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ELDERLY HOMELESS LOOK BACK IN SRJC PHOTO EXHIBIT

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FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

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It's heart-wrenching to study two photos of an elderly man known as ``Blackbird.''

In one portrait, he's shown at a homeless shelter. Another, taken six months later, shows him in a hospital bed, dying.

Although he had a gruff exterior and a bitter outlook on life, photographer **Luz Elena Castro** developed a rapport with him, and he entrusted her to document his life on the street and his final, frail days.

Castro, a Colombian photojournalist who lives in Marin County, encountered Blackbird during a year spent documenting the lives of elderly homeless people in Sonoma County.

An exhibit of her work opens Thursday in the Herold Mahoney Library on the Petaluma campus of Santa Rosa Junior College.

Whereabouts unknown

Some of the men and women **Castro** photographed a year ago may no longer be living on the streets, but she suspects many still spend their nights in parked cars or makeshift encampments around Santa Rosa, Petaluma and Sonoma.

Castro's photo study was commissioned by the Council on Aging, and the show, entitled ``Sheltering the Vulnerable: Old and Homeless in Sonoma County," hung at the Cultural Arts Council gallery in Santa Rosa last year.

Throughout 2002, **Castro** teamed up on a weekly basis with Dick Latimer, a paralegal for the council, and the pair hit the streets to document the extent of homelessness among local seniors.



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Latimer interviewed the subjects of **Castro's** pictures, and wrote accompanying text for the display.

``We started talking with them and we were thinking about taking portraits," said **Castro**, who ultimately shot about 15 rolls of film for the show, which includes 32 black and white images.

``I wanted to show the dignity of these people and respect that," she said.

``Don't look at homeless people on the street as a problem. Yes, it is a problem, but they should be given a life, a job and teach them by helping them."

She was particularly disturbed by one man, whose photo appears in the show, who said he wanted to send the picture of himself to his children. **Castro** said he was a smart guy, and she couldn't fathom how his kids could allow him to live on the streets.

Until the money runs out

Quite a few of the seniors **Castro** and Latimer encountered lived on fixed incomes. They would stay in a hotel until their cash ran out each month, then they would live on the streets.

Some had substance abuse problems or mental illnesses, she said, but the majority were forced out of their homes by financial distress. Among those they photographed and interviewed were a former lawyer, nurse and carpenter.

Others were women who were divorced and didn't have a job to fall back on, but **Castro** found they were less likely to live in an encampment.

Castro, who lives in Mill Valley with her husband and 5-year-old son, is involved in a new photography project.

She is working in Point Reyes, in conjunction with Gallery Route One, to foster literacy among Latinos in west Marin.

She will lend participants cameras to document their lives, and they will learn English as they explain what they've photographed.

New U.S. citizen

Castro's relatives were coffee growers in the Medellin area, and she came to the United States in 1996 after meeting her future husband in Colombia.

Earlier this fall, she received U.S. citizenship.

Castro has had an active career as a newspaper photographer, a foreign correspondent in Europe and personal photographer for former Colombian President Cesar Gaviria.

She also was photo director and graphics editor for el Tiempo, a newspaper in Bogota.

Her photos have been displayed in galleries in South America, Cuba, Europe and the United States.

Currently, she has photos hanging in the Museo de las Americas in Washington.

The ``Sheltering the Vulnerable" exhibit will be on display in the Mahoney Library until Dec. 19.

A reception for **Castro** will be Nov. 12 at 6 p.m., followed by a panel



discussion on homelessness.

For further information, call the SRJC at 778-3974.

You can reach Correspondent Janet Parmer at 762-7297 or jhparmer@comcast.net. PHOTO: 1 by **Luz Elena Castro**

1 by JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat

1: This photograph of a homeless man will be on display at an exhibition opening Thursday on the Petaluma campus of Santa Rosa Junior College.

2: **Luz Elena Castro**, who spent a year documenting the lives of elderly homeless people in Sonoma County, has an exhibit of her work opening Thursday.

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