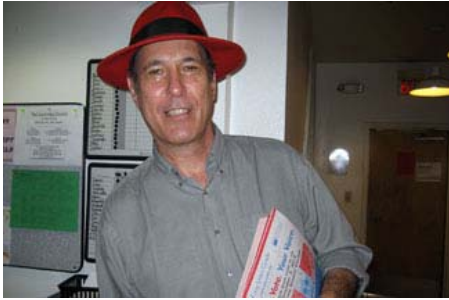


# Group looks to give political voice to homeless, mentally ill in Santa Monica

Oct. 19, 2010 | Susan Valot | KPCC

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Susan Valot/KPCC

Les Jones started the voter registration drive a couple of years ago at Step Up On Second in Santa Monica. The nonprofit serves the area's mentally ill, and often homeless, population. Jones says he wants to inspire people to vote and to realize their voice matters.

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The November 2 election is two weeks away. And in Santa Monica, there's been an effort underway to get out the vote among the mentally ill and homeless. They recently hosted a voter registration drive at the non-profit, Step Up On Second.

Beyond the locked front gates of Step Up On Second, dozens of people squeeze around tables in a small room. They're waiting for dinner.

Everyone here is being treated for some sort of mental illness. Many of them have been – or still are – a part of Santa Monica's large homeless population.

Along a side wall, sort of buried amid the activity, the League of Women Voters of Santa Monica signs up new voters, going over the application and making sure information and signatures are in the right places.

On and off for a couple of decades, Les Jones was homeless himself because of mental illness. That was before he came to live at Step Up On Second a few years ago.

"It's hard to explain what happens to you mentally, physically, spiritually when you're on the streets day after day," Jones says. "There's a mental attitude about who you are and what other people think you are that it's a little hard to explain the depth of."

That's one reason Jones came up with the idea to register the people here to vote two years ago. He's organized the "Step Up to Vote" drive each year ever since.

Jones says it's so important to let homeless – and often mentally ill – people know that they're worth it, that their voice matters.

"When somebody comes to you and says that, 'By the way, your voice matters,' you're a little skeptical," Jones says. "I felt that a lot. And that's why I tell these people, 'You know, I understand exactly where you're coming from.' And I try to just pound it in that, you know, when you're in the voting booth, there is *no one* more powerful than you are. And I just pound it in and say how important their voice is."

The response has been pretty good. Step Up On Second even lets people who don't have an address use the organization's address, so they can get their voting materials.

"It was an excellent turnout," says Joanne Leavitt of the League of Women Voters of Santa Monica on the day of the registration drive at Step Up On Second. "We registered 11 voters in less than an hour and that's better than we could do at the farmer's market."

The League of Women Voters has registered about 35 people here each year since the "Step Up to Vote" drive was born.

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By Deidre Crawford | Art | West Hollywood



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January 17 2011 GO

Bob Trezona registered this year. Everyone here calls him "Mayor Bob." He hasn't been a registered voter since he lost his home a few years ago.

He says he wants "to make a difference in terms of who's being elected as governor."

When asked if he thinks he *can* make a difference, he proudly responds, "I *hope* so!"

Trezona says education, Medi-Cal, Medicare and welfare are the most important to him. Step Up On Second voter drive founder Les Jones says those are common themes here.

"The big thing that I have caught is the state's budget problems," Jones says. "Many of our people are disabled, that are on SSI or SSDI, and they see their checks being cut, month after month. Because of the budget crisis the state is in, they're losing benefits and they're losing money. They're *very* much concerned about this."

Jones says he heard that when they had gubernatorial debate watching parties. They taped each debate and played it a day later, pausing it so people could discuss the issues.

Jones says they help as much as they can to give homeless and mentally ill voters a voice. He recalls a man who signed up to vote in the last election.

"And he came up to me and says, 'There's only one problem. I don't know how to read or write,' he said. 'But I signed up. Can you help me?'" Jones recounts. "I said, 'Oh, yeah.' And we got a vote-by-mail ballot for him and we filled it – I helped him vote."

Jones says he took the man's mail-in ballot to the polls when he went to cast his own vote.

"And I got a little 'I voted' sticker for him," Jones says. "Here's a man who never thought he could *do* this, who never – because he couldn't read or write – felt there's no way his voice could be heard. And I gave him his 'I voted' sticker and he wore it with pride all day long. He was showing it to everyone!"

Jones hopes that sort of pride and inspiration will move others to register to vote – and find their own voice.

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