



A-J Photo/James Granger

Dr. Porntip Chungchansat listens to the heartbeat of of Yesenia Aguillo

Indigents turn to clinic for medicine, education

By VALERIE ULLMAN-AVERY
Avalanche-Journal

The heavyset Mexican-American woman puts her hand over her mouth and quietly answers the nurse's questions. Every few seconds she wipes her dripping nose with the back of her hand.

A safety pin attached to her blue and yellow striped shirt keeps her faded blue pants up around her waist. On cold winter days, she goes without socks.

Existence is this woman's priority.

On this particular day, existence requires medical care — care that has been neglected for the most part in the past.

"It isn't a priority until they are sick," said Alice Segovia, an L.V.N. at the Guadalupe Clinic.

The woman is one of the homeless of Lubbock — probably a "couch person," explained Ms. Segovia.

Many people don't realize they are homeless, she explained. "They might live on a relative's couch night after night and never realize they are homeless."

A homeless person is someone who lacks a fixed nighttime place of residence, said Ms. Segovia.

When survival is foremost in the homeless' mind, medical care and personal hygiene aren't priorities. In fact, they're often ignored, according to Dr. Porntip Chungchansat, the clinic's full-time physician.

"The nature of poor people is that they have to get whatever is necessary for their life first," said Mrs. Chungchansat.

"They're used to living and suffering with whatever symptoms they have," said Ms. Segovia. "They might have had this illness for four to six years. It's just a way of life for them."

See CLINIC 2C

Venecia can relate — he's been there

By ELIZABETH KAUFMAN
Avalanche-Journal

It's 11 o'clock on a week night. Eliu "Louie" Venecia lights another cigarette, takes a breath and tries another tack at reasoning with the shivering woman seated in front of him. The phone rings. His wife wants to know when he will be home. "You have your own family to take care of," she reminds her husband.

She has zeroed in on the trouble spot. Venecia has two families. One family waits for him at home. The other waits in alleys and abandoned buildings.

Working with the homeless is a natural progression for Venecia, the homeless program coordinator of Guadalupe Economic Services Corporation (GESC). The personable, round-faced man with the dark eyes is one of 17 children of a first generation Mexican-American mother and a blond, green-eyed Hispanic migrant worker father. His childhood was spent in an endless convoy of trucks and cars as he traveled cross-country gathering strawberries, asparagus, tomatoes, sugar beets and onions.

"We had no home base. Everywhere was home and everybody was a stranger," Venecia, 31, recalled.

Yet, Venecia said, migrant workers were not officially recognized as a homeless subset until the mid-'80s. It is one small slap of social injustice among many harsh blows hitting the homeless, Venecia said. At the top of the victim list Venecia so emphatically discusses are what he calls casualties — the children.

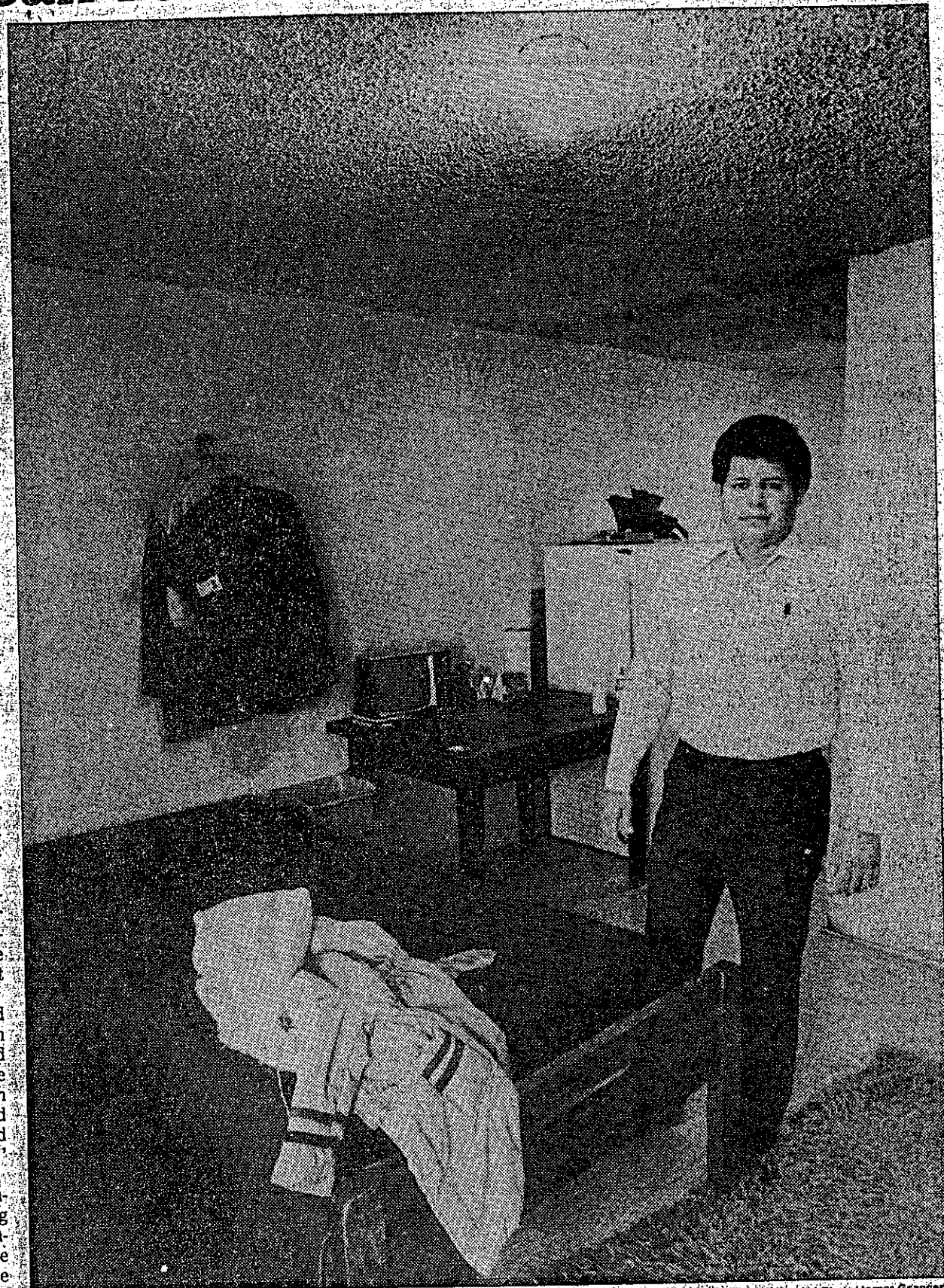
"We have a society that reacts after the fact. A child has to be hurt for help. The life we lived was so devastating as a child. You remember the unfairness, the abuse and neglect. It flashes on you."

Venecia's memories are riddled with scenes of women being raped in migrant camps. He saw unattended mentally ill, and criminals on the lam. Houses were often chunks of tin nailed to trees. Often, "Mom would throw a blanket down on the ground and that was where we would sleep," he recalled.

"I grew up with cousins and uncles that were getting high, blowing smoke in toddlers' faces and watching how the child reacted. We were awakened by other residents (in the camps) trying to rob us."

"As soon as you could bring a bucket to your dad you started picking," Venecia said. "My parents had no education. There's no incentive for education when (migrants) live day-to-day. They might make \$40 or \$50 a day and then might not make any money for months."

"If we came home from school speaking English, it was like a bad word. We were confused as to what



A-J Photo/James Granger

Louie Venecia in one of the Clovis Road shelter units

our native language was. But for me, school was a picnic."

If Venecia wanted to attend classes, he had to complete his day's share of picking first.

In one location, "We had to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning; it was a good hour's walk to the field. We'd have to start cutting asparagus right

away." Venecia wore two sets of clothes — work clothes on top of school clothes. He took the work clothes off before he'd get on the school bus, which drove directly past the field.

"I loved school, but I had to work. When you have to go to six, seven schools in a year and sometimes in

the same season, from Florida to Washington state, that's tough. So I dropped out in the seventh grade."

Venecia says his story could belong to many of the people he now helps. In reference to children, the father of five said, "Instead of investing in our important resource,

See VENECIA 3C

Venecia uses firsthand knowledge to battle homeless' plight

Continued
we're going to spend billions of dollars making prisons. We're going to have to make room for the guys we neglected in the '70s and '80s. The abuse surfaces, the same abuse they suffered."

Two pieces of stainless steel holding Venecia's spine together are evidence of another form of abuse. Years of stooping over rows of budding onions, using a tiny hoe to scratch them out of the ground's surface fractured his spine. "Bend like that constantly, and the spine breaks. The knowledge that they (migrants) made money (based on amounts hoed) led to manipulation and abuse. You'd see the sun go down and you'd try to hurry. You would go until your back was numb. Back in California, they have outlawed the use of the short hoe. A lot of women had miscarriages because of the strain. You'd see people drop in the fields," Venecia said.

Recounting his story in his narrow, but private office at 1416 First St., Venecia is in a suit. If he were in a session with shelter residents, he'd be in blue jeans. But working with the homeless takes more than just dressing for the part, he said.

"You have to understand the language of the natives before you can help them. I have to reach inside of them. We're talking about deep in the jungle, where it's really bad."

Venecia catapulted out of the dank recesses of his life at 17, when he was old enough to escape his father's alcoholic tirades. He spent five years in the ghettos of Indian Town, Fla., where he was a Florida Farm Worker's Council outreach worker and sometime-punching bag for prospective clients and drug peddlers. Venecia eventually moved to Ohio, where the Ohio Hispanic Institute of Opportunity helped him obtain his General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and go on to a two-year business school.

But he couldn't stay away from the social services arena. He worked in a program similar to GESC's in Ohio. "As far back as I can remember, I've been doing some kind of counseling. I'm the kind of person that when people tell me they're hurting, I feel it myself. I'm not a very religious person; my wife has accused me of not believing in God. I'm much more interested in physically helping people than going to church and saying, 'God, please help these poor people,'" Venecia said.

Venecia started at GESC in 1987 as an outreach worker. He moved to Lubbock because, as the geographical center of his childhood travels, it

Venecia recovers from burn-out by traveling - to parks in Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee. "Then I come back, and I'm fresh and ready to go. But there are times when it's a real struggle."

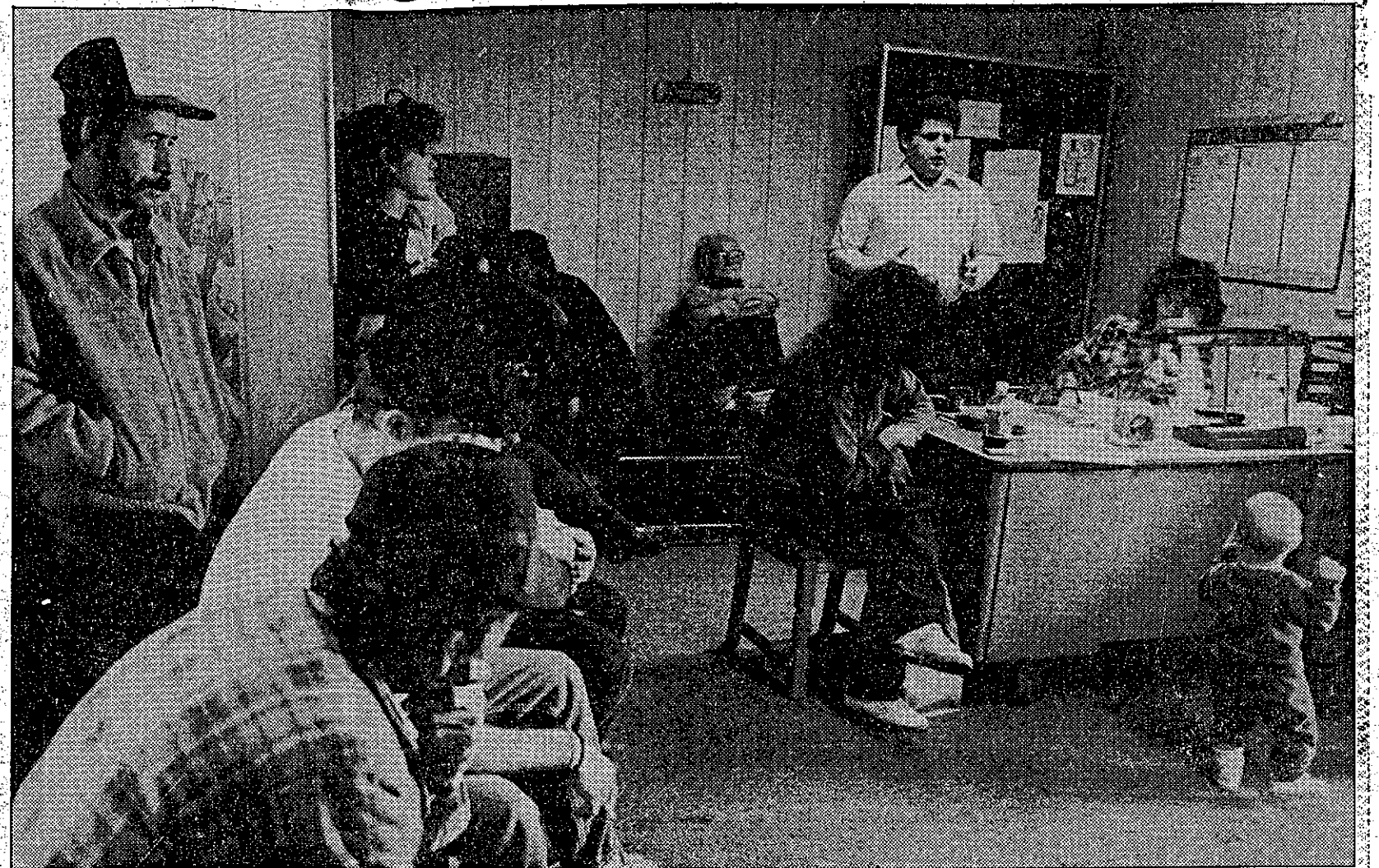
When a group of clients voluntarily spend three 10-hour days plastering and painting GESC's worn offices, it makes Venecia's struggles seem less wearing. He is like a proud father showing off the stuccoed walls of his office. His mood shifts to defiant tones when he points to the people he said should be helping GESC - the community at large. "We are a community organization. The community should be here, donating time, volunteering a dollar or two," he said.

DeAnn Bell is one person who did get involved - through her church, Agape United Methodist. She said she used to gripe about not having enough money for new household items. Then she met Venecia and realized, "I didn't need anything. It's so easy to get caught up in our own lives. I feel guilty, especially when I'm around Louie. He lives his job."

"When he speaks, you know he's feeling what he says. There are times Louie has given up part of his own life for the people he works with. He helps them get self-esteem when they have low self-esteem because their world has bottomed out on them," Ms. Bell said.

"I give them options. I don't give them advice. I expect them to be responsible; to create a core plan. We're helping them help themselves," Venecia said.

"My parents used to say, 'Every mind is a different world.' It's like saying penicillin can cure every-



Louie Venecia, far right, talks to clients at the Guadalupe shelter.

A-J Photo/James Granger


body. But some people are allergic. An educational program or a social services program needs to be

planned and devised according to the needs of individual populations and then to individual people. I believe

that we've done that here to a certain degree. "In order for this type of project

to be successful, you have to see the edge. I had an advantage. I was there."

YES SAY YES SAY YES



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Venecia started at GESC in 1987 as an outreach worker. He moved to Lubbock because, as the geographical center of his childhood travels, it comes closest to being a hometown.

GESC's small corps of outreach and administrative workers carry out the homeless program, homeless migrant program and migrant program. Venecia's outreach job started with identifying the homeless. "The first thing I did was just drive around town to the old employment office, the bootleggers, drug dealers," he said.

He found a surplus of people to fill the 10-unit shelter and a deficit of time to see potential clients. An 80-hour workweek was standard. Though the hours Venecia works have dwindled since he moved into his current post a year ago, the problems haven't. Shelter workers have his home number if they need to make one of those 11 p.m. emergency calls.

"These people have a multiplicity of problems. We're human resource specialists. We have to know where everything is. They're not just coming here for food stamps. A woman was raped at 14 and had never told anyone - she told me."

A client walks in needing immediate medical care. Venecia spends the next chunk of his day in a hospital emergency room. "When you get indigents, there's a higher risk of cancer, high blood sugar, diabetes. Clients can be very hostile. I go from being assaulted to being thanked. Then I find some so depressed, they are so far from my reach." He pauses. "We've had suicides."

"We have people that just hate themselves. Drugs have turned decent women into prostitutes, and there are a lot more male prostitutes than people would believe. There are people with AIDS that don't care. We see a lot of teen runaways. But most of the people we see are families."

When former client Susan Guzman brought her family to GESC, she was frightened. "I didn't know what to expect. I had kids; I was living there (at the shelter) and working. I was having a hard time. People usually don't want to listen." Venecia did. "He came and visited with us. He would check in and see if they (clients) needed anything, groceries. If they needed a couple dollars, he would give it to them."

Joyce Loper, the Neighborhood House service coordinator, describes Venecia's commitment in one word. "Impassioned. When you're in the trenches so long, you get burn-out. Louie can talk you into anything. He will call about someone we just helped, and he'll say 'Oh, but Joyce...' You just can't help but catch the enthusiasm. I think the fact that he has been in this field for so long and his dedication level remains the same says a lot for him," she said.

The United States launched Early Bird, the first commercial communications satellite in 1965.

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