

SIERRA CLUB TALKS ENERGY

Is it time to switch the state off coal power?

Page 3



Dignity Village today



Chaz Collier, a Dignity Village resident, works to repair his structure.

PHOTO BY KEN HAWKINS WWW.KENHAWKINS.COM

BY ISRAEL BAYER
STAFF WRITER

Dignity Village has battled through a turbulent past to arrive where it is today. Starting as a group of eight men and women who pitched five tents on public land nearly nine years ago, the village today is a far cry from a tent city that came to symbolize the struggle of people experiencing

homelessness — not only in Portland, but around the country.

"I wouldn't call them a tent city," says Sally Erickson, who oversees Portland's 10-year plan to end homelessness with the Bureau of Housing and Community Development. "I would call them a community."

"I think it has been a social experiment

that illustrates what people with little to no resources were able to pull together to create a healthy and functioning community," says Wendy Kohn of Kwamba Productions, which is putting together a documentary about the group over the past decade.

"At so many points along the way, they could have failed," Kohn goes on

to say. "It could have flamed out and become an example of a group of people trying to do something positive and coming up short — like so many times throughout history. Instead we see, over a ten-year period, a group of people who haven't failed and are still recreating themselves through a

See VILLAGE, page 8

Miracle theater takes community on a cultural journey

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

Latino theater gives Portlanders a lesson in history and culture through humor and drama

Fifteen years ago, when Miracle Theater made the commitment to become a Latino-focused playhouse, its organizers worked to overcome the misconception that its productions were only in Spanish. In fact, the plays the small troupe produced from its earliest days were all in English, because that was what the Portland audience was prepared for.

Portland, and the audience, soon changed. "It went from, 'It's in Spanish, we can't come,' to 'Why isn't it in Spanish?'" says Jose Eduardo Gonzalez, Miracle's co-founder and executive artistic director. Today, 25 years into Miracle's existence, the nonprofit theater is a platform like none other in Oregon that showcases the work of Latino playwrights, advancing a greater understanding to an audience eager to see original, compelling art.

"We saw back in the early 1990s how suddenly the demographics changed overnight. In the 1990 census, Latinos became the largest minority in the state," Gonzalez says. "So we were very conscious that the community was changing. But there was no interpretive situation going on. It was just happening. So we thought this was a means of

introducing that change to the community by showing the work of Latino artists and their ideas and sensibility on stage — that change that's always influenced the way people thought."

It is also a learning center for social issues that transcend geography and ethnicity. On the main stage now is "The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa" by the award-winning playwright Luis Valdez.

"It's a crazy, crazy comedy about Chicano identity and whether you have to sell out to survive, or have to become a thief and a rebel to survive to maintain some dignity," says Olga Sanchez, Miracle's mainstage artistic director. "And neither path is true. There's got to be a third path. But in 1961, when the play was written, it didn't look like there was any path. This path, as funny as it is, is a really strong issue that is still maintained."

Sanchez is using the context of the play as an opportunity to reach more young adults, particularly in the Latino community, where the issues of teen pregnancy and an alarming high school drop-out rate — some estimates have put it as high as 50 percent — are major concerns. She and the theater are making a push for high school students to come see the play.

"It's funny. It's entertaining," Sanchez says. "I

don't need them to walk away just saying, 'I'm empowered.' They will be empowered by watching this play. This is the kind of play that you watch, and you get it, and you're still laughing your head off."

Miracle takes it beyond the stage. In connection with the production of "Pancho Villa," the theater is hosting a series of lectures entitled "Seeds of Chicano Identity," sponsored by the Oregon Council for the Humanities.

Visiting scholars Jorge Huerta, Phil Esparza and Diane Rodriguez will lead panel discussions on their experiences working with the playwright Luis Valdez, El Teatro Campesino and Latino-identified theater. It is a free and open event on May 10, aimed at better understanding the impact of the farm workers theater that emerged in California fields, educating and organizing farm workers in the 1960s and 70s around labor rights and political engagement. It was political satire, artistic, often humorous, and motivating.

"That's also how you got the flip side of the news," Sanchez says. "The journalist would be putting out the party line, and then you would get

See MIRACLE, page 12