

Bean's Cafe helps those in need

At the end of this year, Anchorage's Bean's Cafe and Outreach Center completes nearly eight years of continuous service to the hungry and homeless of Anchorage.

In those years, Alaska and our community have undergone the stress and exhilaration of accelerated economic activity and population growth that have enriched many, enticed many more, and left others behind.

It is accepted wisdom that economic growth is good. Without it, jobs do not multiply to match the needs, demands and expectations of our people. And, capital is generated at a much slower rate, if at all.

But growth comes at a price, the elements of which are not always clearly reckoned until the bill has been presented. We can see and measure the good; harder to discern is what floats in the wake when older ways of perceiving, thinking and acting are overrun too quickly.

It has been said culture change in the modern world no longer enjoys the historical luxury of evolving at a comprehensible pace permitting adjustments at community and individual scales. There is surely enough evidence worldwide to support that notion. As older social structures weaken under the battering of rapid change and economic pressure, many are left stranded without tools to adapt. The list is long.

Over the last few years, national and local attention have focused on one such outcome, the troubling increase in the number of homeless and disaffiliated people.

The rest of us, faced with confusion, bewilderment and helplessness sometimes comfort ourselves by saying the homeless "choose" their way of life. In one sense, they do. They choose within the very narrow range of options they believe to be theirs and, like the rest of us, they select the objective that seems most attainable. But to perceive the problem that way is to miss the most important point. If at this stage of our historical experience untold numbers of human beings are "choosing" to live on the streets, isn't it pertinent to ask why?

It's easy enough to catalog the conditions that manifest themselves among the homeless: mental illness; inadequate skills, education and employment; alcoholism; emotional disorders and immaturity. Those of us who analyze feel comfortable when we can break out the pieces of an individual's "condition" and measure and describe those parts. Having done it, we think we understand all there is to know.

But at the bottom lies the whole person and a fundamental and inescapable reality: The social, cultural and economic context in which large numbers of people have ordered their experiences and defined the meaning of their lives is disintegrating.

Homelessness is simply the most visible evidence of how difficult it can be for some to navigate through the storms of this change.

At Bean's Cafe, we see many of those who run aground. Our mission is to preserve a place for those who are ill, alone or without any other system of support. We have no solutions to extraordinary personal and social ills. But we have made a commitment to provide the most basic of all human needs — food and a place to be safe. Through good times and bad, we will offer at least that much.

This guest editorial was submitted by Linda Langston, executive director of Bean's Cafe, Inc.