

The Compassionate Camera

Stephenie Hollyman's three-year photo odyssey documents the plight of the homeless

TEXT BY PETER MOORE/PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHENIE HOLLYMAN

In April of 1985 a seemingly routine assignment from the *New York Times* changed photojournalist Stephenie Hollyman's life, starting her on a self-assigned, three-year project that culminated in a 15,000 mile cross-country odyssey to record the heartbreaking plight of America's displaced persons.

From New York City's packed welfare "hotels" to cinderblock sheds in Key Largo, Florida, from disputed Indian reservations to sprawling urban campgrounds in the far West, the trail ran on and some 10,000 exposures flowed through twin Leica M6s in her years of increasing discontent.

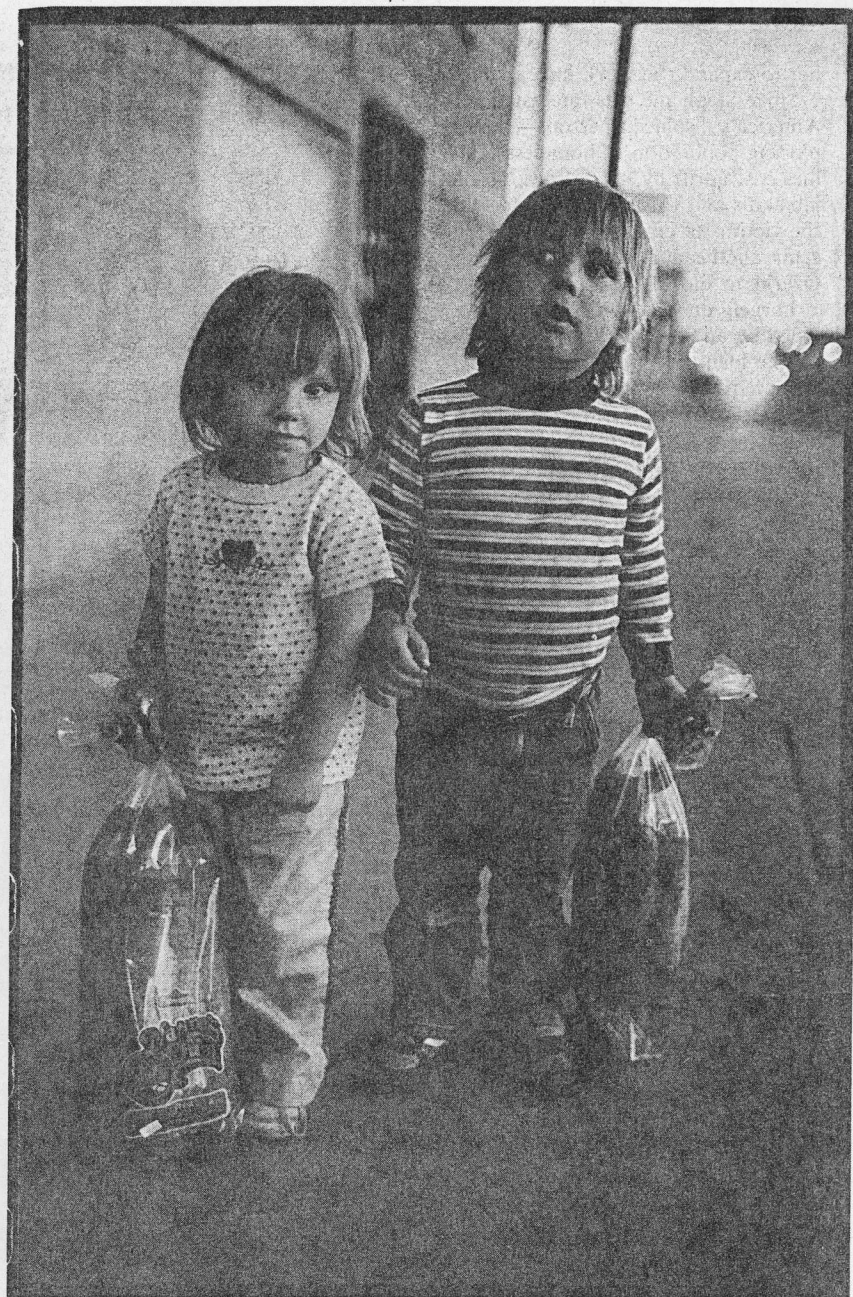
The daughter of two top-drawer professional photographers, Stephenie has long considered the camera a so-

MODERN PHOTOGRAPHY



cial tool. Her first interest, though, was painting, with photography vying for its share of her time. She recalls being deeply moved by Cartier-Bresson's work while in the seventh grade. While at college she spent time in the Guatemalan highlands, intensely photographing the life of the family she broke bread with.

After a trip to Europe, she assisted painter Kenneth Noland, then worked as a cook on a New York City harbor tugboat to support her art work. By 1982, her social and photographic concerns began to push out the painterly ones. She began writing and illustrating articles for *Nautical Quarterly* and other maritime publications, and then became a stringer for the *Times*, MARCH 1989



where the work trained her to come quickly to the heart of the matter, an ability that would contribute greatly to her work with the homeless.

The *Times* assignment that started Stephenie's long odyssey took her to the emergency assistance units that shelter the homeless in New York City. Appalled by living conditions that reminded her of scenes from the work of Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis, Stephenie began her work. Starting in the welfare hotels, she ended up covering the life of one New York City mother, Audrey Williams, for a year. She began to build up a body of photographs of such compelling quality that Philosophical Library, ordinarily a publisher of scholarly tomes, backed

The doors of the shelter seven miles out of Albuquerque are locked between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m., leaving this family (above left) to hitch into town for breakfast and a hard day of job hunting. When house painting dried up in Salt Lake City, they drove south looking for work. Their car died outside El Paso. Eventually, with Stephenie's help, they got back home.

Family life disrupted, cut off from friends, education uncertain, two kids in a soup kitchen (above) start home after an "ear banging"—compulsory organ music between bites. The packages contain stale bread; "they never get fresh bread," says Stephenie.

her to expand the work into a book.

Since Stephenie was interested in America's displaced persons—the exploding population of homeless families cast adrift by hard times, obsolete job skills and rising living costs—not the victims of crack, cocaine and despair, she headed south through the Ozarks to Florida.

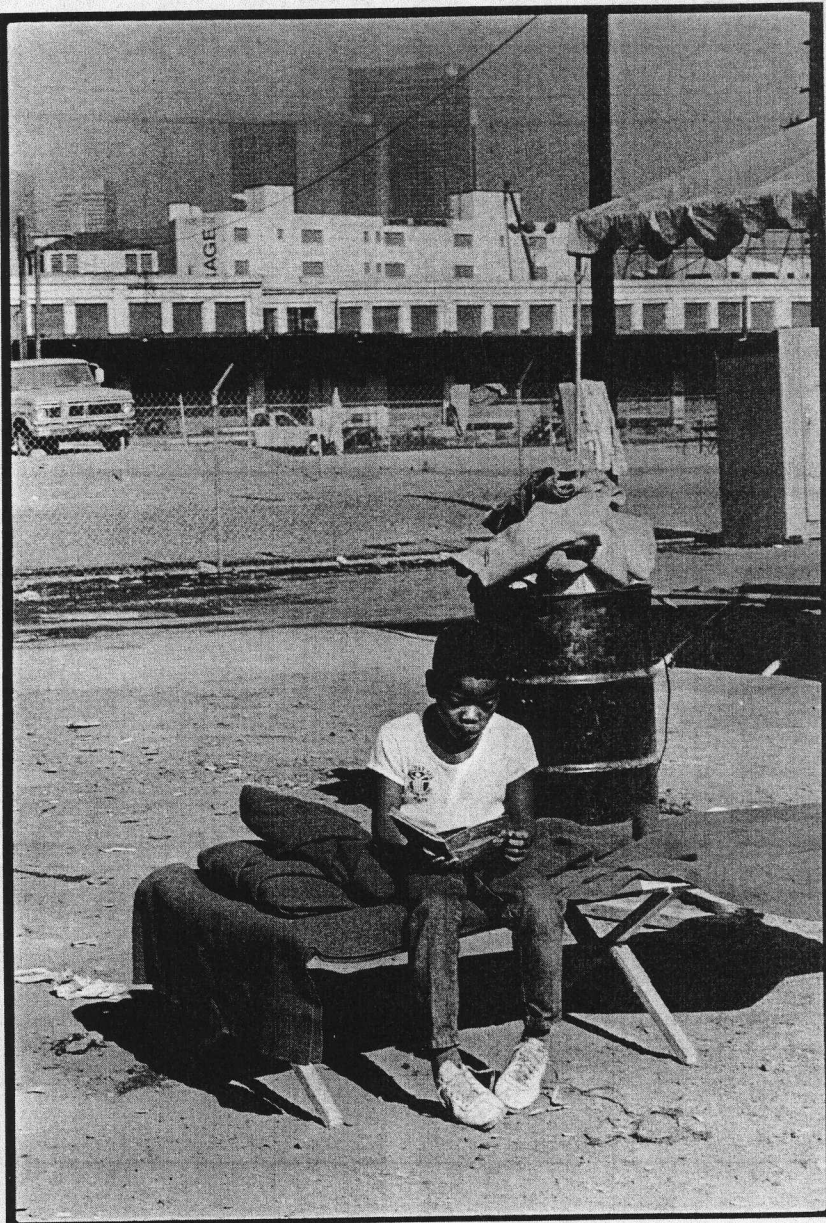
Largely on her own finances, but aided by an advance from her publisher, the loan of a brace of M6s and some lenses from Leica and bricks of HP5 from Ilford, she then headed west. To find her subjects, she looked for sub-standard housing and trailer camps, ate in soup kitchens and nosed around, talking with local advocates. She carried a big stack of Xeroxes of pictures already taken and a contract letter from Philosophical Press noting that 20 percent of the royalties of the planned book were to go to the Coalition for the Homeless.

When she found subjects, she befriended them, recorded their stories on tape for caption and text information, and photographed them sensitively, intruding as little as possible—the classic photojournalist at work. “You want to get their permission, but you don’t set up situations or recreate lost moments. You have to be helpful, but not hurt their pride or set up dependencies. I helped them out, but never gave them money.” Introductions and interviews arranged with local papers helped some of her subjects back on their feet.

“I dedicated my book to those who are working to get the homeless housing, jobs and hope. The problem of the homeless is not an issue of charity at all. It is a legislative issue, and affordable housing is the thing.

“I spent a lot of time being a reporter, the actual shooting time was often very short. I didn’t want to do an arty book on the homeless—putting them two-thirds of the way out to the edge of a 21mm frame—I wanted strong pictures that captured what I was seeing. It was harder that way—I had to really get involved with people.”

After two months on the road, Stephenie thanked her crazy schedule for keeping her too busy to fully assimilate everything she saw. She was worn out and very down, looking for something upbeat to photograph. After mounting a show of her photographs of the homeless at the Senate Rotunda, she was off to Ethiopia as a photographer for UNICEF’s International Appeal. It was the positive experience she needed, as the dedicated, veteran



UNICEF workers had a balanced realistic and humanistic approach.

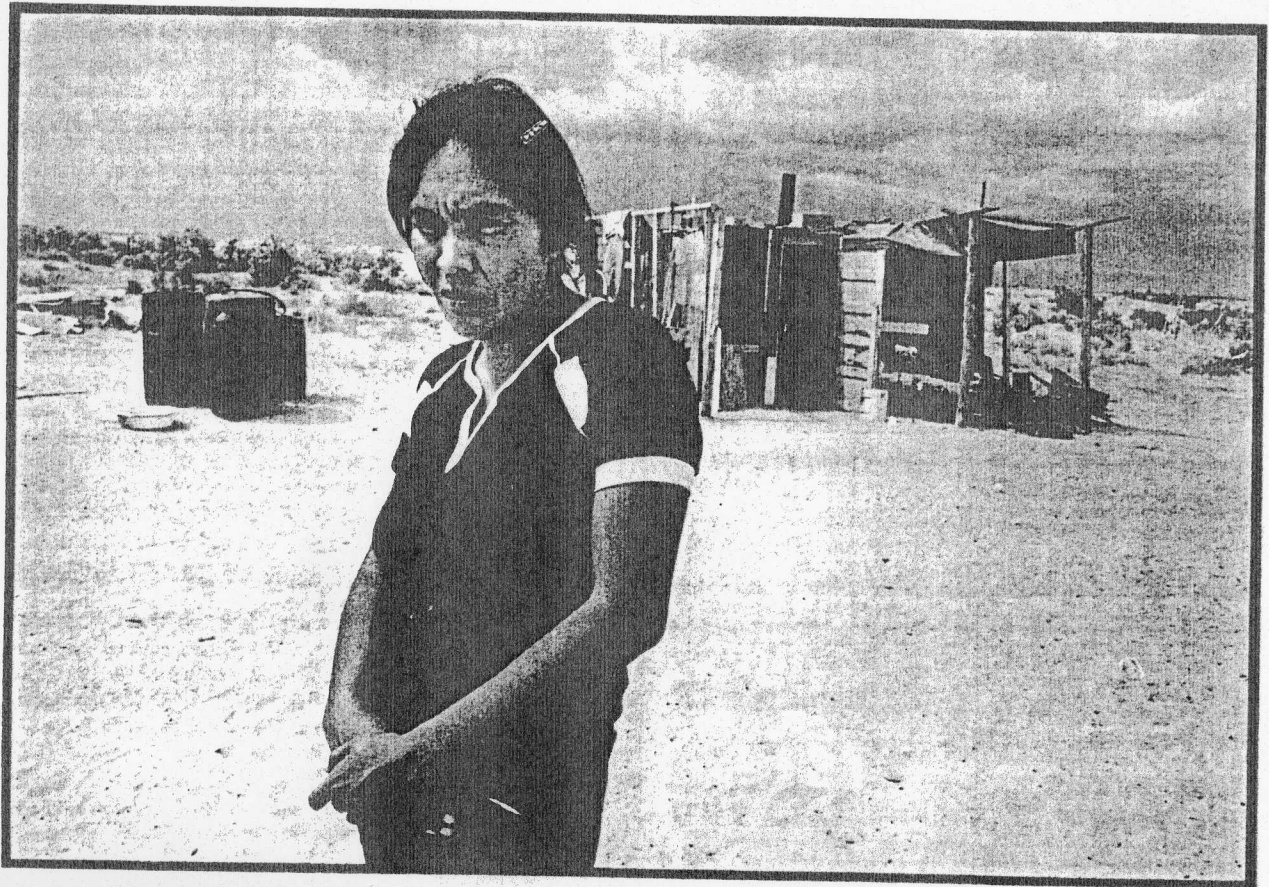
Late last fall, Philosophical Library published *We, the Homeless*, with text by Victoria Irwin, in a \$40 hardcover edition. A paperback version is planned. Although Stephenie’s book has been published and she’s currently working on other projects, the plight of the homeless is ongoing. ■

There is hardly a city, town or village in America that hasn’t been affected, and you and your camera can come to the aid of the homeless simply by providing the publicity that stimulates effective aid. To find out what group in your area needs your photographic help, write the Coalition for the Homeless, 105 East 22nd St., NYC 10016.

Child reading in an urban encampment in Los Angeles (above). Kids and skid row derelicts were mixed in this drug-infested “haven.” This area has now been demolished.

Many Navajo victims of the Hopi-Navajo land dispute, including Rose (top right), were promised housing and moved off their tribal lands. The housing never materialized and Rose moved back to the disputed land. Her shack is in the back.

Concrete blocks provide shelter from the elements for this child (bottom right), but little protection from drug addicts who make this area almost unbearable.



NY Times Book Review
November, 1988

Walking in Their Shoes

As the title suggests, **WE THE HOMELESS: Portraits of America's Displaced People** (Philosophical Library, \$40)

encourages the reader to identify with the book's subjects, emphasizing that the fastest growing category of displaced people comprises "the ones we don't notice because they don't look very different from us."

One homeless man says, "After being self-supporting, then finding yourself being one of those street people you see everyday

and kind of avoid . . . you get a real tender outlook . . . you are walking in their shoes." Stephanie Hollyman's photographs succeed because they encourage that walk in these shoes. Most of the more than 150 black-and-white photographs portray children, who constitute a third of the homeless population. Ms. Hollyman also depicts inhabitants of New York City's welfare hotels; homeless Vietnam veterans in front of the Vietnam Memorial; families sleeping four to a mattress in a shelter or living out of their cars; homeless Native Americans, and displaced elderly men and women. Most of the photographs have captions that describe the place and the people and often create



A homeless child at a camp in Apache Junction State Park, Arizona.

striking and memorable narratives. The text, by Victoria Irwin, chief of the New York bureau of The Christian Science Monitor, is most effective when specific, when the subjects speak for themselves. All too often, though, it hovers in the stratosphere of sociological statistics and journalistic generalizations. While the book does not achieve the high poetry of that great Depression document, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men" by Walker Evans and James Agee, it does have a powerful immediacy and impact. (A portion of the proceeds from sales of the book will be given to the Coalition for the Homeless.)

ROBIN LIPPINCOTT

Photographs of Inupiat elders to be part of Native archives

Karl Packett
News Editor

Elders of the NANA Region were photographed the past two weeks by a professional photographer from New York, the beginning of what is expected to become a permanent historical archive.

The photography project is just one part of Inupiat Iliquisiat (II), a region-wide program designed to preserve and promote Inupiat Eskimo culture.

Eventually, II officials hope to have all 444 elders in the region photographed. Last week, when many elders were in Kotzebue for NANA Regional Corp.'s annual meeting and the Friends Church Spring Conference, 90 elders were photographed.

"These photos will represent our link to our grandparents, our homeland," said Bertha Aquaga Jennings, coordinator of the II program. "It will help us find out who we are and where we came from."

The photographs will be different from other professional photographs that have been taken of Natives in the past, according to Stephenie Hollyman, a freelance photographer from New York who had been in Kotzebue taking pictures of elders.

Hollyman said, between shoots at the senior center last week, that her photographs of the elders will be natural, not "white-bred ver-

Out of the frying pan and into the freezer for freelance photographer

Stephenie Hollyman's far-flung assignments have taken her "from the frying pan and into the freezer" in recent months.

Shortly after the freelance photographer returned to her New York home after living with and photographing the Dogon Tribe in Mali, West Africa, for six months, she was off to the arctic to take pictures of Inupiat Eskimos.

Hollyman was flown to Kotzebue by Indian Health Services earlier this month to photograph elders of the NANA Region as part of the Inupiat Iliquisiat program. It's her idea of a good assignment. "It was a call from the elders," she said last week at the senior center, where she was photographing elders.

Hollyman authored the photo-book, "We the Homeless: Portraits of America's Displaced People." She logged 15,000 miles over three years in her travels across the United States photographing the homeless for the book.

She earned the opportunity to photograph the Dogon Tribe in West Africa through a Fulbright Senior Research Fellowship.

Her assignment in Kotzebue wasn't the first one that has brought her to the NANA Region. She was here last summer to photograph people involved with Inupiat Iliquisiat. And she may come back again to photograph a whale hunt in Kivalina.

"I'm really honored to be doing this," she said of the elders assignment. "I think it's a very important project."

sions" of Natives in costumes they haven't worn in 25 years.

The photographs will go hand-in-hand with another II program in which the oral history of the Inupiat as told by elders is being recorded on tape. And the photographs will add an important dimension to that documentation, according to Noorvik's Billy Sheldon, the president of the Regional Elders Council.

"Our children, who will not know us, will see who we are and what our job descriptions were," Sheldon said. "What they'll probably do is write stories of

individual elders and put them by their pictures."

There isn't a permanent home for the photographs yet. But II officials are looking into the possibility of placing them with the Instructional Television media department, which is also without a home.

The use of the photographs will be three-fold. Three prints of each elder will be developed. One will be permanently protected in a special file; one set will be used for display purposes throughout the region, and; another print will be used for promotion and edu-



Jim Hoenesgard/Arctic Sounder

Eugene and Jenny Sours take a look at a Polaroid that Stephenie Hollyman, right, had just taken of the couple.

cational purposes, such as for use in brochures.

The photographs can be used for more than historical purposes, Jennings said. They should be used

creatively in ways to preserve the Inupiat culture.

"If we don't work with our elders our language will just disappear," she said.

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Coming Up on *Nightline*
Dr. Torstveit's Vacation

By Tom Bettag
abcNEWS.com

NIGHTLINE, May 28 — Memorial Day marks the beginning of the vacation season. People start getting antsy about finally getting some time away from work. Most people, but not Dr. Jeremy Torstveit.

Torstveit is a pediatric cardiac surgeon in Phoenix, Ariz. He operates on children born with heart defects, children whose lives are threatened or who face a lifetime of severely restricted activity. The major but now routine procedure that he performs can give them perfectly healthy, normal lives.

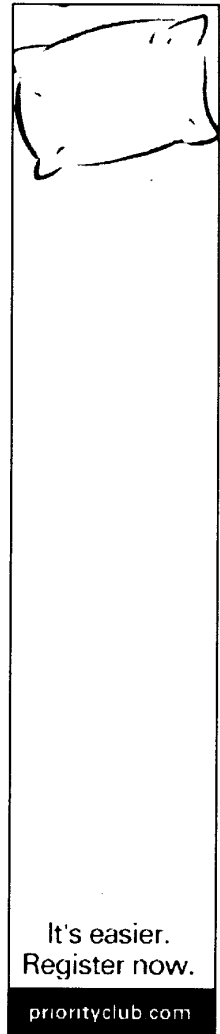
Ten years ago, Torstveit was on vacation in Sri Lanka. He learned that there was no such surgery available anywhere in the country, that children with heart defects died routinely.

Ever since then Torstveit has used his vacation time to travel Sri Lanka to operate those children and also to train local doctors in the procedure.

A remarkable young free-lance journalist named Stephenie Hollyman brought the story to us and offered to travel with Torstveit, shooting the entire story on a miniature digital video camera that allowed her to work without interfering with the doctor and his work. The product is an intimate portrait of a remarkable human being. ■

Tom Bettag is the executive producer of Nightline.


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