

PITCHING A TENT

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The two have experienced a certain degree of homophobia at Dignity Village. The other people "won't admit it, but you can hear it all the time," Dolton says.

She and Arno know Portlanders consider the Village a homeless camp, but they believe "homeless" is a misnomer.

"I don't think we're homeless," Dolton says. "We're houseless. Because we do have an address and a phone."

Although the Villagers might not be living in traditional dwellings, the sense of community creates the atmosphere of a home. The tents are set up close together, ranging in size from small camping tents to full, walk-in rooms. The headquarters are located in a trailer, where residents can access a telephone and receive mail.

The Village even has an Internet site, www.outofthedoors.org, chronicling its history and members. As with any community, there is discontent and feuding, but Dolton and Arno report little theft or violence.

People of all ages and backgrounds live at Dignity, and a security system is in place to ensure no one causes trouble. "People who have been eighty-sixed from the camp come and try to promote violence...but there is a lot of security in the form of people who live here already," Arno says.



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Bean Dolton is grateful that Dignity Village helped her get back on her feet

When asked if she feels safe at Dignity Village, Dolton says: "Theoretically, myself. Sometimes."

At least 60 people live in the camp, and the turnover rate is high at times. Conditions are unpredictable, but Dolton and Arno feel especially protected by certain members of the camp who have taken them under their wing.

"Our guys in our pod love us and protect us," Dolton says. "We all hang out. Every time we stream, there's someone there."

Dolton adapted amazingly well to life in the cold and damp. She just finished a seasonal job

at the Gap, where her bosses didn't care about her housing status.

"It was not an issue at all whatsoever," she says. "They were really cool about it."

Dolton is one of the lucky ones: A few weeks after *Just Out* interviewed her, she moved into a trailer parked across the street from Dignity Village. Her mother bought it for her "as kind of a bonus for staying out of trouble last year," she says.

"I went from tent trash to trailer trash," she jokes. "It's a big difference. The only thing I have to worry about is running out of propane."

Late last month, Arno moved back home to Sherwood with her parents, who are "hard-core Christians," according to Dolton.

"She wasn't getting along with Dignity Village," Dolton says. "She wouldn't abide by the rules...she just started retaliating. And I told her that's her choice, but I'm not gonna put up with that, you know, because the heat comes back on me. I finally couldn't take it. She may be back, she might not. It's up to her."

Dolton is unsure whether they are still a couple. "We may be having a time apart, we might be broken up, to be honest with you," she says.

Meanwhile, Dolton has other plans for the near future. A full-blooded Inuit, she is trying to get her papers together to enroll in the tribe. So far, the process has taken her 17 years.

"Once I get the papers, I can get into housing," she says. "I can get a state job that pays well, and I'll get full medical and dental benefits. I don't want to go to the reservation. I'd rather be out here. I'm more comfortable. I'd like to go back to school and look into the fields of law and paralegal work."

For now, Dolton is looking for another full-time temp job. She eventually would like to move to Alaska and work at a cannery or on a fishing boat.

She is grateful that Dignity Village helped her get back on her feet. "I thank them a lot for that... I asked for a hand to help, and they've always been there. They've always been very supportive."

The ultimate goal, Dolton says, is to stay off the streets permanently. "That's what I'm working towards right now. This is my opportunity, and I'm taking advantage of it. It's scary living on the streets down here, especially nowadays. I went out last night and almost got my butt beaten." □

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