

Recently, my traveling companion, Robert Norse Kahn, and I set out to experience firsthand the nature of the homeless situation in Oregon. What we discovered both surprised us and inspired us.

Robert and I set out first for Medford, Oregon, to meet a homeless activist, John Statler, who Robert had met on the Internet. John met us at a fast food restaurant, and took us to Marty Mosenthien's home. Both are formerly homeless men who had battled alcohol addiction. They had begun not only the task of improving their own lives, but had gone beyond that, to work to create solutions for homeless people which make sense.

"We've found it very hard to organize the homeless," John told us. "We've had greater luck organizing the formerly homeless." Marty told us of the annual Homeless Day in the Park that they had put together for the last two years. They were planning an even bigger event this year. The event was meant to educate the public, to bring service providers together with homeless people, and to advocate for the rights of homeless people.

While the event was increasingly successful, John reported a disturbing incident. "We wanted to count the homeless, so we arranged a night where volunteers went out and literally counted bodies under the bridges, bushes, and in the parks," he explained. "As we went along counting the homeless, the police followed and wrote tickets for the people we were counting. We had to cancel doing a count like that again, because of what the police did."

John and Marty told us of their efforts to influence the Medford City Council to provide more single-room occupancy for the homeless. Robert and I were both complete strangers to John and Marty, but John went out of his way to meet us late at night and Marty gave us his own room to sleep in, a phone to use, and home-cooked food.

Marty and John gave us the number of Peggy Thomas of the Oregon Human Rights Coalition in Eugene. We met her at her modest apartment, which, much to Robert's delight, contained file cabinets full of newspaper clippings, files, and articles on homelessness. Peggy is very active in homeless issues, in spite of having a mobility disability. She introduced us to Tom Musselwhite at Project Recover and Bridget Reilly, publisher of *The Houseless Journal*, a homeless newsletter, and the more ambitious *Oikos*, a homeless newspaper. Peggy, Bridget, and Tom gave us a first-hand report of the Centennial Car Camp and the fight against the Eugene

The Car Camp had operated successfully in Eugene for three successive winters (1993-95) before the Eugene City Council capriciously pulled its funding. "Lane Shelter Care never wanted it to succeed," Tom reported. "A different shelter provider ran the program for two years successfully. In the third year, Lane took over. They set it up to fail. They established some very rigid rules which were patently unfair. When the residents justifiably objected, they ended the program."

#### A GRANDMOTHER IS EVICTED

"They evicted one pregnant woman for having a fight with her husband," Peggy said. "A few months later, the woman returned to show the baby to its grandmother. Lane Shelter Care evicted the grandmother for 'having an unauthorized visitor.' They gave her four hours to pack her belongings and leave the site. When she was unable to do so on such short notice, they called the police and had her arrested for trespassing."

Tom added, "The program for 40 to 60 people included two social workers per shift around the clock. Not only did the labor costs increase the program costs by a factor of ten, the social workers did little to find homes, work, or health services for the residents."

#### FIGHTING EUGENE'S SLEEPING BAN

Danielle Smith, a woman who lives in a bus, told us how she had taken an active stand in fighting the Eugene Sleeping Ban in court. "I don't believe I should have to pay for the right to sleep in my bus (by paying the fines). I don't feel I owe anyone anything for having slept."

Peggy took us to meet Bridget Reilly, editor of *The Houseless Journal*, and new editor of *Oikos*. Bridget, an outspoken woman who lives in a camper, told us of

the opposition people who live in their cars have to so-called neighborhood watch programs. "How does my being asleep in my camper shell, legally parked on the street, negatively affect someone living in a home in the neighborhood?" Robert found Bridget fascinating as she had the largest collection of homeless newspapers he had ever seen. He proudly donated a copy of his Santa Cruz based *Street Shit Sheet* for her collection.

Our next stop was the Eugene-Springfield Homeless Action Coalition where we met Wayne Ford, who had worked at the Centennial Car Camping Program. He confirmed the program had been a success, and only ended when the city council withdrew its support. Wayne

Sleeping Ban.

also told us of the new state law which requires the police to give 24-hours notice before busting a campsite, posted in English and Spanish; it also requires them to notify social workers of the encampment, and to keep all possessions seized for up to 30 days in safe storage, so they can be claimed. "But there's a catch," he said. "There's no time limit for a city to enact the new code. Only one city has done so, so far."

We also ran into Charles Gray, a former Santa Cruz and Nicaraguan homeless activist who had been arrested with Robert at the Santa Cruz Town Clock Sleep-Ins in the fall of 1988. Although retired, Charles volunteers to advocate and report on homeless issues. His article, "Full Time Work, but... No Affordable Housing," chronicled the reduction of affordable housing from 1985 to 1996. He reports, "It seems clear from my study that housing is becoming virtually inaccessible to single-earner, minimum-wage households." His conclusion: "It's high time to put a housing revolution on our agenda."

Our last stop in Eugene was at "Icky's", a meeting place for homeless

people set up like a coffee shop — with no coffee or heat. The rain poured in buckets outside, while homeless people gathered inside bundled in their coats, their backpacks and bedrolls beside them. They reported how the city council had banned skateboards and dogs from an area near the university they liked to frequent, in an attempt to drive them away. Also, a neighborhood park was almost completely fenced off "to restore the vegetation." Outraged homeless people responded by pulling up the fence and leaving it hanging in a tree. A settlement was negotiated between the city and the homeless people. A much smaller fence was put up, and as promised, was left intact.

March 1997

# Traveling the Oregon Homeless Trail