

Keillor aids homeless

Claims government is 'heartless,' ignores tragedy

By BARBARA MULHERN
Capital Times Staff Writer

Calling the people who run our country "heartless," well-known author and radio show host Garrison Keillor says the problem of homelessness is due to too much power and wealth being concentrated in the hands of a few.

Keillor — in Madison Thursday for a benefit performance to raise money for the homeless — also said that all too often, people "pity" the homeless rather than deal with them as real people.

"People in power I believe are slick and have a great handle on how to use the media and how to use images in order to hold onto their power. I believe they are heartless," Keillor said in an interview with The Capital Times.

As the economy has changed, he said, the problem of homelessness has grown, because jobs that were once available at the "bottom"

aren't around anymore.

But at the same time those unskilled jobs have faded, our country continues to experience "corporate civil wars in which billions of dollars change hands and people become fabulously wealthy by manipulating money and power," Keillor said.

The problem of homelessness, he said, will not disappear as long as our economy remains the way it is and as long as the people with wealth running it remain "heartless."

Keillor, who staged a benefit performance at the Orpheum Theatre Thursday at noon, was the creator and host of Minnesota Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion." The show had 4 million listeners from throughout the country when Keillor decided to discontinue it two years ago.

A humorist whose popularity soared after his 1985 book "Lake

Wobegon Days" became a national best seller, Keillor was born and raised in Anoka, Minn. His brother Philip Keillor is a Madison resident and a longtime activist for the homeless here.

Garrison Keillor told The Capital Times his interest in the homeless was sparked by his brother Philip's activism. But he also said moving to New York City has made it impossible to ignore the problem.

"In New York, it's inescapable," Keillor said. "If you drive your car in a city like Minneapolis/St. Paul, you don't see it that much. They're off in another part of the city. But in New York, they're all around you — in the subways and doorways. They're an inescapable part of the city."

Keillor also said the volunteers he met in Madison who work in

Please see KEILLOR, Page 24



HENRY A. KOSHOLLER/The Capital Times

The personal side of Garrison Keillor came out during a stop at Grace Episcopal Church Thursday when he asked Lynne and John Nash if he could hold 9-week-old Chelsea. The chat with the Nashes was after a benefit performance for the homeless.

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Keillor

From Page 21

the local shelters "have a more healthy attitude" about the homeless than does the general population.

"Our distance from the homeless makes us sanctimonious," Keillor said. "We put on a glow of pity around them." But those who work in the shelters, he said, deal with the homeless as "real people."

Keillor's benefit performance, part of Grace Episcopal Church's 150th anniversary celebration, was co-sponsored by the church and WPL Holdings. More than 1,450 people bought tickets for the event at costs ranging from \$10 to \$25 apiece.

The money raised will be used in part to expand the hours of the Grace Drop-in Shelter during the winter months and to fund a part-time housing counselor at the church, said Lester Strom, director of Transitional Housing Inc.

Strom, whose organization runs the Drop-in Shelter, said the number of homeless people in Dane County has been "increasing dramatically, to the point where I personally think it's becoming a crisis."

Last Sept. 15, for example, the county housed 78 homeless families in motels because of a shortage of beds in local homeless shelters. Although that figure has now dropped to 20, shelters in the Madison area are often at or over capacity, Strom said.

In 1988, Madison's shelters served a total of 3,394 people. Although nearly 70 percent were single men, 706 — or 27 percent — were children.

Ron Dunn, 43, talked with reporters before Keillor's performance about his own experience being homeless. Dunn was homeless for three months after landing in a hospital with an illness and then losing his job and apartment.

Now a resident of Transitional Housing Inc.'s Castle Rock apartments in Middleton, Dunn is working full-time as a cook.

"I was applying for work when I was still homeless, but if you put down that you're homeless I found out people don't want to hire you," Dunn said. "People also judge people by what they are, and if you don't have a job or a place to stay

they look down upon you."

Keillor told The Capital Times he believes it was easier to "get by" if you were homeless in the past than it is now.

"The economy has gone through such a wrenching change, that some of the ways people without an education might have earned a living in the past just aren't available anymore," Keillor said.

"If you were a high school dropout or if you had problems with drink or problems with depression and you lost your home and were out on the streets, in the past there were still all sorts of ways to scrape by."



ON TOP, IN FRONT

