

Homeless friends find community spirit at park

By Tiffany Woods
For the Oregon Daily Emerald

In the West University Neighborhood Park in southeast Eugene, a group of men have gathered for the morning.

Two sit at a picnic table examining some local beadwork. At another nearby table, four others talk about the day's news. A familiar face arrives and is immediately welcomed, not just because of the food he brings, but because he is a friend. A bag of corn flakes is quickly opened, burritos are handed out and some Quaker chewy granola bars are passed around.

And another day begins for Eugene's homeless. But this group of friends represents just a small portion of the city's homeless population. Rich Weinman, the planning and community development manager for Eugene, says a 1991 survey found that between 600 and 2,000 homeless people live in Eugene and Springfield.

But these statistics cannot begin to describe the lives of those people. Tony, a 44-year-old veteran who has lived in Eugene for nine years and calls himself "the Beadman," offers his own perspective of homelessness.

"People are homeless by choice," he says. "People don't want to be in the rat race. Who wants to cater to a society you don't like?"

And Tony is tired of the rat race. He was born in Arkansas and has spent 23 years traveling around Northern California and Oregon, sharing experiences with other homeless friends. He has a son, a college graduate, who

has offered him a place to live, but Tony refuses the invitation. He does not consider himself homeless, however, because he says he has made the decision to live the life he does.

"I don't call myself homeless because I know the difference between not making it and giving up," he says.

Tony's friend Frank, who has lived in Eugene since the mid-1980s, agrees. He prefers to call himself "houseless" because he says he has always had a car to live in.

"I could have had an apartment, but I chose the life I was living at the time," Frank says.

Tony says he chose to be homeless because America drove him to it, and now he is "disgusted" with the country. As a result, he supports himself financially and does not accept governmental assistance.

"I don't do welfare because I'm against the government," he says. He doesn't believe in taking advantage of things he doesn't need, such as shelter at the local mission.

Instead, Tony prefers to take care of himself. He performs handiwork jobs such as construction and also sells beadwork. On a good day, he says he can sell up to \$300 worth of beads.

Despite his self-proclaimed independence from the government, he believes the government should provide shelter for the homeless and "get them off the street." He says the homeless don't want much, just a roof over their heads or a place they can fix up.

Tony and his friends are particularly upset with Eugene city officials. They say the city is trying to drive

the homeless out of the park by turning off the water, by not cleaning the outhouse frequently and by letting the grass turn brown.

Frank says it is unhealthy and inhumane. Meanwhile, Patrick Charles, a student at the University who frequently visits with his friends in the park, says the city is committing "genocide" against the homeless.

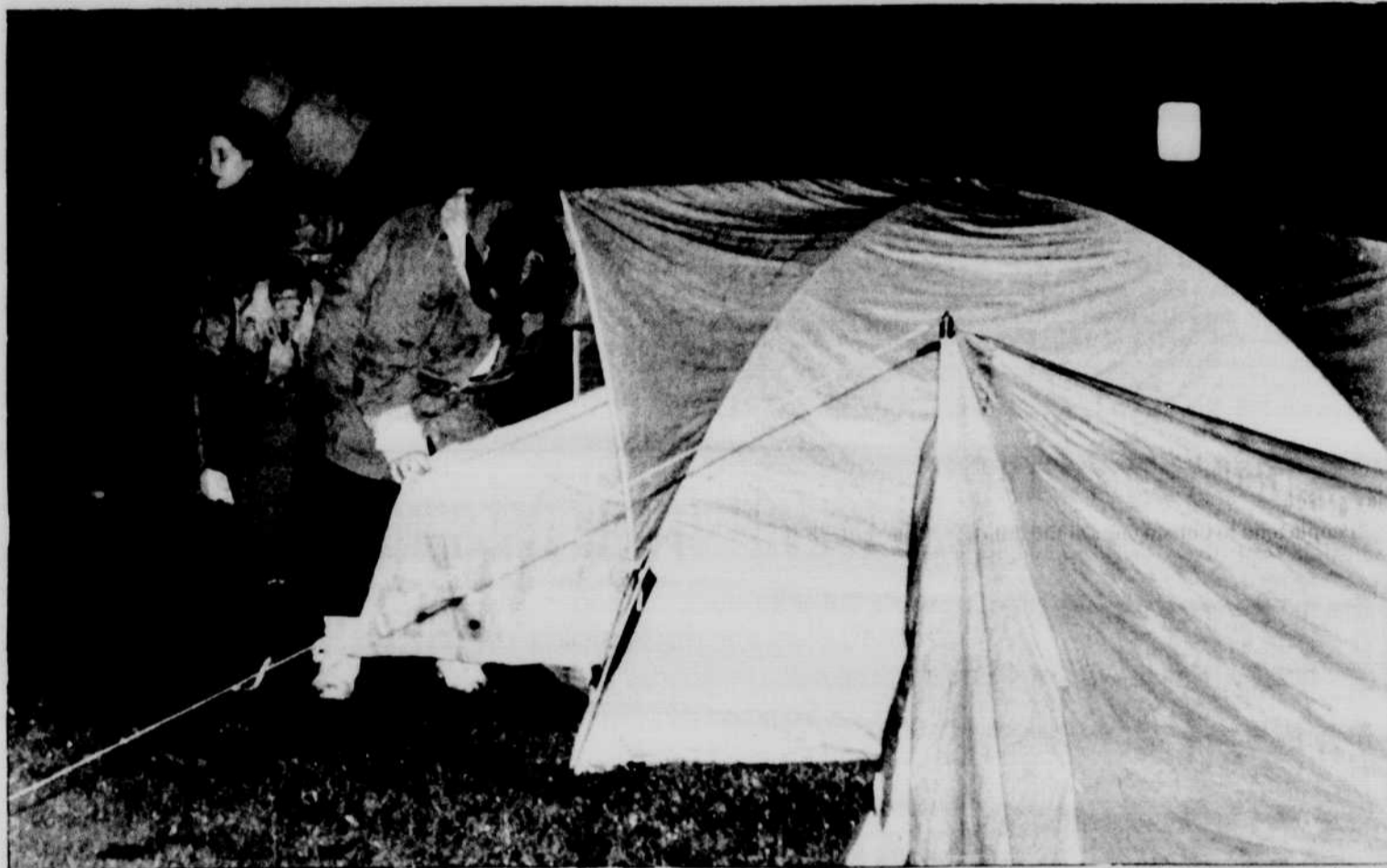
But Weinman says camping in any city park is illegal, and the presence of homeless people in these parks makes the public uneasy.

"West University Park is a real serious problem," he says. "People are uncomfortable about using it."

Regardless of their problems and frustration with the city, Tony and his friends continue to survive, though Tony says it is a constant struggle. One reason they have survived is the friendships they have formed. People respect and help each other, he says.

"Out here I know who my bothers and sisters are," Tony says. "I can get help out here. You see more love passed around here than you can in any office building. It's a beautiful world down here."

As Tony speaks, more people arrive, offering anything from a can of tomato sauce to friendly conversation. The group expands and moves onto the wilting grass. They sit in a circle like a bunch of schoolchildren playing Duck, Duck, Goose. But this is a circle of community — a circle of eternal friendship — that even the dying grass cannot kill.



Stevie, an Amazon resident, sets up a tent Monday night at the OSPIRG's Hunger and Homelessness Sleep-out.

OSPIRG tries to raise awareness with sleep-out

By Daniel West
Oregon Daily Emerald

OSPIRG sponsored the annual Hunger and Homelessness Sleep-out on the EMU East Lawn Monday night, hoping to bring awareness of homelessness to the attention of the students on this campus and the community as a whole.

"I want students to realize that the issue of homelessness is a serious reality," said Kalpana Krishnamurthy, co-chairperson of OSPIRG's hunger and homelessness campaign. "As students, we think that we'll never become homeless because we're getting degrees. But these people have degrees, jobs and families. I realized that if I don't help them, then who'll help me if I'm ever homeless?"

Monday night a group from OSPIRG and local homeless people camped outside for 12 hours, from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. The sleep-out included a candlelight vigil for the homeless, speakers from the community, a discussion, music and coffee, and a breakfast with reflection.

The group bought tents and sleeping bags to keep themselves warm and dry through the rainy night.

"I hope that tonight people realize what it's like not to have a roof and to be out in the cold. It's not much to ask (students) to spend one night outside when the homeless spend years outside in the cold," said Hannah Can-

non, co-chairperson for hunger and homelessness.

Another issue that will impact the homeless in Eugene is the University's plan to tear down Amazon family housing. The housing currently provides students with affordable rates. A double-occupancy apartment costs \$125 per month for students attending the University.

However, the University is continuing with plans to demolish the present structures and replace them with new, more expensive apartments. OSPIRG fears these new apartments will force many of the current residents into homelessness. Some of the residents have taken action to block the reconstruction of the apartments by attempting to have the Amazon apartments declared a historical landmark.

"Many of the people who live there can't afford to pay the high price of rent, especially when they have to pay so much for tuition," Krishnamurthy said. "Also, we want the students to be aware that (the University) can make a decision like this; that is what makes the rest of the students so safe. We're just as vulnerable."

The sleep-out is in conjunction with the National Homeless Awareness week. A table was set up in the EMU Tuesday for petition-signing against the destruction of Amazon family housing. Also, brochures and pamphlets were available on various issues of

homelessness.

Another table will be in the EMU today to collect food and clothing for the homeless. On Thursday, there will be a hunger banquet for Oxfam, a national organization that supports the homeless, in the EMU Fir Room at 7 p.m. Tickets are on sale at the EMU Main Desk for \$3.

"Ten percent of the population is eating well; the other 90 percent is eating either beans and rice daily or beans and water," Krishnamurthy said. "So there will be a random drawing at the door where some people will eat a catered meal and the others will eat beans and rice. This is to demonstrate how homeless people survive off of minimal food."

On Friday, Amazon student housing is sponsoring "A March for Justice" in the EMU Breezeway. The event will occur in opposition to the University's decision to tear down the housing project.

In the future, the homelessness and hunger committee is planning to form a national student coalition against hunger and homelessness. It wants to form a group that will create a working organization to help combat hunger and homelessness on a national level.

The hunger and homelessness committee is always looking for students who are willing to help; it has meetings every Thursday to discuss issues. If interested, contact OSPIRG in EMU Suite 1.

HOMELESS

Continued from Page 1

Saxon said he knows many of the students who have been harassed or disturbed by homeless are scared of going to the police because of retaliations.

Although the problems continue to fall largely on the shoulders of local law enforcement, Eugene has a broad spectrum of non-profit and church-oriented services providing food, shelter and services to the homeless.

The Mission is the transient service in Eugene where both men and women can receive shelter and food, but, like most places in the country, the Mission has elaborate and stringent rules.

Beds go first to those who have not been there for two months, and you can stay for only two nights in any two-month period. No shelter is given to those who are not sober, and you are required to listen to sermons and participate in prayer.

Saxon said about 95 percent of the homeless he has spoken to about shelter have a place to stay, explaining that many will go together for a night at a cheap motel.

Many believe that it is society's responsibility to increase the services for those truly in need, and the Eugene City Council has a Shelter Work Group that is discussing the need for shelters and housing opportunities for homeless people.

Last year it opened a temporary car-camp for the winter, and this year the same car-camp will open near Autzen Stadium Nov. 22. The camp will accommodate 50 people and will be a big help for the many families on the road who are looking for work.

Meanwhile, reports from across the country indicate that the number of homeless people is increasing. An estimated three million people are sleeping on the streets, and nothing is being done to decrease this number.

EPD Sgt. Dennis Baker said the homeless will always be a part of their workload.

"They have always been and will always be on our streets," he said.