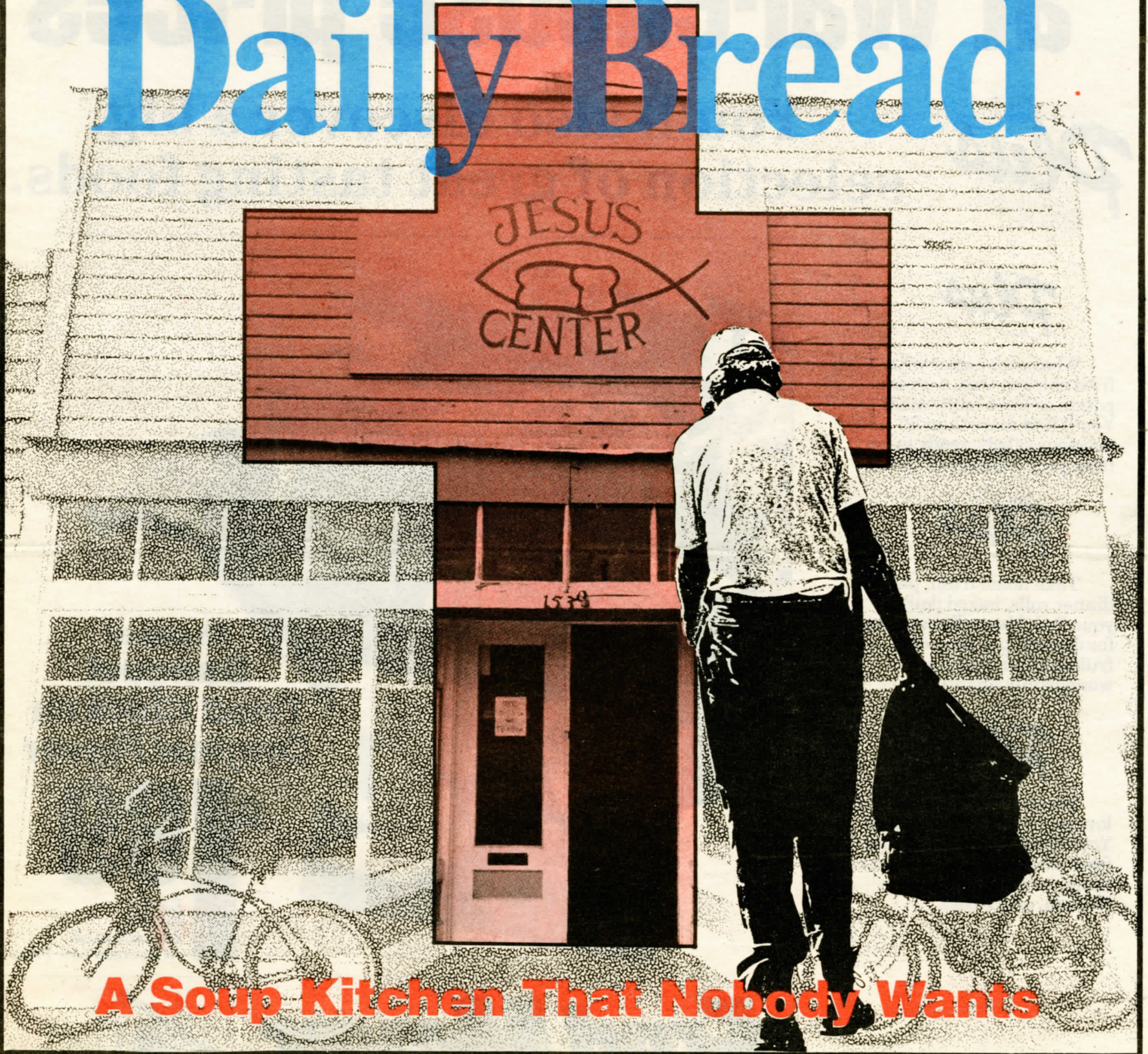


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A Soup Kitchen That Nobody Wants

INSIDE: AUDREY TAYLOR • HOT SWIMMING HOLES

AN INDEPENDENT WEEKLY NEWSPAPER VOLUME 13, NO. 50 JULY 19, 1990

FIGHTING THE SKID ROW STIGMA

PARK AVENUE MERCHANTS TAKE AN UNPOPULAR STAND AGAINST THE JESUS CENTER

BY MATTHEW BUDMAN



Many business owners think patrons of the Jesus Center are responsible for the deterioration of the Park Avenue area. The soup kitchen is the only organization in Chico serving two free meals daily.

To say Park Avenue merchants are fed up with the Jesus Center "derelicts" would be something of an understatement.

"They're obnoxious, they're drunk, they never have enough money, they try to steal cigarettes and wine," says Bill Siver, a clerk at Duke's Cork 'n Bottle. "I'd rather not deal with them."

The business owners feel helpless. They have been forced to watch as an area of town that should be thriving slips into disrepute.

They blame their problems on the Jesus Center, Chico's only free soup kitchen, which attracts dozens of genuinely needy people—and some undesirables. Despite the merchants' requests, the center refuses to deny anyone—including known alcoholics, junkies and troublemakers—two meals a day.

"We can't sweep the streets," says Park Avenue merchant and City Councilman Dave Guzzetti. "You can't shut down the only free soup kitchen in town. The Jesus Center has to stay open."

At a July 3 City Council meeting, Park Avenue business owners presented a petition with 44 signatures and spoke in an effort to convince the council to close, move or monitor the Jesus Center.

The city says it can't help them—nothing officially can be done about the operation of the Jesus Center. The City Council has asked that city officials mediate the dispute between merchants and the operators of the Jesus Center.

Because it is located in a commercially zoned area at 1530 Park Avenue, the center does not require a use permit.

The business owners wonder why the problem is theirs alone.

"We here on Park Avenue are absorbing a problem that the rest of the town should be sharing," says Phil Putnam of Putnam/Mulholland Auto Company. "They're allowing this section of Park Avenue to turn into the ghetto of Chico."

The merchants have been vocal—even vociferous—in their complaints for several years now. Each has his own list of grievances against the Jesus Center patrons.

"They have no morals, no scruples," Putnam says. "They have absolutely no concern for other people's property. They're always using our bathroom. They sleep in our cars. They break windows out. You name it and that's what happens."

"We had one sleeping in an old car back here," Putnam continues. "We finally had to have him arrested. Who wants to come down and buy a car in that kind of environment?"

"They've broken furniture outside," says Gary Holbrook of Holbrook's Trade Center. "Once we had them lying out here on the steps spaced out on something. We couldn't make them leave, and the police came. The next morning we had our windows knocked out."

Wayne Craig of Cycle Recyclers is

concerned primarily with the Jesus Center's lack of off-street parking. "Their patrons park in our parking lot," he says. "They urinate in our parking lot. They defecate in our parking lot. They panhandle outside and inside my store. They've had fights and thrown people through my plate glass windows."

"They pass out behind my building and shit in the corner," says Les Hord of 17th Street Wine & Deli. "I'm quick to send those people down the way, but they'll just find another place to do it. The panhandling has been the biggest problem. My customers complain about it."

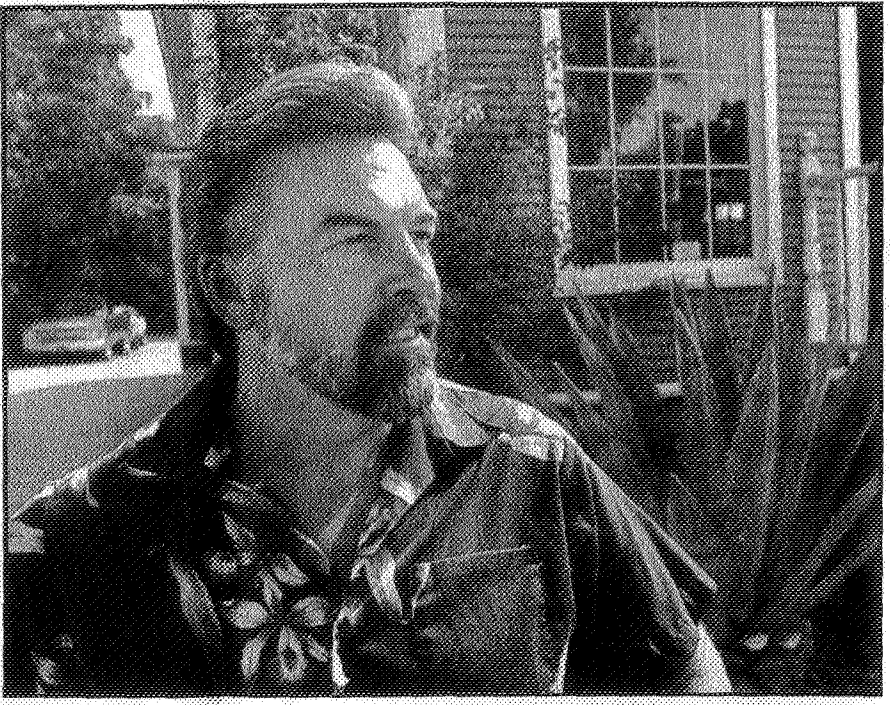
Dave Guzzetti, owner of the Kramore Inn, believes many of the grievances are misplaced. "Their complaints are legitimate, but they're not always Jesus

Center-inspired," he says. "It's no secret that south Chico has a slightly lower income than the rest of Chico. If the Jesus Center were on the other side of town, we'd still have problems in south Chico."

"The overwhelming number of people at the Jesus Center are not causing problems," Guzzetti continues. "There are a few rotten apples in every barrel."

Most of the problems, the merchants say, stem from the Jesus Center's open-door policy, which allows anyone who wants food to eat twice a day.

The center says they won't discriminate against any hungry people, but many businesses would be satisfied if the center would simply refuse to feed



John Mull, owner of Olde Clippings and the Park Avenue business owners' de facto leader, calls the Jesus Center "a well-intentioned program." The merchants are "not against feeding poor people," he says. "We just want to see some monitoring of the people on Park Avenue who are creating a nuisance."

alcoholics and junkies.

"They need to have a qualification process and a time limit," Craig says. "It's not a Band-Aid; it's become a routine. They're not temporarily destitute; it's a way of life for them. They don't care to be any different."

"They're helping young male drug and alcohol addicts and calling them 'homeless'," Putnam says. "Ten or 15 years ago they would have been called 'derelicts' and kicked out. They would not have been tolerated."

Guzzetti believes a qualification system would be difficult to implement. "How do we monitor that?" he asks. "Do we do a background check on everyone who shows up at a free-food program? Their only hope is to monitor the troublemakers."

Hord worries that the "drunks" scare away women and children who legitimately need the center's assistance. "By serving drunks, they're discouraging people who are really in need," he says. "The Jesus Center would be a good thing if it were managed correctly."

John Mull, owner of Olde Clippings and the merchants' de facto leader, agrees. "We're not against feeding poor people," he says. "It's a well-intentioned program. We just want to see some monitoring of the people on Park Avenue who are creating a nuisance."

"We've pointed out the problem," Mull continues. "Now we have to have a commitment by the Jesus Center that something will be done."

The Park Avenue business owners know all too well that their stance isn't particularly popular with the rest of Chico.

"Obviously, I don't want to make a name for myself as being against poor people," Mull says. "This isn't the kind of notoriety that brings you business."

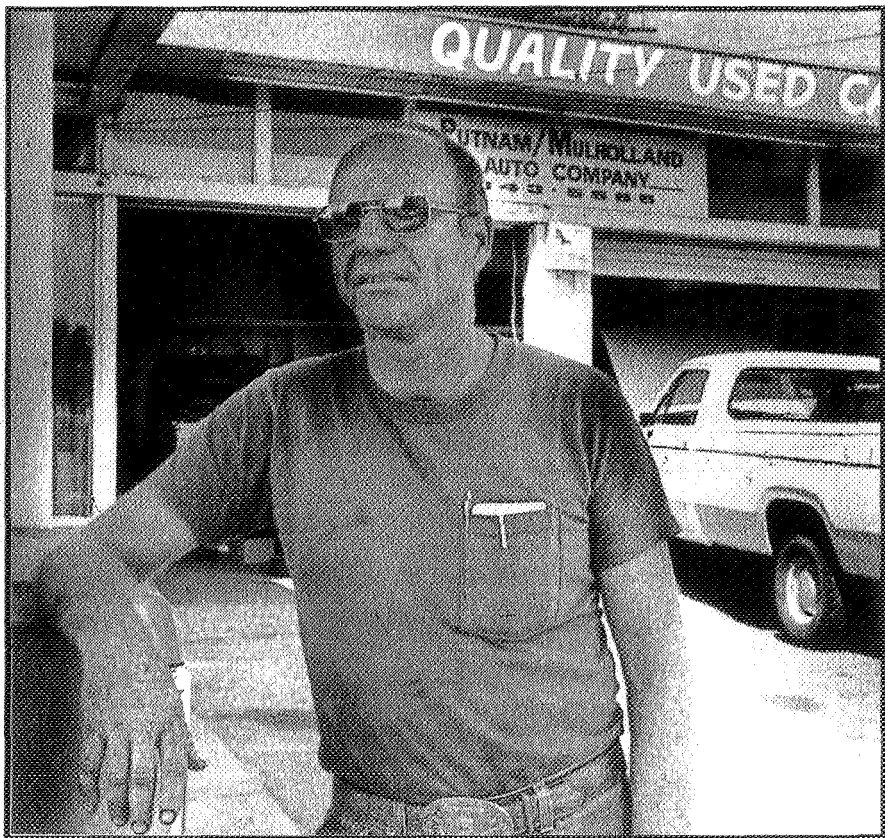
Last week's News & Review Streettalk feature asked the question "Should The Jesus Center Go Or Stay?" All six respondents answered "stay."

"The people who respond that way are ill-informed," Craig says. "They don't know what it's like. If they think it's so dandy, we'll move it to their neighborhood."

The business owners are concerned about the Park Avenue area being looked at as a mission district and eventually even a skid row.

"I see this problem growing," Mull says. "If it's left unchecked, next year it'll be twice as bad. Even if it's only 25 people creating a nuisance, 25 people can have a real impact on an area."

"You don't want to see this end of town



Phil Putnam, co-owner of Putnam/Mulholland Auto Company, believes the Park Avenue merchants are being forced to cope with a problem that the rest of Chico should be sharing—the Jesus Center patrons. “They’re allowing this section of Park Avenue to turn into the ghetto of Chico,” Putnam says. “They have no morals, no scruples. They have absolutely no concern for other people’s property. They sleep in our cars. They break windows out. Who wants to come down and buy a car in that kind of environment?”

go down in the dumps,” Holbrook says. “If you just sit there feeding them every day, they come like flies. That’s what’s happened here.”

A few think it’s too late for the area. “They’re a bunch of crybabies,” Bill Siversays of the 44 merchants who signed the petition to the city. “The reality is this is already a ghetto.”

Some merchants have watched the problems associated with the Jesus Center grow for years; out of frustration, their feelings about the homeless have turned ugly.

“I don’t really appreciate them being here,” says the owner of Piggy’s. “We try to keep the bar pretty much cleared out of anyone who looks like he’s from the Jesus Center. Let them become self-sufficient and work for a living so they’re not like tame dogs.

“They ought to put up concentration camps, like leper colonies, and keep them locked away.

Since the City Council meeting two weeks ago, the Jesus Center has managed

to keep the crowds down. At 4 p.m. last Thursday only three “derelicts” stood in front of the building. Perhaps 10 people—rather than the normal several dozen—sat quietly inside.

“I think the heat’s on right now,” Mull says. “Things have been pretty quiet the last couple of weeks.”

Putnam agrees. “They apparently put the word out. Since the City Council meeting they’ve been coming in one at a time and leaving one at a time; Usually they stand around in big groups. Our vandalism has stopped; that’s all that matters to me.”

Like other merchants, Putnam hopes the current quiet situation continues but is cynical about that possibility. “As soon as the spotlight comes down,” he says, “they’ll be back to normal.”

Despite the resistance from the city, the public and the Jesus Center, Mull is prepared to fight for his shop and his area. “I don’t think the merchants are going to let this go,” he says.

“There are a lot of livelihoods at stake.” □