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## Frontier Internship in Mission

### **To protect and advance civil and human rights**



*By Imbarajah Jeyakumar*

ACCORDING TO A JULY 2007 Coalition for The Homeless report, New York City is in the midst of an historic crisis in family homelessness. According to data from the New York City Department of Homeless Services, in February of this year, the average number of homeless families sleeping in the municipal shelter system reached nearly 9,300, an all-time record. This record level of family homelessness in New York City persisted throughout the year. Each night of 2007, more than 9,000 New York City families with a total of more than 14,000 children slept in shelters or welfare hotels. Equally alarming, family homelessness has been on the rise for a considerable period of time. As the Coalition for the Homeless documented in its recent ‘State of the Homeless 2007’ report, the number of homeless families sleeping in shelters each night rose by 17.6% last year, while the number of homeless children in shelters rose by 18.1%. A major cause of the rising population of homeless families is the dramatic increase in the number of new homeless families. According to City data 2006 saw a 22.9% increase in the number of homeless families new to the shelter system over the previous year. In large part, this increase is driven by the growing scarcity of rental housing affordable to low-income New Yorkers.

Indeed, according to the U.S. Census Bureau’s Housing and Vacancy Survey, between 2002 and 2005 (the most recent data available) the number of New York City apartments available at monthly rents of less than \$1,000 (in 2005 constant dollars) fell by nearly 157,000, while the number of apartments with monthly rents of less than \$600 —apartments that would be affordable to low-income families— fell by more than

56,000. Indeed, during the same period the number of subsidized housing units in New York City shrank by 11 percent. Thus, by every measure the housing affordability crisis in New York City has worsened in recent years. The widening gap between soaring rents and falling renter incomes remains the driving force behind rising family homelessness.

Inbarajah Jeyakumar, a Frontier intern from India, completed his second year as a social worker with the Jan Hus Presbyterian Church (JHPC) assisting those that society has thrown out. Inba staffed the JHPC Homeless Outreach Program, which works with a smaller subset of clients who are housed, modestly employed, but are at risk of losing their housing because of a sudden crisis. Others are seeking to improve their lives, but need some extra financial support for a brief period of time in order to achieve their goals. The program seeks to help by offering financial assistance for items such as college textbooks or rent arrears. The possibility of providing such assistance has increased the effectiveness of the program, which offers comprehensive help to homeless and marginally housed people.

### **Advocacy work**

Inba helped organize the Homeless Clients Rally that took place on March 13. “It was our Legislative Education and Action Day. We went to Albany, the capital of New York to fight for a Legislative Commission on universal health care, raising the welfare grant, real jobs for low income New Yorkers, and improving the welfare program in the state. We were given the opportunity to talk to three legislators for 30 minutes each. It was great. Many of the members were fantastic speakers and handled their own wonderfully. I had never expected this and felt a bit unsure at that moment. It was a great experience that led me to many realizations. Clients asked questions about income security, affordable housing, access to training and services, good jobs for New Yorkers and the implementation of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. We urged the legislature to support funding for emergency food programs, transportation to work initiatives, affordable housing, education and training opportunities, and affordable childcare. The entire program was organized by Hunger Action Network of New York City,” Inba reported.

“I continue to work with homeless friends, helping to find all the possible ways for a better life. I am in charge of the Tuesday Night Dinner Program; nearly 100 clients come to eat a hot meal each week,” said Inba.

### **The Circle of Arts**

Inba was involved in organizing *The Third Annual Circle of Arts: Breaking Boundaries among Artists: A Sharing Experience*. The Circle of Arts is a two-week multimedia arts exhibition and sale that brings together homeless and formerly homeless artists, supportive artists, staff, and volunteers who plan, design, and install an art gallery. “This year’s theme was ‘Abundance.’ The homeless clients came up with many reflections on the theme which influenced the curators. The gallery opened on May 4. The exhibit was scheduled to be on display until May 31.”

The Circle of Arts addresses the root cause of poverty in a dynamic way by addressing issues such as emotional satisfaction and social relationships to strengthen people’s ability to achieve goals like employment, housing and a more dignified life. “When we talk about homeless, the conversation generally focuses on people’s lack of housing.

However, in order to respond effectively to homelessness, it is not sufficient to focus on what is missing,” explains Inba.

The Jan Hus Homeless Outreach and Advocacy Program strives to acknowledge the talent and humanity of people who are treated as numbers in other settings. There are many artists and performers among the Manhattan homeless community, many of whom are too often denied the opportunity to share their work with the larger community. The Circle of Arts is a unique opportunity for members of the homeless community to showcase their work alongside that of artists who wish to support them at a beautiful and welcoming Upper East Side location.

“This year, there were three categories under which artists submitted their work—homeless artist, struggling artist, and establish artist. The Third Annual Circle of Arts had a wonderful opening reception on Friday, May 4. More than 70 people toured the gallery. Everyone in attendance was enthusiastic about the quality of the art on display and by the gallery itself. They also had the opportunity to listen to the creative writing of homeless and marginally housed people who attend our creative writing workshop on Tuesday nights.”

The logo for this year’s exhibit was designed and drawn by client-artist Anthony Horton. The middle design represents this, that, and the other thing. The interlocking hands encircling the design represent artists helping each other and the program here at the church.

“We were all shocked on the morning of May 23 when we saw that eight pieces of art were stolen from the sanctuary. After careful consideration, we decided to close the art exhibit early, out of respect for the generosity of the artists who donated or lent their pieces, we could not take any further risks. This had never happened before. A full investigation is underway. The police was here and reports have been made. This is so unfortunate on so many levels. So many people have worked so hard on this project and so many have passionately given work to this cause,” reported Inba.

### **A New Sanctuary Movement**

As part of the Global Concern Program of the JHPC, Inba was member of the commission of the Presbytery of New York City that organized a conference on ‘Immigration, Justice, and Christian Hospitality’ attended by a large group of people from the congregations.

“It was amazing to see multi-cultural people joined for action. We urge comprehensive immigration reform that provides a path to citizenship. We also advocated for the protection of workers, family reunification, and restoration of the rule of law, and enhanced security. The conference also called on the authorities to promote citizenship and civic participation, help local communities, and protect and advance civil and human rights.”

In the 1980s, Jan Hus Church was active in the Sanctuary Movement. Since immigration laws are tightening, more families are vulnerable to immigration security enforcement. A few churches in New York City felt the need to get involved in this crisis. They had a new vision —The New Sanctuary Movement. Jan Hus Church is one of the active members of this slowly growing Movement. The main purpose of the

movement is to give moral, legal, and spiritual support to those with order for deportation. The movement is committed to education, advocacy, legal triage, prophetic hospitality, and material support, explained Inba.

### **Creative writing workshop**

For the past 2 years, Inba has been working with the New York Writers Coalition (NYWC) to empower the poverty stricken and homeless through writing. The NYWC organizes creative writing workshop for many participants every Tuesday immediately after the Dinner Program. The Creative Writing Workshop provides many people with the opportunity for their stories to be heard. It provides a voice to those who are at times left voiceless.

On December 18, the workshop participants had a public event called Book Party and a reading called 'The Hidden Chorus.' "Being part of this program inspires me. I can say that this is a platform for many of our clients to put their stories in writing. We publish their stories, poetry and articles in our newsletter too."

### **Anti-styrofoam campaign**

Each year, Americans throw away 25 billion Styrofoam cups, 1,369 tons of Styrofoam products every year. The New York City School System alone throws away 150 million Styrofoam meal trays annually. Styrofoam is a notorious pollutant that is very difficult to recycle due to its light weight and low scrap value. It is generally not accepted in curbside programs, is seldom reusable, occupies a significant amount of space in landfills, and takes a very long time to fully decompose. A single cup can take 500 years to decompose. Styrofoam can seriously impact human health, wildlife, and the aquatic environment. As the product breaks down, it can clog waterways or be mistaken for food by wildlife.

Recently, New York State Senator Liz Krueger introduced a bill banning Styrofoam products in the food service industry. The bill would allow the food service industry one year to find environmentally-friendly alternatives to Styrofoam products currently in use. It applies to restaurants, as well as food-service providers, such as supermarkets. Inba visited the Senator's office in the first week of November and had a discussion about the campaign they were initiating at Jan Hus. "We have her full support and now we are talking with churches, especially soup kitchens where the homeless are fed. Jan Hus Church is no longer using Styrofoam products in its Homeless Dinner program or during the church coffee hour after the worship".

From August to December, Inba spent a great deal of time promoting this 'Green Program,' leading workshops, and coordinating dinner.

"Whenever I closely work with homeless and marginalized communities, it gives me more insights. The unjust global economic system throws many people out of the mainstream. Again, I remember the verse; struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens. I see Empire and Globalization as evil spirits that divide people, communities, societies, and countries. The approaching holiday season gives me courage to join with a child called Jesus who fought against powers and principalities."