

Inside:

- Impact training, Page 7
- Argentinean atrocities, Page 8
- Ducks' demise, Pages 16 & 17

Oregon Daily Emerald

Monday, October 26, 1987

Eugene, Oregon

Volume 89, Number 38

All's not well at the Mission

*When folks fall on hard times
Eugene Mission offers help;
but can't guarantee happiness*

By Stephen Maher
Emerald Associate Editor

Outside the Eugene Mission, a young couple toting backpacks and pulling along a spotted black and white mongrel relax on a curb. When the man leaves for a moment, the woman unties her bedroll and goes through her meager belongings wrapped in a towel.

Nearby, an older man works on his mini-camper. A mish-mash of cars and trucks with Michigan, Texas, Nevada, California and Oregon license plates surround the man's vehicle, which bears Washington plates. Before long another man arrives, and the two of them carry their belongings into the mission.

Down the street, under an overpass littered with empty wine bottles and garbage, a man takes a drink and spits on the ground. It's 12 noon.

Such is life around the Eugene Mission, an institution of the city since 1956. Although the names of the characters change from time-to-time, the scene at the mission rarely does. People come and go and the doling out of food continues.

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The mission itself appears well-groomed from the outside, in sharp contrast to the people who use the building's facilities. The lawns are manicured and green, and hedges are neatly trimmed. On the patio of the woman's dormitory, petunias bloom in flower pots.

The scene inside the mission, however, is a little less cheerful.

On a wall near the main office, hangs a poster of a man sitting on railroad tracks with his head bowed. The caption reads: "What does an adult do when no one cares."

Down the hall, men walk to the dining room single file in groups of 25. Inside the white-walled room, barely a whisper of talk is heard. Most eyes concentrate on the food on the table or the floor below.

"One serving only — no seconds" reads a sign above the serving line. The lunch on this particular day is a mixture of rice, barley, potato, corn, green bean and strained beef. A loaf of bread, a jar of peanuts and a cube of margarine as well as a pitcher of dehydrated milk round out the menu. The men finish the meal almost as fast as they walked in and leave in groups of two or three.

Some remain in the building after lunch and congregate in a lounge graced with old bus station-like chairs. The only real noise comes from a television set attached to the wall. Just as during lunch, an eerie silence pervades the room.

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Ernest Unger has been director of the Eugene Mission, officially known as the International Union of Gospel Mission, since 1962. According to Unger, the mission serves 180,000 meals a year and provides accommodations to 200 people a night.

Most people who visit the mission stay an average of 20-30 days, Unger says, which is longer than was the case seven or eight years ago. Unger blames the increase on the economy, and the high cost of housing and lack of "working-people's hotels" in the Eugene-Springfield area.

"There's no inexpensive place to live in Eugene," Unger says.

The average age of mission-goers also has changed in recent years. Unger says the image of the homeless as transient crop workers in their 40s is a thing of the past. "The nationwide average (of the homeless) is 28 years old," he says.

"So many of the people we work with are ill-equipped to handle today's job market," Unger says.

Turn to Mission, Page 11



Photo by Sherlyn Bjorkgren

The Eugene Mission doesn't allow animals, so Diane Grue, 53, and her camera-shy cat named Muffin sleep in a slightly wooded area nearby.

Family faces housing predicament

By Stephen Maher
Emerald Associate Editor

Richard and Ardella and their two children, 2-year-old Anthony and 13-month-old Natasha, have run into a predicament. They've been forced to break into a vacant house in Eugene in order to have a roof over their heads.

On Oct. 24 Ardella was kicked out of the Eugene Mission because the mission has a 10-day limit on lodging for women with children.

"I can see them kicking out a man after 10 days, but I can't understand how they can kick out a woman, especially with kids these age," said Richard, who had been living in the men's dormitory until his wife's eviction.

Ernest Unger, director of the Eugene Mission, said the mission imposes a 10-day limit for women with children because the facility is structured for singles.

"We work with the Eugene

Family Shelter (located on State Highway 99), and generally they can take them in within four or five days," Unger said.

Richard, 27, said the family has sought help at the shelter but was turned away because Ardella doesn't have any identification.

"I guess it's just to make sure you are who you say you are," Richard said.

In early September, the family's car was stolen a week after they arrived in Eugene from Burns. With it went Ardella's I.D.

Richard said the family has no money to go through the process of obtaining new identification.

The family arrived from Burns with the hope of finding employment in the area. "We couldn't find work there," Richard said.

But after staying in a motel for a few weeks in search of employment and a place to live, their savings quickly evaporated. In mid-October they were forced to seek shelter at the mission.

"I don't consider breaking a

window to allow my family a place to sleep a criminal offense. I'm not a thief or anything," Richard said.

"At least we'll all be together. There may be no heat. But we'll be together," he said.

Richard said he has run into difficulty landing employment in the area because of the job-search process.

"I go into a gas station here and they want resumes or referrals. In small towns they don't care," he said.

"I don't care whether they pay minimum wage or \$15 an hour — I want some kind of job," said Richard, a mill worker by trade.

He said the family faces a Catch-22 situation today.

"If you don't have an I.D. card or address, you can't get a job. And without a job how are you supposed to get an I.D. card or address?"

"We're plumb out of luck," he added.