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When life had him down, he responded with compassion

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Many who know Kenny **Williams** call his Scripps Ranch home The Hotel California. Only because it seems that he and his **wife, Tanya**, always have room for folks in need of a place to stay.

Former guests abound.

Eva, from the Czech Republic, recently stayed for four months until she completed the English studies needed for the work she wanted to do back home.

Cinda was going through a divorce when she came, seeking a place to stay until she got on her feet. Three months later, when she left the so-called hotel, she was back on track.

Julie, who was between jobs, stayed six months before finding work.

For his part in opening his doors to others, many who are virtual strangers -- people referred by friends and acquaintances -- Kenny **Williams**, 45, a prominent **dentist** with a successful practice in La Mesa, insists it's no big deal.

He doesn't think twice about it, he says.

His own life hadn't been so darned easy. And if his struggles taught him anything, they taught him empathy.

"It's become part of my (makeup)," he says. "Sometimes when you're real nice, I've found, some people take advantage of you. But I don't think about that -- I can't say no."

Williams is the oldest of three children born to alcoholic parents. Generally, in his formative years, money was scarce and family relations strained.

Limited financial resources forced him to take 10 years to put himself through San Diego State University's four-year undergraduate program.

In the course of becoming the first ever in his immediate and extended family to earn a college diploma, he was homeless for a while.

Williams lived in his weathered van on the streets of Ocean Beach, eating cold chunky soup out of cans and studying for his undergraduate degree at night by the light of a battery-powered lantern.

He later earned his graduate degree in four years of dental school at the University of San Francisco. Once, in the lean years, he and a friend went hungry for eight straight days while stuck in an Alaska snowstorm during a failed attempt to make money selling and delivering another friend's mobile home.

Oh, before that storm passed, to have had someone offer them even the crumbs off a table, **Williams** recalls, would have greatly eased some deep despair that, at times, led him to contemplate suicide.

"It still hurts to think about those days," the **dentist** says.

But, clearly, the lessons from the experience can't be erased.

And his motivation came from deep within when he biked 600 miles to raise more than \$10,000 for St. Vincent de Paul's dental program for the homeless five years ago.

Williams is happy to give back, especially when it comes to charity work.

So when the old motivation struck **Williams** again last year and the dentist jumped into a national campaign to help support St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tenn.

Williams helped create "Smiles for Life," an annual three-month program through which dentists, nationwide, provide free teeth whitening for patients who make charitable donations to St. Jude. The effort raised \$1.5 million last year.