



*biography* **DIANE NILAN, HEAR US Founder/President**  
**Compassion Epidemic for a Heart-felt Cause**

Diane Nilan's unconventional approach takes her to places not typically thought of as experiencing homelessness: rural areas, resort communities, affluent cities and towns. She's invited homeless children, youth, and parents to share their thoughts on video, highlighting the plight and dreams of the most invisible homeless population: young people and families.



*to create a documentary featuring kids talking about their homelessness.*

**B**y the end of June 2006, she logged more than 20,000 miles through 34 states, conducted over 75 interviews, and

connected with a like-minded producer/partner, Northern Illinois University's media professor, Dr. Laura Vazquez, to shape these powerful encounters into a series of short documentaries, "[My Own Four Walls](#)." This video is now being distributed nationally, targeting school districts responsible for identifying and assisting homeless students as well as the general public.

Nilan's 25+ years experience with the issue of

homelessness includes running massive emergency shelters in Joliet and Aurora, Illinois. In spring of 1994, Nilan and her associates succeeded in gaining passage of the Illinois law to guarantee homeless students' educational rights, the first law of its kind nationwide. The bill named "*Charlie's Bill*," after a homeless boy, Charlie, whose photo was taken by a photographer-friend of the group.

**N**ilan guided Illinois' compliance with this law, intervening with homeless families across the state as they encountered enrollment problems. She addressed myriad groups of educators, shelter staff, and community leaders, outlining how this law could help schools and homeless students alike. She continues video-advocacy.

Check HEAR US' website.

**Key HEAR US dates**

- JULY '05, HEAR US INC. STARTED
- NOV. '05, DIANE EMBARKED ON HER 1ST CROSS-COUNTRY JOURNEY
- MARCH '07, MY OWN FOUR WALLS WAS RELEASED NATIONALLY
- NOV. '07, HEAR US AND MY OWN FOUR WALLS RECEIVE NATIONAL AWARD AND EMMY
- MARCH '09, MY OWN FOUR WALLS '09 RELEASED
- MARCH '09, REACH FILM RELEASED
- FALL 2010, "ON THE EDGE" SCHEDULED FOR RELEASE

**I**n July 2005 Nilan created HEAR US, a nonprofit organization to give voice and visibility to homeless children, youth and families. In November 2005, having sold her house, car and most of her possessions, Nilan purchased an RV to set out on an extraordinary venture:

**Nilan's experience—local, state, national advocacy**

**H**er involvement in homeless education was in addition to a key leadership role at a busy center for ministry in Aurora. Nilan was responsible for the emergency overnight shelter—the largest shelter in Illinois outside Chicago. She also assumed countless other responsibilities from resource development, writing and producing several newsletters, to overseeing maintenance and construction projects.

In addition to her daily tasks, Nilan, an ardent advocate, contributed her energies to innumerable organizations, projects, and advocacy efforts throughout her community, Illinois, and nationwide.

Among her involvements: long-time board member and officer for the various state housing/homelessness groups; cofounder of the unique and successful campaign, *Forget-Me-Not*:

*Kids' Day on Capitol Hill*; and coauthor of several reports including *People Just Like You*, the nation's first report on suburban homelessness.

Nilan created and ran a state-funded McKinney-Vento program, Project REACH, to assist 305 suburban Chicago school districts in complying with this law prior to starting HEAR US. This project provided the impetus for HEAR US...*more—over...*

*What do you want people to know?*

*Now more than ever this nation needs to fight compassion fatigue with a compassion epidemic...!*  
*ddn*

## About Diane Nilan, continued...

### Advocacy Accomplishments...cont'd

Nilan was also instrumental in advocating for a federal education law, an Illinois-style [McKinney-Vento homeless education bill](#). With a tremendous amount of grassroots organizing nationwide—bolstered by the *Forget-Me-Not* campaigns—and the ardent sponsorship of Congresswoman Judy Biggert (IL-13), the bill passed and became part of the omnibus No Child Left Behind Act, signed by the president in January 2002.

The reader-friendly book [Crossing the Line: Taking Steps to End Homelessness](#), published as Nilan began her journey in November 2005, offers her behind-the-scenes account of homelessness in a Midwest community and history of her legislative endeavors.

HEAR US takes Nilan's fervent advocacy efforts to the next level. Her observations of local

...visible poverty  
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poverty and homelessness fuel her fire to create a compassion epidemic. The reception from homeless families, youth, shelter staff, and education advocates for this empowering effort sustains her on her arduous journeys.

This accomplished national advocacy project will continue to shine a light on the plight and dreams of this vulnerable population, empowering those who are homeless as their own spokespersons. ■



One of Diane's "neighbors" in a New England campground, a family with a 15-month-old baby, struggled to stay warm in below-freezing fall night. Homeless thanks to the subprime debacle....

### HEAR US HIGHLIGHTS

In November 2007, the National Association of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) awarded HEAR US their esteemed *Outstanding Media Award* for *My Own Four Walls*.

A week later HEAR US learned that a **Chicago Fox TV** story about HEAR US by Mark Saxenmeyer (aired 11/23/06) on Chicago Fox TV won an **Emmy**.

#### Recognition also includes:

- *Naperville CWU, Human Rights Award, 2008*
- *University of St. Francis, Joliet, IL, Award of Merit, 2006*
- *Kane County (IL) Hidden Hero, 2006*
- *LULAC, Aurora, IL Outstanding Contributions, 2005*

#### National news coverage includes:

Christian Science Monitor, CBS News, Wall Street Journal...

Plus a host of print, TV and radio stories nationwide.

Check the **HEAR US** website, [www.hearus.us](http://www.hearus.us) for a sampling of the coverage. ■

'In addition to financial support, I'd urge people to get involved as advocates...see our **WHAT U CAN DO** page on our website...Do **SOMETHING!**

This biography-summary does not include the extensive contributions of countless, but treasured, friends, supporters, and my family. I am deeply indebted to so many...DDN



*Tillie the Turtle, Diane's bug-splattered home, office and means of transportation ...*

### *Tillie the Turtle—Corporate Office!*

"Never did I imagine I'd be *IN* an RV, much less be living in and working out of one," exclaims Diane, who sold her house so she could buy *Tillie*.

Tillie, a 27' recreational vehicle, has 100,000+ mostly unscathed miles, although if you ask, you'll hear tales of cows on the loose, mountain sides that inched too close...

This mode of travel, while expensive as far as gas, is cheaper than motels and allows Diane to get to the *backroads*, and she has seen the back of the backroads... "All in all, America is a beautiful country, which can be better if we seriously address homelessness," points out this seasoned full-time RVer. ■



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HEAR US Inc...giving voice & visibility to homeless kids...