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## NORTHWEST news

# HOMELESSNESS IS NOT A CRIME

In the wake of mayoral decrees  
targeting the homeless,  
*Just Out* talks to three queer street folks

by Jaymee R. Cuti • Photos by Marty Davis

Earlier this month Portland Mayor Tom Potter announced a multifold plan to cut down on crime sometimes associated with homelessness such as trespassing, loitering, drug possession and prostitution.

Although he said unequivocally that homelessness is not a crime, leaders in the downtown business community have urged elected officials to crack down on what they call "aggressive panhandling"—a catchphrase that has come to denote an array of activities they say are bad for business.

Potter is pursuing what some social service providers call a holistic approach, addressing addiction and crimes of survival.

The City Council's response is a \$500,000 investment to offer the homeless immediate admission into a treatment program to avoid jail if they are arrested for drug-related charges. The city will spend another \$1.3 million on 57 beds at the Multnomah County Jail for crimes including burglary, trespassing, auto theft and prostitution.

Queer folks on the street often blend in with other homeless people, invisible to the mainstream sexual minorities community.

Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are overrepresented among the homeless, constituting an estimated 30 percent of the 1,500 to 4,000 people sleeping outside on an average night in Portland.

Though they may not fit the stereotypes of gays and lesbians frequenting queer dance nights, political meetings and singer/songwriter performances, their struggles with marginalization, homophobia and classism are familiar.

The experiences of queer homeless Port-

landers are as varied as their housed brothers and sisters, sometimes including struggles with drug dependence, mental illness and clashes with authority. At the same time, for some, homelessness affords the embrace of freedom and nonconformity.

*Just Out* spoke with three people who identify as queer and have spent time living on the street. They preferred to withhold their full names for reasons of safety and privacy. Their stories offer perspectives about inclusion, class divides and quality of life faced by the whole queer community, not just those without a roof over their heads.

### Surrounded by Family

Webb can hold his own in any conversation. He is friendly with most police officers, feels accepted among several street communities such as the queers, tramps and junkies, and keeps up with local and national news. Yet because of his graying and fraying clothes and natural odor, he says few members of the mainstream sexual minorities community will return his smile or meet his gaze.

Webb and his companion, Jed, enjoy traveling together and spending time at parks with their dogs and one day would like to live in a secluded area in the woods. Webb sleeps in a doorway on Southwest Morrison Street and plans his day around food lines at various hunger relief agencies.

Though Portland has a vivid gay night life,



Webb says he and Jed, who have been together for two years, feel they don't exist in the eyes of mainstream gays.

"We are the forgotten part of the gay community," said Webb.

Even at Portland Pride, Webb says he felt out of place, leading him to believe it is not his sexuality that draws prejudice, but his bedraggled appearance.

Webb says that he has gotten job offers but that it's difficult to maintain employment without a place to clean up every day. He also says drugs are a major factor contributing to his homelessness.

Webb, 44, came to Oregon 10 years ago to live closer to his parents in Woodburn. He worked as a truck driver in northern California for 18 years and lived in a house. According to Webb, life on the street is often more desirable than functioning within the system.

"It's much harder to have a place to live and pay the bills. It's much easier to live out here," he said.

He says the homeless community knows he is queer and treats him better than the men he passes along Stark Street.

"I walk by Scandals every day with my dogs and people say, 'Get away from that nasty tramp dog,'" he said. "Straight street people are more accepting of me than the mainstream queers."

Webb says he earns a living by recycling cans and bottles and does not panhandle. "We survive off this country's waste, and trust me, there's plenty of that," he said.

He and Jed are taking steps to increase their mobility. They have bikes and are working on getting trailers to travel with their dogs.

Webb had this to say to *Just Out* readers: "I think the gay community needs to be reminded not to stereotype, because the person you are scowling at might be family."

### Access Denied

Late in the summer, April was so fed up with getting hassled by cops and being kicked out of yet another public place, she dreamed aloud of owning all the businesses that rejected her as a patron.

Since arriving in Portland in June, the 28-year-old has been arrested for drug possession and threatened with criminal trespassing charges and is searched regularly by police when moving about the city.

"Police are supposed to protect and serve. All



Webb (left) and Jed are forgotten members of the gay community.