

Homeless and their heroes draw Keillor's attention

By Ron Seely

Wisconsin State Journal

It was "Prairie Home Companion" with a twist — better titled, perhaps, "Prairie Homeless Companion."

Garrison Keillor, former host of the popular public radio program, turned his silver-toned voice to the cause of Madison's homeless during a benefit lunch-hour performance Thursday at the Orpheum Theater.

The performance, organized by Grace Episcopal Church and sponsored by WPL Holdings, was meant not only to call attention to the city's homeless but to honor the 1,000 volunteers who work in the city's shelters.

Keillor praised the work of the volunteers. He had them stand up "so we can see what heroes look like."

And he praised them the way you would expect him to — with a story.

His mother, Keillor said, had always taught her children not to stare at those less fortunate than yourself. It was impolite, she said, and revealed a ghastly, morbid streak in people.

Well, Keillor said, he didn't judge his mother for believing that. But he didn't grow up com-

pletely convinced she was right. He grew up thinking there is probably something healthy about looking disaster and poverty in the eye.

And that, Keillor said, is what the volunteers in Madison's homeless shelters are doing.

"To touch people who are only abstractions otherwise is a great work," Keillor said.

Keillor talked, too, about the homeless. He talked about how difficult a life it must be.

"One of the saddest things about being homeless is how it forces you to be so careful and forces you to take care of the small things; to do the simple business of life takes all of your time," Keillor said.

"To be homeless is to be less free. It's only when you have a home that you can leave home and run away," he said.

Listening to this, and understanding it probably better than

many, was Ron Dunn, 43, a Madison man who is homeless.

Dunn said he ended up living in shelters because illness cost him his job and, eventually, his apartment. He joined a growing number of people in the city who are homeless. Last year, more than 4,000 people were served by city

homeless shelters.

Thursday, before Keillor took the stage, Dunn unexpectedly found himself the center of attention.

His voice wasn't as smooth as Keillor's. He had to pause sometimes to cough because of bronchitis. But what he had to tell reporters about homelessness was as compelling, in a way, as what Keillor had to say.

Dunn said he is working now for \$4.50 an hour as a cook at a Country Kitchen. He had worked the night before. "I put out 500 orders last night," he said. "I'm beat."

But the job, Dunn said, is what will save him. With the job he will be able, eventually, to rent a place of his own. He's saving so he can afford the security deposit and the first month's rent that just about every apartment owner requires these days.

Dunn said the benefit is wonderful because it brings attention to the homeless. But to really solve his problems and the problems of other people like him, society needs to provide jobs, he said.

"You don't have a job, you don't have a place to stay, people look down on you," Dunn said.



State Journal photo/CHRIS CORSMIEER

Garrison Keillor speaks at benefit for homeless Thursday in Madison.