

Author campaigns for awareness of homeless

By Melissa Naumann

REPORTER

When Jonathan Kozol, author of "Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America," went to New York City's Martinique Hotel, it wasn't for a vacation. Martinique Hotel, a shelter for homeless people, was where Kozol got his first look at the desperate situation of homeless children, he said Friday in a lecture sponsored by MSC Great Issues.

"If all of the homeless children in America were gathered together in one place, it would be bigger than Atlanta," Kozol said.

Homeless children usually have bleak futures because they have never had secure, stable homes, Kozol said.

From the beginning, their chances for success are minimal, he said.

"The infant mortality rate in homeless shelters is four times the national rate," he said.

Half of all homeless children do not attend school and those who do are at least two years behind children of the same age, Kozol said.

In psychiatric evaluations of homeless children who are in school, the children were described as being "more depressed than those we would find in mental hospitals," Kozol said. Self-inflicted wounds are common in these children, he said.

"One boy I saw had pulled all of his permanent teeth out," Kozol said.

As homeless children get older, they usually turn to crime, he said.

"Can you blame them?" he said. "They hear about all the things this nation has to offer, but they think these things are not for them. They're angry and justly so."

Kozol said homeless children who become involved in crime usually start with prostitution and drugs, and

eventually move to violent crimes.

"By the time they're 18, we don't pity them any longer — we hate them," he said. "When these 18-year-olds go out into the street and commit a real crime, will we remember what we did to them when they were children?"

Kozol said when he talks to audiences from wealthy areas about helping homeless children, they don't want to give money, but are willing to spend time teaching illiterate adults how to read.

"Isn't there a certain cruelty in this national phenomenon?" he asked. "Affluent people see their taxes decline and profits increase and those same people want to go and volunteer."

"They ask if money is really the answer. They ask if we should throw money at a situation like this. I'm always amazed that they can actually ask if money can be

the answer to destitution. Only when it comes to human justice do we question the utility of cash."

Kozol said his reaction to these people shocks them. "I tell them, 'You keep away from them — you're the enemy,'" he said. "Jews wouldn't want Nazis to come do them favors."

For students who don't have money to give, Kozol said their most effective position is to raise political consciousness.

"It's important that we don't always look for sympathetic people in the humanities," he said. "We also need to get economics students interested and ask them, 'Does a free enterprise system mean there's no mercy for losers?'"

Kozol said he does not oppose a free enterprise system but it frequently can do more harm than good.

"I would like to see our system prevail," he said, "but I want to see it change so it deserves to prevail."

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