Body Builder-Turned-Pastor Targets Silicon Valley's Unwanted

Tucked behind a light industrial area of self-storage warehouses and auto-parts stores is a small encampment of homeless people who live in tents along the banks of a creek.

Few people know or care about this encampment, or an estimated 150 others scattered all over this Silicon Valley capital of 1 million people. But every so often, a beat-up 1985 RV called the Mercy Mobile pulls up along a dead-end curb and a motley crew of homeless advocates bearing water, food, or clothes and shoes hops out.

Leading the pack is Pastor Scott Wagers, a former body builder and trainer who has dedicated the last 25 years of his life ministering to the homeless.

"Hey man, you doin' OK?" he asks a homeless man waiting to see what the Mercy Mobile might distribute one Saturday in late June. Wagers gives him a bottle of water, some energy bars and his card and encourages him to get in touch.

"Text me and let me know if you're getting swept up or something's going down," he says.

Among the homeless at the encampment that day are James "Tripper" Turner, a Canadian native who has been homeless for years and makes a living collecting aluminum cans for cash, and Ajanae, a transgender woman from Somalia whose family has disowned her.

Unlike most brick-and-mortar ministries that require the homeless to come to them, Wagers meets the homeless on their turf. He doesn't urge them to seek shelter or get counseling

or even come to Jesus. He simply inquires about their well-being and lets them know he's there to help.

His larger goal is to get his community—one of the country's wealthiest—to face up to a gnawing problem: more than 4,000 people in San Jose with no place to call home.

Every chance he gets, the 50-year-old Disciples of Christ minister brings people with him on his rounds, whether it's fellow clergy, interested scholars, students or business executives.

"What's driving me is the human crisis," says Wagers. "People are living under overpasses and going to the bathroom outside in one of the richest nations of the world. The church has to be a witness."

Like a prophet crying out in the wilderness, Wagers is dogged in his pursuit of justice for the homeless.

California has the highest percentage of homeless people living in unsheltered locations, according to a 2015 homeless study by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

San Jose tops the list of the state's cities with homeless people living outdoors, about 70 percent.

"We don't have winter, so people are able stay outside," acknowledges Ray Bramson, division manager for the San Jose housing department.

Santa Clara County, where San Jose is located, also has the nation's highest median household income; nearly half its residents earn more than $100,000 a year, mostly at high-tech companies such as Adobe, Cisco and eBay, which are headquartered in the city. (Google is nearby in Mountain View and Facebook is in Menlo Park.)

San Jose's median home price was $980,000 last year. And 16 percent of its residents are among the nation's top earners.

The disparity created by the tech industry has created an acute housing crisis for people on the lower end of the income spectrum who cannot find affordable housing in a city where renting a single room in an apartment might cost between $800 and $1,500 a month.

For years, homeless people took refuge in the Jungle, a 68-acre homeless camp along Coyote Creek that had the dubious distinction of being the nation's largest homeless encampment.

Wagers used to visit the Jungle's 300 homeless residents until the city evicted them and barricaded the area two years ago.

After that, he bought the RV for $5,500 and together with homeless advocate Robert Aguirre, a former resident of the Jungle and a onetime engineer, began driving it from one encampment to the next.

They avoid downtown, where services to the homeless are more plentiful, and instead drive to remote areas where 20 people typically live along a creek bed below street level, obscured by cottonwood trees, shrubs and other vegetation.

Wagers and Aguirre rail against the sweeps—the city refers to them as "abatement activities"—that have come to define homeless living in the San Jose area.

The drill is all too familiar: As soon as too many homeless people congregate in one area, the city will drive them out—forcing people to trek to a new location, in the process losing many of their possessions. (The city maintains the abatements are needed to avoid environmental hazards or public safety concerns.)

"The homeless are like refugees, moving from spot to spot," Wagers says. "Nobody wants them anywhere."

The roving ministry takes in donations from churches, nonprofits and individuals.

Those, say Wagers and Aguirre, are easy to come by.

“I can fill the RV three or four times a day if I wanted,” says Aguirre. “People will donate food, water, hygiene kits. We need to get people to understand there’s a financial need.”

That financial need is steep. The longer people live outside, the more likely they are to show up in emergency rooms, in the county jail or in need of acute psychiatric treatment.

A recent study showed that persistently homeless people cost the county $13,661 per person per year. But frequent users of medical and other public services can average $100,000 a year.

The city’s government recognizes the problem. In November it will ask residents to approve a $950 million bond to pay for the construction of housing, the vast majority for the homeless.

Meanwhile, various church ministries are pitching in.

The Cathedral Basilica of St. Joseph allows homeless people to use its address as a way to receive mail.

Grace Baptist Church allows homeless people to shower, do laundry and lounge indoors in its downtown sanctuary. Last winter, it got a permit to house 15 homeless people overnight for 35 days. This year, the congregation won permission from the city to house 30 people for 90 of the winter’s coldest nights.

“What we’re doing, honestly, is putting a Band-Aid on things,” says the Rev. Liliana Da Valle, pastor of Grace Baptist Church. “We’re feeding people today but saying, ‘Sorry. Tomorrow we may not be able to.'”

Wagers is more blunt in pinning the blame. He has few kind words for tech executives such as Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook or Tim Cook of Apple.

“Their policies create an environment of survival of the fittest,” says Wagers. “The people who built the valley can’t afford to live here anymore.”

In Silicon Valley, the theory that tax incentives for powerful tech companies will “trickle down” into middle-class wealth has not played out.

Companies such as Apple are not averse to charitable giving. They, and other tech giants, are often willing to match employee donations to an ever-expanding group of nonprofits, for example.

But they have yet to fully realize the problems they’ve created for middle- and lower-middle-class families.

“Companies need to open their eyes and take responsibility for pushing people into homelessness,” says Da Valle. “Asking for their charity is not enough.”

The behemoths may be slowly awakening to the reality. Last month, Facebook agreed to construct 1,500 new housing units, of which 15 percent will be reserved for low- and middle-income residents, regardless of whether they work at Facebook.

That’s just a drop in the bucket. But it’s a start.

Meanwhile, Wagers will continue his Mercy Mobile rounds.

He’s committed to giving the most politically powerless class of people in America a voice.

“I’m not a socialist or a capitalist,” Wagers says. “I’m a Christian. And this is shocking to me. What’s our role as Christians? ‘What you did to the least of these you did to me.'” {eoa}