the flexibility and responsiveness that COTS has displayed over the

years as it has quietly evolved into an award-winning agency which the Press Democrat called “the most influential homeless program in the region.”

**COTS Clients: Representative Stories**

*Miranda*

If Miranda had money in the bank, she would simply be eccentric, lovable Aunt Miranda.

But having lost her money, her home and her family, she wanders the streets of Petaluma, prim and bright, chattering or sometimes muttering darkly. Two of her children, aged twelve and fifteen, would also be on the street were it not for Miranda's oldest daughter, who, in her late twenties, has taken on the responsibility of raising her own children and mother's. Believing herself an exiled princess, Miranda waits cheerfully for her billions. When she meets a new person she usually promises them steak, lobster, and a \$500 dollar bottle of champagne. "You know why they killed Jimmy Hoffa?" she asks her new acquaintances.

"Power," she answers darkly after a weighted pause.

"Him, his chauffeur and his body guard, I can see them now deep under that building."

According to Miranda, Hoffa got mixed up in a conspiracy that was bigger than he could handle, a conspiracy which -- by no coincidence -- revolves around her.

She sleeps at the COTS Winter Shelter and arrives early to the Ellwood Opportunity Center to stay warm and take a shower. She looks at you intently with her oversized, brown eyes—which are bright and serious with something that speech cannot capture—and says confidentially, "You know".

And we do know.

She is the color of light coffee, has good skin, bad teeth, and looks older than her 40-some years. The studies tell us that she will get sicker with each month she spends on the street.

But hers is a relatively happy story. She did not find her mother dead in the bathtub, overdosed on heroin. She did not kill anyone while she was in San Quentin, and has, in fact, never been in jail. She has none of the alphabet of hepatitis running through her veins. She leans on the office counter at the Opportunity Center and fervently declaims to anyone who will listen, “The light will tell the truth; the darkness will hide it. The moon is bright.”

Her synapses fire randomly, striking targets far from the mark, but, even so, she works hard at keeping the Opportunity Center clean. She is wise when she is lucid, and kind even when she is not, taking care of those street comrades whom she calls, “the lost ones.”

“They Are Afraid,” she declaims like some Old Testament Prophet, “and that means they are already defeated.” Just who “they” are remains a secret between her and the burning bush of her psyche. Yet she brings out the best in people for whom the worst has become a habit.

Miranda is herself emblematic of the “lost ones.” Like many people on the street her own symptoms and conditions prevent her from seeking help – even when help is there.

For example, though diagnosed psychotic, Miranda knows herself to be sane. Why would a sane woman swallow pills everyday?

Medicated or not, Miranda could be reasonably autonomous in a safe environment. Now, her only protector is her constant companion: Hoffa’s ghost.

*Tom, Mary, Billy, Cindy and Sarah—in Mary's words*

Hi everybody, sorry it has taken me so long to write but I never have been much of a one for writing. Everything is going really great. Tom loves his job. The kids are back in school. Next week I can start job hunting. Before I turn this letter into a book I have some things that Tom and I would like to say to all of you. First of all ...

**THANK YOU!!!**

Thank you for your help and understanding when the van broke down on Tom on his way home from work that time, and we couldn't make the meeting that day, so that we could go get it. And for always being there if and when we needed you.

Thank you for the Children's Haven, the kids' new school clothes, back packs and school supplies. You really made the kids feel good that first day of school. Thank you for the special way you have for caring about the kids and everything you do for them.

Thank you all for everything you do and for giving up your nights with your families to stay with the families at COTS. I know it's your job but I also know you guys do a lot and put up with a lot for all of the families that come through there. We just want to make sure you know that we really do appreciate your being there.

Thank you for the cooler, which we are using until we can get a fridge. Thank you, too, for the mandatory savings program, which helped us save enough for our rent through the first month, deposits on our utilities, my car payment, Tom's student loan, gas for the cars and food for the first month.

Thank you for the workshops at COTS. I started out thinking I didn't need the workshops. But through one of the meetings I finally, after more than 30 years, came to terms

with something that happened to me, which I think you know what I am talking about. For the first time in my life I really opened up and talked about it, which I never thought I could do. Now, I have even been able to talk to Tom about it and what's really great is, I feel better about myself. I don't feel ashamed to talk about it and even the dreams seem to have finally stopped, or at least for now.

Also, through some of the meetings we found out what is on our credit report, which we are working to clean up so we can buy a house. We learned what to do, how to act and what landlords are looking for when we are house hunting. We also learned how to make budgets that work and how to manage our money. Thank you!

When we first went to COTS we just wanted to get it over with and then forget it ever happened. Now, we don't ever want to forget our time there for two reasons. One, because we believe that is what is going to help make sure we never end up like that again. Before we just kind of thought it didn't matter what we did, somehow everything would be okay. Now we know, everything can only work out if we work hard and make it work. Second, we never want to forget all the people, staff and residents. We made some really good friends that we hope to know for a long time.

For the first time in almost a year, we feel like we are going in the right direction again and this time we know we are going to make it. We have our own home again, our bills are getting paid and we are starting to pay off our debts. So, for everything you all do, and for everything you all did for us, there could never be enough or the right words to really express how grateful we are to all of you. Thank you! *Tom, Mary, Billy, Cindy and Sarah*

## *II*

### **The Founders**

It is hard to specify the precise moment when COTS was born. Was it when COTS made its first application for federal funding to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in May of 1988? Or was it the first sleep-over at the United Methodist Church? Was it when it officially opened its doors in December 1988?

What is clear is that COTS was founded as a result of the compassionate response and hard work of two women, Laure Reichek and Mary Isaak.

Laure Reichek could be described as a visionary radical but to do so would be to understate the passion, charisma and impressive erudition with which she engages the world. She combines the perspective of an old school Marxist with the evangelical intensity and singleness of purpose of the first generation of New England Puritans. Reichek was brought up to believe that but for the grace of God she could have suffered any of the myriad calamities that others have suffered.

“Since I’m healthy, I have an obligation to help those who aren’t. Since I have a roof over my head, I have an obligation to be of use to those who have been maimed by the system under which we live,” Reichek says. A Holocaust survivor, Laure has a deep gratitude for simply being alive, and that gratitude has expressed itself in a life of political activism. “I hate to see the planet and its inhabitants abused.”

Mary Isaak, on the other hand, brings an entirely home-grown tradition to bear upon social issues. Born to a prominent Oregon family, Isaak is effortlessly moderate. Like Reichek,

she believes that those whom fortune has blessed have an obligation to help those who are less fortunate. The system can work, she believes – with some systematic and aggressive tinkering.

While she remarks that she thinks she might be a socialist, Isaak's life displays the hallmarks of the liberal tradition at its best. She sees the ability “to put yourself in the other guy's place” as one of the most important principles of civilized life. A natural leader and born educator, Isaak founded the Live Oak School, a school, as she characterizes it, for misfits. She recalls that there were only two rules: be there, and no dope.

They were good rules. A Petaluma businessperson who attended Live Oak as a teen says simply, “She saved my life.”

Isaak is likely to tell you that her role at COTS is that of “gopher and chauffeur.” But those who know her see her as the guardian of the flame, the conservator of COTS' original vision.

Founded sometime around March of 1988, COTS was a response to Isaak's and Reichek's concern for the adults and their children who were sleeping outdoors in culverts, dumpsters or in other unsafe and unsuitable conditions. Both women realized that FISH (Friends In Service Helping) and other charitable organizations were not able to respond to the increasingly numerous requests for shelter.

On the Board of Directors of Petaluma Seniors Involved (PSI), which they had co-founded in 1975, Isaak and Reichek suggested that the organization find a way to respond to the needs of homeless families in Petaluma. Raising money from private donors, enlisting the support of the churches and fraternal organizations, educating the community, and monitoring sleepovers at temporary shelters throughout the city, Reichek and Isaak spearheaded the drive for

homeless services in Petaluma.

“People have such good hearts,” Isaak offers, reminiscing about the early days of COTS. She fondly recalls Copperfield’s Bookstore’s basement, Elim Lutheran Church and the Howard Street house the city provided - all early sites for shelter for the city’s homeless. The COTS budget in the first year of its existence was twenty-eight thousand dollars. Today it is over a million dollars and Mary Isaak, the longest serving member on the COTS Board of Directors, continues to be active in setting the organization’s agenda.

### *III*

#### **The Reichek Years 1988-1990**

What is now a major nonprofit, which has helped thousands of homeless people over the years, had a humble beginning. Isaak and Reichek had originally envisioned a six-home trailer park located in Petaluma. Like all projects small and great, COTS needed funding, so Isaak and Reichek enlisted community support and applied for a matching grant from HUD. COTS needed to raise \$20,000 from other sources in order to be eligible to receive matching funds from HUD.

Then as now, COTS benefited greatly from community support. Dan Benedetti of Clover-Stornetta Farms donated \$1,000 and challenged other local businesses to match his company's contribution. George Weiner of Sonoma Woodworks donated another \$5,000 and the Grateful Dead's philanthropic organization, the Rex Foundation, pledged \$5,000.

Isaak and Reichek managed to raise the necessary funds, but their vision of two playgrounds and a small, temporary "hamlet of remodeled used mobile homes," as Reichek called it, was not to be.

The first parcel of land donated by the city was on a flood plain. The second was deemed unsafe because of the proximity of propane tanks and potentially harmful chemicals. HUD denied the grant request.

Disappointed but not deterred, Issak and Reichek focused their attention on the city, which had been encouraged by the amount of local support COTS had managed to garner and had promised to help the fledgling organization locate a permanent shelter site.

COTS was originally staffed by volunteers from PSI, FISH, Church Women United, St. Vincent de Paul and other religious, charitable and civic organizations. Because COTS had no paid staff, Vietnam Veterans of California initially handled the administration and finances in addition to providing a tax exemption umbrella until COTS was able to complete its own tax-exempt application.

From its inception, one of the goals of COTS had been to increase community awareness regarding the conditions under which Petaluma's homeless attempt to survive. To counteract uninformed and stereotypical responses to homeless people, COTS used a variety of media to educate the community about homelessness. In October of 1988, COTS organized a symposium at the Petaluma Veteran's Memorial Building and directed it to a wide audience. The event was advertised by posters, radio and newspaper announcements and flyers which were distributed to Petaluma businesses and professionals. The event, attended by more than forty people, was a huge success.

In November 1988, without a permanent shelter in place, COTS, through the City Council, lobbied to have the Armory in Petaluma opened on cold or rainy nights for homeless families. However, opening the armory to provide shelter for homeless families was not such a simple task. COTS learned that, according to state and national policy, if an armory is opened, all shelter seekers must be welcomed. The difficulty, of course, was that COTS' primary target group was families and the policy would not allow the mentally disabled, alcoholics, drug abusers and others to be excluded. To admit such people, though, would have required trained supervisors which COTS did not have.

In December 1988, local churches helped find a solution. At COTS' request, the United

Methodist Church opened its doors to families with children and eventually included single women as well. The Petaluma City Council, under intense lobbying from COTS, allocated the necessary funding to open the armory, thereby giving homeless men a place to stay.

During its first year, eight of the ten families COTS helped were able to find homes and jobs. As Isaak said in an interview in 1989, "COTS actually works." Realizing COTS' efficacy, the city of Petaluma put aside \$250,000.00 of developers' in-lieu fees to purchase a permanent family emergency shelter for COTS. After a great deal of searching, the permanent shelter was finally founded in 1989 in an old poultry lab at 1500 Petaluma Boulevard South. The city purchased the old building to house both Petaluma People's Services Center (PPSC) and COTS. Although the organizations could not immediately move in due to the need to renovate the facility and to remove asbestos, COTS was able to open a shelter for families on Howard Street and have the armory opened for homeless singles.

Reichek resigned from her position as Volunteer Executive Director in 1990, feeling that the city's close involvement with COTS inhibited her relationship with the press.

## *IV*

### **The James Years 1991-1992**

Grayson James was the first of two paid Executive Directors, taking the organization's helm on July 1, 1991. Having managed several dance companies and a private school, James brought needed skills to what had essentially been a volunteer-run organization. An accomplished martial artist with broad intellectual and social interests, he brought to COTS, as Mary Isaak put it "a wonderful competence in practical matters." His strength, according to Isaak, who had served as interim director after Laure Reichek's resignation, was his ability "to see the whole thing." James himself promised to bring more order and structure into the operations of the corporation. "There is a time," quipped Isaak, "when the good-hearted amateurs need to get their act together." It was at this juncture that James arrived, bringing a culture of professionalism and a wealth of knowledge about nonprofit operations.

A man with well-articulated spiritual ideals, James helped Petaluma residents recognize their obligations to one another. "The problem isn't 'out there,'" he argued in an op-ed piece in the Argus-Courier. "It's within each of us and will only be solved when we expand our sense of community to include everyone."

In James the homeless population of Petaluma had an eloquent and consummately professional advocate.

Among James's many accomplishments was the formulation of a sensible policy on AIDS for the COTS shelters. While enforcing a policy of non-discrimination and confidentiality,

even providing counseling for those with HIV, James managed to provide guidelines that helped to protect the health of other residents as well. Under the direction of a strong Board of Directors (including Thelma Dungan and John Sedlander, who both remain part of COTS today), presided over by Tim Kellgren, pastor of Elim Lutheran Church, James built the foundation for the agency's future. Among his many supporters was John Records, then a volunteer at COTS, who penned several incisive letters to the local papers supporting James' policies.

## **The Records Years 1992-**

Depending on whom you ask, John Records will be described as an organizer or a diplomat or as the manager who took the founder's vision and turned it into reality. On his office wall hangs a framed quotation: "Don't feel totally, absolutely, unconditionally responsible for everything. That's my job. Signed, God." But given the meticulousness of Record's managerial style and the extent to which COTS has expanded under him, one may be forgiven for harboring a certain skepticism about how seriously he takes the quotation. Records is an imposing figure with an offbeat sense of humor who could intimidate a Green Beret - and might if he thought it would help the homeless.

Records was an unlikely candidate to be the Executive Director of a homeless services organization. A graduate of New York University law school, Records in the 1980s was on the fast track to a seven-figure income as a corporate attorney. But John grew disillusioned with chasing money and moved to a small town in Oregon where he practiced law, taught, and started his family. Then something quite remarkable happened to him. He and his wife and their two young daughters joined the Great Peace March for Global Nuclear Disarmament.

Through one of those life-transforming quirks of fate, he became the march's leader. Trekking three thousand miles across the country changed him profoundly into the person Mary Isaak describes as "a crazy miracle of heart and brain."

Records is a canny manager who has kept the organization's administrative overhead admirably low while securing funding from diverse sources. When he took over the helm, he was

involved in every aspect of running the organization from development and payroll to shelter management. Building on the expanded sense of community that was James' legacy to COTS, Records created a structure within that community which allowed the organization to grow and prosper. Under Records, COTS has added a variety of programs. These include: The Ellwood Opportunity Center, which provides services for homeless singles; a shared and transitional housing program; licensed childcare on-site in the Center for Homeless Children and Their Families, which provides emergency shelter for families; the Faith-Based Shelter Program, which formalizes the support of local congregations; the Petaluma Kitchen, and the Food for Families Program. COTS now requires drug testing in the emergency family shelter, which greatly increases the rates at which people have been able to secure permanent housing.

Under Record's direction the budget has grown from \$200,000 to \$1.7 million, with about 35 employees and nearly 10,000 hours per year of volunteer support from the community.

Records, of course, has faced many challenges. Ministering to those whose lives are in crisis inevitably takes its toll on the staff. Most difficult of all was the shooting of Opportunity Center client Paul Rodrigues, which devastated the staff, the homeless clients, and the Petaluma community at large. On March 10, 1998, Officer Roy Loden caught Rodrigues burglarizing the Opportunity Center. The officer ordered the homeless man to place his hands in the air and freeze. Instead, Rodrigues charged at Loden, brandishing a weapon. Loden fired twice, fatally wounding Rodrigues. The event marked the first fatal shooting by a Petaluma Police Officer in forty-six years. The incident galvanized residents of the East Petaluma area where the shooting occurred to call for the removal of all homeless services including the soup kitchen from their neighborhood. Records, working with the COTS Board of Directors, volunteer consultants,

Police Chief, Pat Parks, Housing Administrator Bonne Gaebler, and his own staff, formulated a solution that both addressed the concerns of East Petaluma residents and brought a wider range of services to the homeless population. “Painful as it was for all concerned, we worked together to meet the needs of the officer, the homeless people, the police department and the greater community,” Records said.

Successful beyond most administrators’ dreams, Records gives most of the credit to his staff.

Laure and Mary “had the baby” but, according to one long-time employee, it was Records and two long-time COTS employees, Michelle Baynes and Diane Landman, and – of course - hundreds of volunteers, who raised the little tyke. Records, a man who reflects deeply but acts decisively, busies himself, as Jane Addams, the mother of reform in America said of herself, “with the old questions eternally suggested by the inequalities of the human lot.” His efforts were recognized by the Petaluma Area Chamber of Commerce which named him “Man of the Year” in 1997.

## **COTS Today**

Patty Hilligoss, former mayor of Petaluma, stated that her one regret in her long public service career was that she had not done more to help the homeless. Ironically, Petaluma is the Sonoma County city with the best track record of providing homeless services. Hilligoss' remark is an indicator of how deeply COTS has instilled a sense of responsibility among Petaluma citizens.

COTS is now the primary provider of emergency shelter, shared housing and related services in south Sonoma County. The agency helps over 1,000 homeless people each year.

During the last year, COTS provided:

- 44,000 bednights
- 500 life management workshops
- 6,500 meals
- 10,000 plus hours licensed child care

... and many other essential services to help homeless families and individuals get back under a roof of their own.

### *Emergency Shelter Programs*

***Center for Homeless Children and their Families:*** The Center is a year-round emergency

shelter for families with children, which accommodates up to 35 people at any one time, providing shelter, food and intensive assessment/case management services for up to 60 days (11,000 bednights per year).

***Faith-Based Shelter:*** Coordinated by COTS staff, 18 congregations provide companionship, food and up to 12 additional sleeping spaces to homeless families during the school year (2,700 bednights per year).

***Winter Shelter:*** The shelter is a cold weather facility for homeless adults operated by COTS five months per year. The Winter Shelter provides sleeping accommodations for approximately 50 adults per night from November to March (8,100 bednights per year).

### **Opportunity Center**

The Opportunity Center is a multi-service day-time shelter. It provides showers, laundry, a message center, telephone, mail and locker services. Staff provides assistance with employment referrals, housing referrals, counseling, assistance with chemical dependency and referrals for health care. Opportunity Center clients provide thousands of community service hours each year, thus actively giving back to the community (450 clients each year).

### *Licensed Child Care for Homeless Kids*

Located at the Center for Homeless Children and their Families, the Children's Haven program offers licensed day care and other comprehensive services to sheltered children and their parents,

including parent training, counseling and assessment (190 children per year).

### *Affordable Housing*

The Housing Services Program provides Shared and Transitional housing for previously homeless families and individuals using ten residences in Petaluma and Rohnert Park. This program provides safe, affordable housing in a mutually supportive, service-enriched living environment (23,000 bednights per year).

### *Food*

***The Petaluma Kitchen*** serves free, nutritious hot lunches to homeless people, seniors and needy members of the community 365 days of the year. The Kitchen serves over 30,000 meals annually.

***Food for Families.*** Every Saturday morning volunteers deliver food boxes to needy families and seniors. Over the course of a years over 8,000 boxes of balanced wholesome food supplements the diets of people in our community.

### *Rebuilding Shattered Lives*

***Life Skills Training:*** COTS holds results-oriented workshops in parenting skills, money management and other life skills. COTS also leads a team of health professionals from other agencies to address the dual problems of chemical dependency and mental illness in addition to providing assessment, treatment, referral, support, education and relapse prevention (700 clients each year).

***Homeless Prevention Assistance:*** COTS provides first month's rent and deposit assistance for homeless individuals or families who are securing permanent housing (40 clients each year).

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