

## Woman documenting plight of homeless children

By Lee Provost

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Diane Nilan has no place that technically can be called her home, but she isn't homeless.

The 56-year-old author and documentary maker travels the country in her 2006, 27-foot motor home documenting the plight of this nation's homeless, particularly those under the age of 21. And what she finds saddens and pushes her to continue her crusade.

Despite what many government officials state, Nilan, founder and president of HearUs Inc. and a former Kankakee County resident, says homelessness in the United States is only intensifying and that includes those who can't fend for themselves.

"We have to get over the 'it's them, not me' attitude. We need to start a compassion epidemic. ... We can do this," Nilan said during a nearly week-long stop-over in the Kankakee River State Park's Chippewa campground.

Nilan believes in this mission so much that in November 2005, the former homeless shelter operator in Joliet and Aurora sold her townhouse and car, bought a video camera and camper and set out to collect stories and images of the homeless.

"That sounded crazy even to me. It was put up or shut up time and I decided to do it," she said. "Someone up there has looked out for me. There were enough signs out there that showed I wasn't going totally off the deep end."

To truly make a difference with this issue, Nilan said people have to almost be slapped in the face with its reality.

She's willing to do the swinging.

"It's so typical for people not to be aware of homeless children. Once the public realizes there are kids out there as well as adults, they start getting a little uncomfortable that we have let this slide for so long.

"This is the richest country in the world. We've got to do something about this."



**Photo:**

Diane Nilan has been on the road since November of 2005, traveling the country to raise awareness of homeless children.

[More photos from this shoot](#)

A government report for the 2005-06 school year stated there were some 914,000 homeless students in the country. While that may seem like an astonishing number, Nilan believes it is not accurate and is likely to be at least twice that amount.

"If I were dropped in any community in this country, I could find homeless children. That includes Kankakee or any other town around here. People see them all the time, but they don't even know they are looking at them," she says.

For the most part, she said, homeless children don't want to be counted. These youngsters have the fear that if they are found, they will be pulled out of their school and away from their family.

The youngsters would rather endure their situation than leave family.

The government, Nilan charges, has "lost its grip" on homelessness. In other words, she says, the government really doesn't want to know what the true numbers are.

Based upon a "Point in Time" homeless survey conducted in a portion of the Kankakee metro area in January, Nilan was told the count of people actually living on the street was three.

Local homeless advocates noted that that number was obviously low. Nilan couldn't have agreed more.

"We have to get our heads out of the sand. Homelessness is all around. You just have to look."

### **Homeless with homework**

Many homeless children lack basic school supplies and a place to do homework. With frequent moves they have difficulty maintaining friendships. Their lives feel out of control, and they often experience anxiety and depression as a result.

**20%**

Percent of homeless children who do not attend school

**41%**

Will attend two different schools within a year

**28%**

Will attend three or more different schools

**4-6**

Number of months a student is set back academically with each change in schools