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Recession hits home: One man's ordeal and call to faith

By Rick DelVecchio

A successful professional, a money-maker for his firm, laid off through no fault of his own. On a Friday afternoon. And axed by phone no less.

It happened to Ken Outzen last fall and he has been bobbing to keep his head above water ever since. Juggling a mortgage, he and his wife Kristi have two children in college and a third in high school. The couple had planned to start a small business after the kids were on their own but have set aside those plans as Outzen looks for work outside his old industry – banking.

Outzen, 53, a parishioner at St. Bartholomew in San Mateo, has decided not to deal with his crisis in silence. Instead, he is playing a part in a public effort to share information about the recession in his community and point the way to help.

He was one of three people who testified at a March 8 forum on affordable RECEPTION HITS HOME, page 3

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housing and property foreclosure sponsored by the St. Matthew Local Organizing Committee and Peninsula Interfaith Action. The event drew 100 people to the parish school auditorium.

Also testifying was Ana Rodriguez, who said she and her husband, a house painter, have been struggling financially in the recession. “Our income is nowhere what it was two years ago,” she said.

Jose Cabeza, the third to testify, said he and his wife came to the United States in 1981 and worked to be able to buy a house. But they were scammed in a string of refinancings and the house is worth less than its original value of \$700,000, he said.

The forum focused on the Obama Administration’s proposed package to help as many as 9 million homeowners keep up with their mortgage payments. As many as six million families risk foreclosure in the coming years because of job cuts and

the inability to secure credit to refinance, according to a description of the U.S. Treasury Department’s \$75 billion “Making Home Affordable” program.

“I used to be a person that helped everyone else financially,” said Outzen, who made a healthy living working for a company that refurbishes ATMs for small banks, “and now I’m in a position of having to borrow money in large amounts to make ends meet. I am being strategic with the way we get through these economic hardships, but it is just barely getting us by.”

“We are not quite to the point of missing mortgage payments, but if things don’t change I see how easy it could be for one to lose their home and everything they’ve worked so hard to build.”

Interviewed after the meeting, Outzen said he was abruptly laid off to cut costs. Companies throughout the economy have been responding to the recession by cutting jobs and hours to save 10 percent to 15 percent in personnel costs, he said.

“I’m not unique,” he said. “There are a lot of people in the same boat.”



PHOTOS BY RICK DELVECCHIO/CATHOLIC SAN FRANCISCO

Assemblyman

Jerry Hill said federal help is urgently needed for homeowners threatened with foreclosure:

“We have to get the money where it belongs, and that’s in people’s pockets.”



Ken Outzen, who lost his job in the banking industry, wants government to understand the concerns of those who are suffering because of the economic downturn: “(President) Obama’s trying to do things, the state Legislature is trying to do things, the community is trying to do things – but are they doing the right things and do they really understand the pain?”

Outzen is concerned that government should offer the right kind of help and that people in need should know how to find it. “Obama’s trying to do things, the state Legislature is trying to do things, the community is trying to do things, but are they doing the right things and do they really understand the pain?” he asked.

Bill DeKay of Peninsula Interfaith Action said San Mateo County has not been hit hard by foreclosures but people are worried about making their payments and even more worried about keeping their jobs. He said the federal mortgage modification program is a welcome step.

“It’s good and it’s available but how do we get individuals using it?” he asked. “It comes down to people being aware.”

State Assemblyman Jerry Hill, who represents District 19, was the featured speaker at the forum.

“The main impact for me is when you hear the real stories of people who are struggling with potential homelessness, losing their jobs,” he said after the meeting. “It makes it real.”

“I can take that as a lesson and offer opportunities to work with the state departments that will be implementing the federal stimulus and work closely with them to make sure San Mateo County and the Bay Area get their fair share and that it’s a fair and open process.”

“We have to get the money where it belongs and that’s in people’s pockets so that they can stay in their homes.”

In his presentation, Outzen concluded: “We will do what it takes. In these times I know the answer lies with each of us, first individually, then as a family, collectively as a community. If we trust in the Lord and keep our faith, we will not fail.”

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