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Perspectives clash on Eugene-area transient problem

Life's a struggle, but 'natural' for one transient



Photo by Steve Maher
Due to the lack of a secure home, Mark Kamarata finds it necessary to carry most of his belongings with him at all times.

Mark Kamarata lives along the Willamette River in a secluded spot.

Every day he cooks his meals on an open fire and digs through dumpsters for food and clothing others throw away. When his monthly food stamps run out in the middle of the month, he sells plasma twice a week at a downtown plasma center and searches for bottles and cans.

The 31-year-old Kamarata has been living as a transient since 1973, when a sour family life forced him out of his Phoenix, Ariz., home and onto the streets. Before that there was a bad hitch in the army and an eight-month prison sentence in Virginia for riding in an automobile a friend had stolen.

Story by
Steve Maher

During the past 13 years, he has traveled around the country by rail and by thumb and lived in camps in eight different states from Texas to California.

He has called Eugene home for a year now and finds living near the University easy compared to some of his previous stays.

"It's just amazing what people throw away," Kamarata says. "You find sleeping bags, radios, stereos, clothes and food."

Kamarata lives in a wooded camp with 10 others in the vicinity of the Willy Knickerbocker Footbridge near I-5. The area serves as a place to eat, sleep and drink the hours away.

"We try to stay in the woods and leave people alone. You can smell smoke from the bike trails but you can't really see us," he says.

There are problems associated with living in a camp, however. One comes from the police, the other from people Kamarata calls "bushbeaters."

"The police like to try to come and find us. I guess they want to run us out of town," Kamarata

says. "But everytime the police rout us out, we stay there anyway. What are they gonna do, write us a ticket?"

The "bushbeaters" are a different sort of threat. They "come into camp and throw things around and find your sleeping bag and cut it open," Kamarata says of the people he believes are fellow transients.

Kamarata and his "brothers" indulge in whatever they can get their hands on. Night Train, a fortified wine sold in grocery stores, is one choice. So is beer and hard liquor. There is also marijuana.

"We stay in the woods and drink our wine and beer and smoke pot," he says. "And occasionally we'll buy a bottle of tequila and go sit in the weeds and drink."

Once a month, Kamarata receives food stamps. No street address is needed to collect them, he says, only a general delivery address, although "sometimes they want you to draw a map of where your camp is."

"Cracking food stamps," the act of buying a five- or 10-cent item with a dollar stamp and receiving real currency as change, is a popular ploy among transients, Kamarata says.

"But we do buy a lot of food with our food stamps," he says. "And when we run out everybody pitches in. If we find food in the dumpsters we bring it back."

Kamarata has worked sporadically at labor construction jobs in the past, but has no real job skills. He recently tore ligaments in his right shoulder when he suffered a fall. This has stopped him from attempting to secure any summertime jobs, he says.

"If my arm gets better, I hope to work at the Lane County Fairgrounds setting up the carnival," he says.

Surprisingly, Kamarata agrees with business and neighborhood groups that transients pose a problem. However, he disagrees with their proposed solutions.

"You have people from all over the country coming here. And they're a bad element in

themselves because they've been on the street for awhile," he says.

"But I think people are taking things into their own hands and trying to form vigilante squads. I don't think they're doing right," Kamarata says.

As a result, violence similar to what occurred in Santa Cruz, Calif., a couple of years ago could occur in Eugene, Kamarata says. The Santa Cruz case involved a number of transients who were beaten to death in their sleep, he says.

He also believes pulling fortified wine off the shelves of grocery stores as some Whiteaker-area markets in northwest Eugene have done will solve very little.

"Once they get the fortified wine off the shelves, we'll just start drinking hard liquor. And I think it'll just make us crazier," he says, pointing out that the downtown plasma centers are only blocks from the liquor store.

"I think they should have some sort of alcohol rehabilitation center so people who need help can get it," he says.

According to Kamarata, there also should be help for people with a different sort of problem.

"I think a lot of people are being kicked out of the state mental hospitals and they can't live on the streets and take care of themselves. And I think it's a damn shame there's no help for these people," he says.

But like other transients, Kamarata has a tendency to stay away from social service organizations. He rarely appears at the Eugene Mission for a free meal because of restrictions the shelter imposes.

"I don't like staying at the Mission because there are too many rules and regulations for me and it's too far away from where we've been camping," he says. To get a free evening meal, visitors to the mission have to attend a church service, an event Kamarata calls "an earbanging."

"I'm not a church-going kind of person," he says.

Resident crusades against transients

By Chris Norred
Of the Emerald

George Leyba wants to make Eugene a better place to live.

The vice president of the Whiteaker Community Council and editor of the Whiteaker News, Leyba is an activist concerned about his neighbors and their neighborhood.

The problem with Eugene right now, says Leyba, is transients.

Story by Chris Norred

Leyba is the self-announced, and widely agreed upon leader in the mainstream community's fight to fend off the tide of transient activity that he says threatens an otherwise quality life here.

In the last few months, local media attention has been focused often on the transients who live in makeshift campsites hidden under the foliage along the Willamette River. The murder of Wilfred Tahnezani, a 26-year-old transient whose body was found near the McKenzie River on June 30, a police raid on local transient camps shortly after June 30, and three recent rapes for which the suspects, arrested and charged, have been identified as

transients, are examples of events which have increased the number of local people who will agree the transient population is a problem that needs a solution.

The solution is a difficult one, however, Leyba says.

"At the last meeting of the Whiteaker Community Council we had a tremendous turnout, about 90 people," Leyba says. "Not all of them lived in the Whiteaker Neighborhood. There was a great diversity of opinion. There was a small group of people that felt transients were not a problem and that we'd overreacted and were acting like Nazis."

"And there was a larger group, the largest, that felt transients were a problem but wanted to deal with them in a rational and humane manner," he says.

"And there was another small group of people, at the other extreme, who were just so fed up with transients on their streets and in their parks and in their yards," Leyba says.

Facing open opposition to his well-intentioned activism is something new to Leyba, he says. In the last two years he has been a catalyst in another community cause, exposing and controlling the methamphetamine production in the city.

"Nobody would stand up on a soap box and argue in favor of crack dealers," he says.

But people will argue in favor of transients.

Continued on Page 8

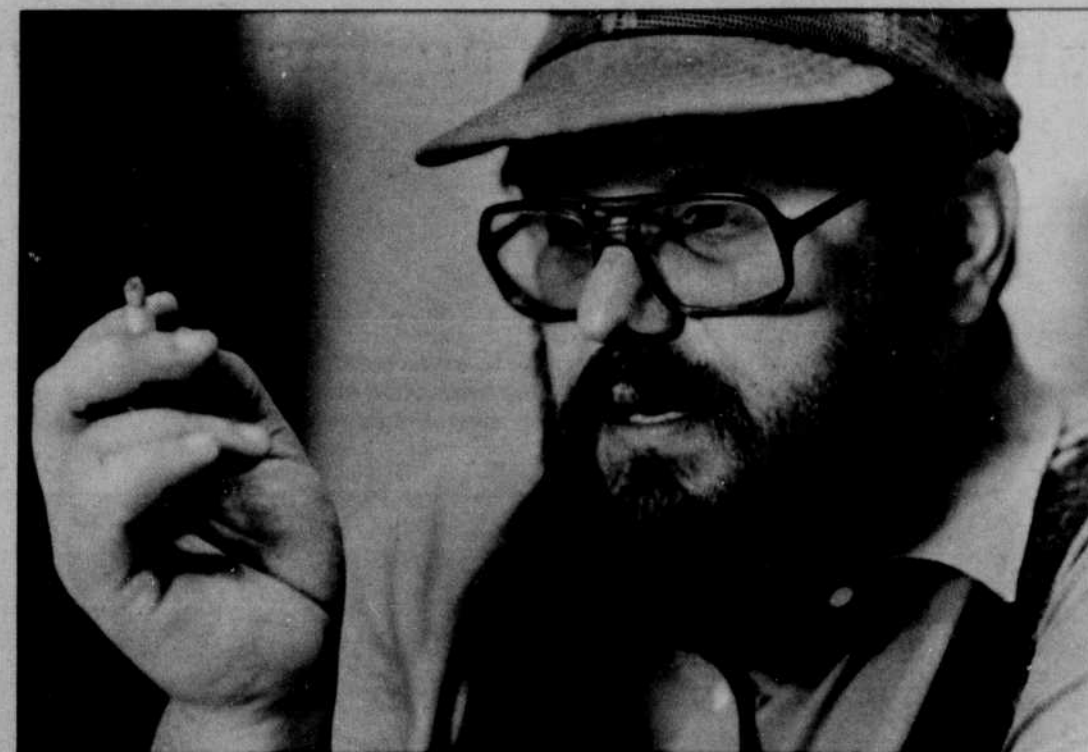


Photo by Ross Martin
George Leyba wants to rid Eugene of its transient problem through community interest and activism. He says his efforts have already made a major difference at Greenway Park.

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