

## SISTERS OF THE OPEN ROAD CAFE

Robert and I traveled on to Portland, the largest city in the state. The temperature was 37 degrees, and a fog reduced visibility to a few blocks. As I walked to The Sisters of the Open Road Cafe, the cold stabbed through my winter jacket like razor blades. I was grateful when Jenny Nelson let us in 45 minutes before opening time. I looked at the man waiting outside on the sidewalk with a huge backpack and a German shepherd mix half-grown puppy. I shivered to think what it must be like to live outside in this climate.

Inside, the Cafe was warm with laughter, a diverse staff of upbeat down-and-outers, and posters and photos of inspiration adorned the walls. The Cafe is an enigma, but the kind that reaffirms one's faith in humanity. It is the only restaurant I've ever heard of which takes food stamps. A meal is \$1.25, and this morning included coffee, juice, macaroni and cheese, beans, bread, and apple sauce.

Jenny Nelson, the manager in chief, told us: "If a person can't afford to pay, they can work in the restaurant for credit for meals at a wage of \$5.00 an hour. Fifteen minutes of work, and dinner is paid for." A homeless man named Wayne cheerfully refilled my coffee cup. As the restaurant opened, a stream of people entered with backpacks, lined faces, and the bundled look of people who live outdoors. But distinctively missing was that dull, forsaken expression I've seen on so many homeless faces. Instead, they were smiling, cheerful, and talkative.

Soon the restaurant was filled with people, as the waiters and waitresses rushed about, getting them steaming plates of food, coffee, and juice.

I asked Jenny how they were allowed to take food stamps for restaurant food. "It was Sen. Mark Hatfield who lobbied for it. We pointed out how difficult it is for a homeless person to get a hot meal with food stamps. They have no cooking facilities, sinks or running water, or adequate refrigeration. He helped alter the food-stamp policy to allow it. The USDA published a pamphlet, *Dining with Dignity*, allowing nonprofit restaurants to accept food stamps, and the Sisters of the Open Road Cafe was begun in 1987." Noting the rarity of the action, Jenny said: "We are a nation that doesn't take that kind of go-to-the-root look at the problem."

In our search to meet homeless newspaper editors, we sought out Sharon Pearson; she wears two hats, one as managing editor of *The Burnside Cadillac*, the other as the director of the Bridge School, which seeks to educate homeless people.

"What is a Burnside Cadillac?" I asked. "It's a shopping cart full of a homeless person's possessions," she explained. "We have a high number of homeless in the Burnside neighborhood, hence, Burnside Cadillacs." Sharon and her board have set a standard of having a minimum of 50% of the articles in the

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**"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. As we went along counting, 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."**



**Homeless people gather in the Service Station, a day access center in Eugene, Oregon, which provides showers, laundry, sack lunches, telephones, and referrals.**