

## POP QUIZ



**For the past decade** as CEO, Joel John Roberts has guided PATH (People Assisting The Homeless) Partners, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization, into becoming a multi-agency partnership that links homeless service programs with permanent housing.

Representatives from around the world have traveled to L.A. to see firsthand the organization's PATH Mall, a unique multi-service center. Much like how a shopping mall is made up of different stores, the facility is occupied by two dozen agencies that provide a range of services for the homeless. Here, people can access job training programs, substance-abuse counseling, a health clinic, a hot lunch, even a hair salon. The facility also features 98 transitional housing units. Designed by Kalban Architects, the PATH Mall was recognized this year with a housing award from the American Institute of Architects.

Roberts is the author of *How to Increase Homelessness: Real Solutions to the Absurdity of Homelessness*. He also keeps people informed about the homelessness scene on his blog at [www.lahomelessblog.org](http://www.lahomelessblog.org).

**Q** How did you become active in working with the homeless?

**A** When I was an infant I was adopted into a middle-class American family. I was given every opportunity in the world to succeed. Today, I am "paying forward" all of the prospects of success that I was given as a child to people who are homeless and

who are in need of new life opportunities.

**Q** Is it true that L.A. is the "homeless capital of America?"

**A** Sadly, Los Angeles County has nearly 90,000 people who have no homes. To put this in

perspective, the number of homeless people in Los Angeles is similar to the whole population of Albany, N.Y., or of Trenton, N.J.

**Q** Tell us about a homeless person you recently met.

**A** Every month, our organization serves over 1,800 people who are homeless. Although, when thinking of the homeless, many of us see stereotypical images of single men in downtown Skid Row, the homeless population also consists of single mothers with young children, veterans from recent wars, and seniors who are disabled. Recently, a graduate of our program not only landed a job, but was even able to buy a home.

**Q** How is PATH funded? Is the organization affiliated with a church or other group?

**A** Although started from the local faith community, PATH has become a regional housing and service agency with support from business, governments, the faith community, and individuals. We also have a nonprofit affordable housing development agency that brings in development fees that we use to support our programs.

**Q** You led the team that developed the PATH Mall. How is the mall per-

forming, and what has been the biggest challenge of operating it?

**A** The PATH Mall is like any other Southern California mall, except it provides life-changing social services rather than Gucci bags. There are two dozen public and private homeless service agencies in mall-like suites, all under one roof. You can even get a haircut and facial. Like most services for the poor and homeless, the challenge is to continue to raise resources to keep the doors open. This year, we will host a national Mall Network summit, bringing together cities around the country who are interested in developing their own service malls.

**Q** One issue that has hit the news is hospitals reportedly dumping poor patients in Los Angeles' Skid Row. What's going wrong?

**A** With the lack of homeless services in Los Angeles, most care centers and local entities resort to sending homeless people to Skid Row. We recently launched a program called "L.A. HEALS (Healthy Exits and Links to Services)," where we are linking hospitals to homeless programs so when patients who are homeless leave medical facilities, they are sent to an appropriate program to receive shelter and social services.

**Q** What's the last book you read?

**A:** Helen Fielding's *Cause Celeb*. It's a funny novel that goes behind the scenes of celebrity charity. It's something we encounter here in Los Angeles.

**Q** What's next for you?

**A** Because providing permanent affordable housing for people who are homeless has become a priority, we are building more housing as well as redesigning how homeless services can be linked to permanent housing. ■