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Los Angeles Times

May 15, 1991, Wednesday, Home Edition

SECTION: Part A; Page 1; Column 5; National Desk

LENGTH: 4049 words

HEADLINE: HOMELESS BOY'S LIFE A SERIES OF MOVING DAYS, SCHOOLS;
CHILDREN: THIS YEAR A MILLION YOUNGSTERS WILL SPEND AT LEAST SOME NIGHTS WITHOUT
SHELTER IN A NORMAL DWELLING.

SERIES: GROWING UP IN AMERICA. The Reality of Childhood Today. Fourth in a series.

BYLINE: By RON HARRIS, TIMES STAFF WRITER

DATELINE: LAS VEGAS

BODY:

As the glitter of the casinos faded against the sunrise and the all-night gamblers gave way to the morning wave of vacationers eager to wager the new day's millions, Thomas Elliott, 6, stirred homeless and hungry on the floor of a church basement. His two younger sisters slept nearby.

Face flat on two inches of foam rubber that separated him from the cold concrete, Thomas peeled his eyelids open, and, from his peculiar vantage point, glumly watched the usual morning procession.

Feet -- grimy feet, bare feet, feet in worn out sneakers, run-over flats and ragged sandals -- shuffled past his face as the 50 or so women who had also slept in the basement the night before arose from their makeshift beds. Almost in slow motion, battered souls gathered the meager snatchings of their lives into garbage bags and backpacks and prepared for another day of homelessness.

Thomas dragged his small frame up on one elbow. He looked tired and lost. The acrid smell of bodies wafted up around him. He rubbed his faded blue eyes as though that might magically change the picture. Thomas had lived like this for three months.

This, however, was a good day. Today, Thomas would get to wear his "new" Ninja Turtle sneakers. They were actually obtained from the pile of donated used clothing in a corner. But Thomas had proclaimed them new, so everybody agreed that they were.

He got up, stuffed sockless feet into the shoes and pulled on a shirt from the donation pile to match the pants he had

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slept in that night. Then, off to school he went.

Growing Problem

Every day in America, experts say, 100,000 youngsters wake like Thomas -- homeless, destitute, drained. They and their mothers are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population, according to the National Academy of Sciences.

Over the course of this year, officials say, an estimated million children will be without a home for some period of time, spending their nights in cars, parks, public shelters, cheap motel rooms, doorways or vacant buildings.

These youngsters are in addition to the estimated 1.3 million teen-age runaways and "throwaways" rejected by their parents who try to get by on their own, officials at the National Network for Runaways and Youth Services say. They eke out an existence on the streets through menial jobs, prostitution, petty theft and a variety of hustles.

Almost all of these children are homeless because of some problem or failing of adults -- unemployment, underemployment, alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, child abuse, spousal abuse, neglect.

Fortunately, most of the youngsters who live with their parents on the nation's streets do not do so for long. A month is the average, officials at homeless shelters and children's organizations say.

But that does not tell the whole story. For such families, the officials say, being homeless is just the harshest reality in a long nightmare.

"It is not that dramatic a departure from the situation they lived in before," says Lisa Mihaley of the Children's Defense Fund. "They live in substandard housing . . . doubled up with other families. They live in places of domestic violence. They live in houses that consume 50% to 60% to 70% of their income.

"Then something happens that knocks them over the edge. The rent goes up. A kid gets sick. The car breaks down . . . and they end up homeless.

"When they finally do get housing, in most cases they're going to go back to housing situations that are just as bad as the one they left. The lucky ones get hooked up with services that help them. But a lot of them will be homeless again."

Since March, Thomas has been one of the lucky ones. He and his family have landed in a small, sparsely furnished, two-bedroom apartment in North Las Vegas near Nellis Air Force Base. But before that, he endured eight tough months as he wound through four schools, homeless shelters, motels and protective detention, meeting up with thieves, hustlers and alcoholics as well as police, child welfare officials and enough pain and ugliness to leave many children scarred for years to come.

One Child's Life

Here are glimpses of some of the days in his life as a homeless child:

Oct. 31 -- Halloween. Thomas is wandering barefoot and dirty around the church basement where his family has been living the past two months. This is their second tour at the shelter.

Thomas landed on the streets of Las Vegas in late June when his mother, Vicki Knecht, 35, moved here from Long Beach, Calif., with him and his sisters, Beatrice Grimmitt, 4, and Randy Anna Knecht, 21 months.

Until then, Long Beach was the only home he had known in his six years. His mother, a tall, thin woman with stringy dark blonde hair, worked part time in a bar and part time at the apartment complex that was their home, but got

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by mainly on welfare. In those years, she lived at different times with the three men who fathered her children.

Thomas arrived in Las Vegas shortly after his mother's fiance was jailed for slugging her one night. Friends advised Vicki not to be in town when he got out, so she packed up her family and bolted for Las Vegas with Jack, a biker and drifter she had known since she was 15.

The first week here, the five of them crowded into one of the tiny transient hotels that dot the city's back streets. One morning, Jack left to borrow more rent money. He never returned. Vicki learned later he had been arrested.

So the family headed for St. Luke's Episcopal Church, a small wooden building just northeast of downtown that doubles as a shelter for homeless women and children. Thomas and his sisters and mom were there for a month before his mom met Harry, a former stripper at Chippendale's in Los Angeles who was doing part-time maintenance work at St. Luke's. Harry had stopped in Las Vegas on his way to Florida, and was living in a beat-up motor home not far from the shelter.

It wasn't long before Thomas and the rest of the family had moved in with Harry. It was a lot easier than living in the shelter. A week later, Thomas found himself bouncing along the highway toward Florida.

A Sudden Rejection

But the money ran out in Deming, N. M. Stranded, they decided to give the little town a go. They were there three weeks, long enough for Thomas to be enrolled in kindergarten.

Then, one afternoon as Thomas and his family returned from the welfare office to the park area where they were living, they discovered their possessions stacked where Harry's motor home had once stood. They were homeless again.

"Harry dumped us," is about all Thomas says of the experience.

Were you afraid?

Thomas looks off into space momentarily and changes the subject.

"Do you know Batman?" he says. "Batman came to our school one day. And then he ate the Green Monster."

Did you like Harry?

"Harry had a van," Thomas says glumly. "He dumped us." Then he jumps off the stool and scurries to the other side of the room.

The family hobbled back to Las Vegas and St. Luke's, which has been home since early September.

They have carved out a space in a corner of the 50-by-36-foot basement they share with dozens of other women and children. The sanctuary upstairs is also used as a sleeping area. On busy nights 100 adults and a third that many children crowd into the facility. Every night there are new faces.

There is a small kitchen at the rear of the room. Two small restrooms, each with toilet and a sink, one upstairs the other in the basement, double as bathing facilities. Each has a five-minute use limit.

"We do have a garden hose out back that the women used to use before the weather changed," Thomas' mother says.

Most of the women prefer to take the daily bus to St. Vincent's, a homeless shelter that offers shower facilities. Thomas and his sisters wash up during the week in the restroom and bathe on Saturdays at the home of one of the

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church deacons.

During the day, the sleeping pallets -- black rubber cots and green cushions that once functioned as exercise mats -- are stacked. Everybody must be out of the facility between 7:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m.

By 4 p.m., women and children start wandering in. A black-and-white television is tuned to cartoons. Dinner is served around 6 p.m. on beat-up banquet tables. Much of the food is leftovers donated by the casinos: the Showboat on Tuesdays and Thursdays and the Golden Nugget on Saturdays.

Officials have tried to spruce up the dreary, windowless room with its drab, sad walls. A bulletin board displays school drawings done by some of the children -- one by Jeffrey, one by Tina, one by Kenyon and one by Thomas.

For Halloween, pumpkins and other decorations have been scattered around the room and donated costumes have even been distributed to some of the children.

But no matter how much the workers try to brighten it, the shelter is not a friendly place. Tension and frustration are always in the air. Because many of the women have been battered or otherwise abused, men are not allowed in the facility. Their mere presence at the doorway sends an anxious shudder through the room.

Children, especially young children like Thomas and his sisters, are tolerated, at best. Adult nerves rubbed raw from an oppressive street life have little patience with the playful chatter, laughter, tears and games that are a natural part of childhood.

It is at night that the mood grows most taut. Slowly the women begin carving out territory as they bed down for the night. The odor of urine begins to fill the air. It becomes harder to move around the room without drawing a disapproving stare, a sneer, or a comment.

It is 8 p.m. and Thomas drags around a broken drum that scrapes the concrete floor.

"Aren't we allowed to sleep here!" growls a woman huddled on a cot near the center of the room. "We don't sleep during the day."

The anguish that dwells in tortured minds occasionally bursts from some: "I can't wait to get out of this town, man, to go to a place where people shoot each other!" one woman suddenly shouts. "People keep pushing me and I'm going to shoot somebody!"

Another woman, unkempt, in her mid-20s, mumbles incessantly as she sits on the floor, back against the wall. "Call 911 and see if I care!" she blurts. "But you know those big people are strange, so, what the hell."

Thomas has learned to deal with it. Every now and then as he walks around the room he is jolted as an outburst catches him off guard. But usually, he acts as if the others don't exist.

Because he has seen so much of it, he knows how to shut out much of life's unpleasantness. Eleven months after he was born, his father left, and Thomas hasn't seen him since. Nor has he ever seen his grandparents or any other relatives. Instead, a bewildering array of adults have wandered in and out of his life.

Poverty has taken its toll. Thomas is a cute kid, good-looking enough to fit right into a television commercial, but his health is precarious. Numerous black cavities dot his teeth.

He is bright, his teachers say, but also an emotionally ravaged child prone to mercurial mood swings. One moment, he is cheerful. Seconds later he is enveloped by intense anger, sadness or tears.

Particularly painful questions are met with blank stares and non-answers about ghosts or Peter Pan. Or, he says: "I

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killed the giant and then I ate him. I killed the skeleton."

In his quieter moments, he appears worn, tired, blank -- the glow of childhood shining ever so dimly.

"He's like a toy that has something broken inside," says Mary Frances Ringstad, one in a series of kindergarten teachers.

Like most homeless children, Thomas has problems that cannot be disassociated from those of his mother, an unskilled high school dropout who has spent an adulthood of instability, wandering from man to man.

By most standards, Vicki is not a particularly attentive mother; her children's needs do not appear to be uppermost in her mind. But on closer examination it's clear that she often is doing the best she knows how, and that she loves her children. They bubble up often in her conversation. What she does not appear to understand or admit is that the life the family leads takes a heavy toll on them.

It is 10:15 p.m. Thomas nestles down on a church pew for the night. There is school tomorrow.

Nov. 1 -- As usual, Thomas must thread through the bodies in the crowded basement in preparation for school. His mother is helping in the kitchen. Thomas snatches up a lunch box and claims that it's his. It isn't. Thomas doesn't have a lunch box.

It is a short walk to Robert Lunt Elementary School, where it took a while to get Thomas enrolled because his school and shot records had disappeared down the highway in the back of Harry's motor home.

Lunt is a dramatic change from the shelter. It is a bright, colorful environment with friendly, clean people and lots of space. Thomas likes school, but because he's homeless, he attends irregularly. So far, he has missed 19 days out of the first 44. He is repeating kindergarten because he didn't finish last year.

He gobbles down a subsidized breakfast of cereal and orange juice in the school cafeteria and plays on the jungle gym before heading to class. The lesson is the normal routine of recitation and recognition. "I am smart," Thomas says in unison with his classmates as they read from the board "I am so special. I can do it. I can read. I am beautiful."

The words ring with cruel irony on Thomas' lips.

Today, his hair is uncombed, his face is unwashed and his pants are on backwards. "I don't have on any underwear," he says as though to explain his pants. He yawns incessantly in class.

"I feel bad for this boy," says his new teacher, Celia Dekoekkoek. "Sometimes his hair isn't combed. I keep an extra comb in here just for him. I comb his hair and wash his face."

Most telling, she says, is one of Thomas' most persistent habits.

"He wants to save anything that you use," she says. "Tommy wants to save the paper cups, paper napkins, paper towels. I have to tell him: 'No, we don't save those.' But he wants to save them anyway. He doesn't want to throw anything away."

Thomas leaves school at 11:15 a.m., the quitting time for the half-day session. He does not know it, but after today his wandering lifestyle will keep him away from Lunt for three weeks and he will return only once more, to withdraw from school and say goodbye to his classmates.

Nov. 11 -- Thomas and his sisters have moved in with Robin -- "Aunt Robin" to the kids -- and her boyfriend, Lanelle. Robin, who lived for a while at the shelter, is an old friend of Vicki's. She and Lanelle, who once spent two years in prison for car theft, live in a small hotel room at the Moulin Rouge, a dilapidated motel complex in a rough part

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of town that has become a major center for street drug sales.

Schooling Interrupted

Thomas is more withdrawn, more distant. Things have changed again for him. His schooling has been disrupted. What little routine there was has disappeared. There are no daily meals, no television, no telephone, no other children to play with.

At 10 a.m., Las Vegas police investigate a call reporting that a black man is dragging a crying white child down a street. The black man is Lanelle, and the white child is Thomas' sister, Beatrice, who went to the corner store with him. Beatrice is crying only because Lanelle won't buy her what she wants, but the police fear a possible kidnaping and arrive at the motel room to investigate.

The conditions they find cause them to call in Clark County child protective services.

According to the report filed later by county officials: "The children were sleeping on the floor . . . trash, empty food cans and plates of stale food were seen in several locations. There was a foul odor throughout the apartment."

Thomas and his sisters are put in the back of the police car and driven to Child Haven, a temporary facility for abused and neglected children. It is the first time they have ever been separated from their mother.

Nov. 22 -- Thanksgiving Day: Thomas and his sisters are running around a small, two-bedroom frame house just off the Strip. For now, this is their new home. They were released by the county to their mother just yesterday.

The ramshackle house is being rented by Fred, an auto mechanic in his 50s who agreed to let Vicki move in and claim residency so she could get her children back, only a day before they were scheduled to be placed in foster homes.

Friends and relatives have gathered here for Thanksgiving dinner. The remnants -- sweet potato pie, pumpkin pie, turkey and dressing, macaroni and cheese and other dishes -- are being put away as the dinner guests say their goodbys.

Thomas and his sisters sleep on mattresses downstairs in a nearly airless basement. Their belongings are strewn everywhere. In the corner is a tattered love seat where one of Fred's friends sleeps sometimes.

Thomas and the other children have changed since Child Haven. "The kids did better at Child Haven," their mother says. "They were more quiet. Thomas' writing skills are better. I think they must have had some people working with them one on one."

But she also notes that they are more possessive of her.

"They are totally afraid to let me out of their sight," she says. "I think they're afraid I'm going to disappear."

Dec. 29 -- Four days after Christmas and it is moving day again -- this time just next door. Thomas and his sisters gather their few possessions and head for the Knotty Pine Motel, a bunch of rundown kitchenettes "with 10,000 roaches per square inch" Vicki jokes, that is next to Fred's house. Rent is \$139.10 a week.

At Fred's, things became too crowded as more friends and relatives down on their luck moved in, Vicki says. Eventually the number grew to nine. But Thomas explains it a little differently.

"Fred kicked us out too," he says.

His mother has been working for over a month as a sander at a company that makes wooden window shutters. So there is money. They have a regular baby-sitter, an old friend who lives just two doors down in the same motel. Thomas now attends C. P. Squires Elementary -- his third school in four months. He is doing well there, but he still stands out.

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He doesn't always come to school in the best condition, his teacher notes, and unlike the other children his age, he walks to school alone and he goes home alone.

"Usually for kindergarten students, their parents or an adult comes with them," says teacher Donna Della Valle. "He's a real loving boy, my top student. When I tested him, I was just amazed at how well he did. And I think he's done it on his own. I can tell you this, he's a survivor."

Jan. 21 -- It is Monday. School is out -- Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Thomas rumbles and tumbles around his baby-sitter's motel room with her four children until his mother gets home from work. He is especially fond of one daughter -- Rachel. "That's my girlfriend," he says. "I want to marry her."

Thomas does not realize it, but sometime between breakfast and lunch, his life has taken a dramatic turn for the worse.

When his mother reported for work this morning, she was told she was being laid off for lack of work. There had been a big layoff on Friday, and Vicki had spent the weekend thinking she had skirted disaster. Now, the boss has handed her a final paycheck for \$50 and wished her good luck. As she makes her way home, she stops at a dozen places along the Las Vegas strip in search of a job.

Feb. 11 -- Desperation has moved into Thomas' already crowded motel room. The money has dried up. Food is scarce. His mother has been selling her blood at \$10 a visit to get by.

Mike, a roomer who has been living with them recently to help pay rent, has lost his job as well. He has started hanging around with a new set of friends -- drug friends. With their arrival, things have begun to disappear -- like the \$20 tucked away for rent.

'I Don't Do Drugs'

"I don't do drugs, and I'm not going to lose my children over drugs," Vicki tells Mike. "You've got to go."

Vicki can sense homelessness just a breath away. She has enrolled in the Opera House Dealer's School, a nightly 17-week course designed to prepare students for casino dealer jobs. An education grant pays the tuition and affords Vicki \$50 a week.

But that is hardly enough to pay the rent. Also enrolled at the school is Travis, 44, who was a gold miner until he injured his back. Now he's sleeping in his van while he tries to learn a new trade. Vicki suggests that he move in with her. Together they'll have \$100 a week. Still, that leaves them \$39.10 short of the rent, and they haven't accounted for food.

Travis has a friend, Maurice, 56, a former security guard who collects \$400 a month in disability benefits from Social Security. He is living in a drug- and gang-infested neighborhood and wants out. Maurice could move in too, Travis suggests.

As Thomas lies down to sleep in a corner of the tiny motel room tonight, two strangers are now living in his home. Another stranger, Mike, has left. It is more crowded and uncomfortable, but at least the streets have been staved off for now.

March 8 -- Thomas enrolls in his fourth school, Mountain View Elementary. Teachers note that he came alone, the paperwork wadded up in a pocket. "Normally the parents come with them on the first day," an administrator said. "He was just there."

Thomas has moved again, this time to a two-bedroom unit near Nellis Air Force Base. Travis and Maurice have

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moved with them.

Thomas and his sisters sleep in one bedroom on mattresses. Maurice takes the other bedroom and Vicki and Travis the living room. It is by far the best place Thomas has lived since he left Long Beach. There is carpet on the floors and the walls are freshly painted.

A black-and-white television is propped up on milk crates, which also serve as seating at the kitchen table.

Actually, having Maurice there works well for Thomas and his sisters. As part of the rent agreement, Maurice acts as their full-time baby-sitter. And he has taken to the children, doting on them, chastising them, making sure they eat their evening meal. Thomas still is not sure what to make of it all.

April 11 -- For the first time in a long time, a sense of order and permanence has settled around Thomas' life. He is adjusting to school, where he is doing noticeably better.

"The first couple of days he was very disheveled, unkempt. His face was dirty and his hair wasn't combed," his teacher says. "He was loud and wanted a lot of attention. But he's much better now."

He has new friends. "There is Robin, Rudy, Jeffrey, Sarah, Ashley and Cameron -- his birthday was yesterday," Thomas says.

No Talk of Family

His teacher notes that Thomas is still reserved about one thing.

"He never talks about his home or family," she says. "The kids are always talking about their family, what they did, where they went. He hasn't opened up about any part of his family."

But he really likes his new apartment.

"I like the floor," he says. "It's soft. Me and my sisters, we have our one room together. We got a VCR. We have movies. We watched 'Duck Tales' and 'Ernest Saves Christmas.' "

What does he like best?

"We have a lot of food," he says without hesitation.

The biggest news is that his mother and Travis are planning to get married. They want to have the ceremony the last week of May at the Opera House Dealer's School where they met. Friends are supposed to be coming in just for the occasion.

There is more money. The combined income of the three adults, \$800 a month, affords them some spending change after the rent and utilities are paid. Also, Thomas' mother is getting food stamps again.

Best of all, his mother is just six weeks away from completing her dealing course, and the school promises to place her in a job when she finishes. They're talking about \$20,000 a year to start. And \$50,000 if she is really good. Those are the plans.

Today, Thomas is still poor, still just a step away from homelessness. But, at least for now, everything seems headed in the right direction.

At least for now.

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Times researcher Nina Green and the Times Editorial Library staff contributed to this story.

Next: Children as a political issue.

GRAPHIC: Photo, A Long Goodby: This year in America 1 million youngsters will be without adequate housing for at least some period of time. One child who has endured is Thomas Elliott, 6, shown here hugging his kindergarten teacher at Robert Lunt Elementary School in Las Vegas as he says goodbye. Poverty has forced his family to move many times. ; Photo, Thomas Elliott dresses himself in a Las Vegas motel room. His family has moved often in recent months. ; Photo, Thomas hides behind a door to cry. His mother moved to this two-bedroom frame house off the Las Vegas Strip so she could claim residency and get her children back from county protective care. ; Photo, Vicki Knecht and two of her children, Thomas, 6, and Beatrice, 4, while waiting for food stamps. JAMES KENNEY / For The Times