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Above: Villager Sharon Simonds works in the organization's community garden. Currently, more than a dozen raised beds are being used. Below: A villager works to repair his structure.

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democratic process."

News organizations around the country reference Dignity Village as a sidenote when they write about the growing number of tent cities in the United States. Typically summed up in a sentence or two, the village is described as a success. To the local public in Portland, however, Dignity Village has seemed fairly quiet — yet that's a far cry from the truth.

Last year alone, the village had more than 1,000 visitors — mostly housing activists, students, faith-based community members, policy wonks and politicians from five continents and eight countries.

Erickson says she takes calls from all over the country from city governments and other parties interested in the village.

Erickson points them to the Tent City Toolkit, an interactive DVD the village created with Kwamba Productions. The

toolkit takes individuals on the streets through the step-by-step process of turning a tent city into a semi-permanent community through direct action. That a city official would promote tent city information at all may mean that even at the government level, our city is more progressive than most.

"I tell them Dignity Village was and is unique," says Erickson. "It wasn't like the city just created a tent city. (Dignity Village) fought for everything they have, but they also created a non-profit after realizing the political dynamics involved and overcame many obstacles. Dignity Village should be proud of what they've accomplished."

Kohn agrees. She says Portland is lucky to have had the personalities on the streets that it did when the village was born.

"(The organizers) were politically and socially sophisticated," says Kohn. "After the city realized they weren't going away under any circumstances, (the city) began to

create an absence of barriers, so to speak, and waited to see if the village would fail or be successful. Today there's a new generation carrying that same spirit on and (they) are doing remarkably well."

Dignity Village today

"Dignity has helped me reach out and deal with the violence in my life," says Bob Sterling, who has been at the village for nearly five years. "I would have ended up killing someone or robbing them if it wasn't for this place."

Sterling, who has been clean and sober for three years, is set to move out of the village and into a home in Newport, Ore. this week.

"It's like a family, and I'm going to miss them," Sterling said. "But it's time. I've come a long way to deal with my anger. It's time for someone else to start a new life again, like I was able to do."

Butted up against a bustling compost facility directly to the West and a state prison to the South, the village is a small piece of paradise for those who call it home. At regular intervals, jets can be heard taking off and landing from the airport nearby.

Currently, 58 individuals and couples live at the village on a 1.3-acre plot of land known as Sunderland Yard. The village also allows for a hand full of guests to stay and has a waiting list ranging from 15 to 25 people at all times. According to villagers 18-months is the average stay.

Decisions at the village are made by its membership committee, a rotating group of 34 individuals who oversee day-to-day activities and set the goals for the larger group.

"Each person has to work 10 hours a week," says Joe Palinkas, who handles public relations and oversees work projects. "We don't assign people to

things — they can choose for themselves — but each person does have to put in 10 hours a week at something."

There are currently 43 structures at Dignity Village that can be inhabited. Each 120-square foot structure, which is lifted 18 inches off the ground, comes with a bed and propane stove. The vast majority of structures are made out of recycled material, including several created from a mud-and-straw mixture known as "cob." There's also a community commons, where villagers are able to gather and hold meetings.

Many of the structures also have a small porch and an area for raised beds, so residents can garden. The village has a community garden as well, with more than a dozen raised beds that serve the entire village. The community garden is maintained by volunteers who live at the village, growing vegetables and flowers for the group to use and sell.

"The raised beds help us all mentally and physically," says Palinkas. "It also helps feed us."

Costs for the village hover around \$4,000 a month. This includes paying for portable toilets, garbage hauling, building supplies, water, sewer, phone, Internet and insurance.

The city has granted the organization a three-year \$25,000 grant to launch a series of micro-enterprises, including a hot dog cart that will be stationed at events throughout Portland this summer. The village also has a yard sale once a month at their location at Sunderland Yard.

The city has put an estimated \$200,000 into Dignity Village so far, but according to Erickson, the village is now completely self-sufficient.

"I'm proud of how far we've come," says village resident Laura Brown. "Look around. We are doing things for ourselves in a way that many people and critics didn't think was possible. We owe a lot to the original organizers — they sacrificed for something that's turning out to be a wonderful thing."



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