



By Tequila Minsky

Elderly homeless New Yorkers know what it means to have no place to sleep, to have no home. They understand. When the tsunami created so much devastation and left thousands without homes some wanted to do as much as they could to help.

“We raised money before and I knew we could do the same for those who have lost everything,” said Domingo Martinez, 63, a client of Peter’s Place. Located on 23rd St. between Sixth and Seventh Aves., Peter’s Place, a project of the Partnership for the Homeless, is a 24-hour multiservice center for homeless seniors.

“Being homeless in New York City helps us have compassion for others who need,” said Martinez, who hails from Puerto Rico. “We, the homeless, want to give to other people who need it more than us.”

In December, this group raised \$500 for holiday toys for homeless children by creating and selling cards. Recently they rallied to paint greeting cards to sell for tsunami relief.

Elizabeth, 76, of Guyana, who has been homeless for the past few months, painted vibrant cards with stripes of sea blue, squiggles of chartreuse and dabs of deep red.

Jamaican native Gwendolyn Taylor, 73, who had never used art materials before, dedicated many days creating hand-painted cards.

“I’m a novice,” she commented on her newfound form of expression as she painted colorful shapes across her paper. “I use green, it’s the color of prosperity.”

The Peter's Place clients worked together. Some sprinkled glitter; some painted the card stock while others assembled the cards adding shiny cord.

"I like to use art activities," said Bronwyn Rucker, creative art therapist/group worker. "It's a nonintrusive way for participants to reveal and express themselves. By working together the projects help break through the isolation of these seniors and also build community."

"Homelessness here in America could never compare to the tsunami tragedy," said Alvester Grant, 70. "At least here we have somewhere to turn. There, there is hopelessness."

This group of homeless senior New Yorkers, touched by the plight of people left homeless by December's tsunami, organized the fundraising effort. On a recent bitter February day they set up a sales table in front of the W. 23rd St. center. They collected \$76 — selling each card for \$1 — from street sales and they continue to sell cards from the center to contribute to the American Red Cross.

At the display table, Donald Leight, 61, managed the sales end of the tsunami fundraiser, with help from volunteer Steve Cohen. Leight has been at Peter's Place for three months. "A lot of homeless seniors made these cards, and I wanted to help sell them," he said. "We don't have much to give, but we have plenty of time and can help in other ways."

Leight said he spent many years in Indonesia as a merchant marine. "These people didn't have much to start with — they are very poor. I know they are really suffering now."

A passerby who only gave his name as Anthony stopped to select a greeting card from baskets of colorful miniature artworks. "I'm going to give this to my girlfriend," he said, after choosing a glittery card adorned with hearts. "This is nice — a lot of work went into it." The tsunami relief greeting card project is ongoing and at least once a week, weather permitting, the table is set up for sales.

According to Beverly Chevront, the Partnership's director of communications, Peter's Place is for many a refuge of last resort. Providing emergency services, meals, health care and help in finding housing, Peter's Place offers services to about 140 older homeless adults every day.

"Housing for people who are older and homeless is extremely scarce in New York City," she said. "People at Peter's Place understand what it's like to live without shelter, and the plight of people left homeless by the tsunami resonates deeply with them."