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In the beginning

"Have you heard the good news, homeless people? We are coming out of the doorways, coming out from under the bridges. We are setting ourselves up a tent city. We are coming in from the cold." So wrote Jack Tafari, one of the original Dignity Village organizers, in Street Roots in November 2000.

The first meeting of the "Out of the Doorways" campaign was in October 2000. The village was born out of Street Roots and homeless activism because of the lack of shelter space in the city.

In December 2000, a group of eight men and women pitched five tents on public land — a muddy field beside the Broadway Bridge. They called it Camp Dignity, which later became Dignity Village. Two days later, the police and fire marshal forced them to leave. In what would become the first in a series of high-profile standoffs with the city, the group marched off to an industrial site under the Fremont Bridge with a shopping cart parade.

In the first few months, village members ran a series of articles, poems and opinion pieces in Street Roots to inform the general public about the camp and its goals. Street Roots became the organization's fiduciary sponsor and would remain so for the next three years.

Within weeks, the camp had become a media phenomenon on television and radio stations throughout Portland and the nation. Images of people in wheelchairs and shopping cart parades were brought to people's living rooms. The group's tactics escalated with every relocation to gain more attention in the community. Most newspapers in Portland covered the campers as underdogs who had no true vision or way to sustain themselves. The Oregonian editorial board waged a campaign against the village.

"The first few weeks were both chaotic and exciting," said Bryan Pollard, former managing editor of Street Roots and former spokesman for the village. "There was apprehension about how the police would respond, but we had contingency plans for a variety of situations. The police responded more gently than we expected, I suppose, partially because we had numbers and were obviously organized."

The second site under the Fremont Bridge lasted five days, until the day after Christmas. In another shopping cart parade, the campers moved to the east waterfront, under the Morrison Bridge. The group

lasted about three weeks in the cold of winter at the waterfront. They then moved to River Place on the Willamette River in January 2001, one year since the first tents were pitched.

The group agreed to leave River Place a week later after negotiating for a spot back under the Fremont Bridge. The group lasted there for nine long months before splintering into three factions.

One group went to Rancho Dignity, a forty-acre farm outside of Portland. Another group occupied a field near the French-American school on Naito Parkway, otherwise known as the Field of Dreams. That camp was swept on Sept. 11, 2001, and several members of the Homeless Liberation Front, a radical group in Portland that reclaimed public lands for the public use, were arrested for camping on public lands.

The third group went to Sunderland Yard, where Dignity Village currently resides. "We eventually all coalesced on Sunderland Yard, but the mood was very, very bitter about being driven out of town," said Jack Tafari, one of the original organizers of the village.

"The first winter was hell at Sunderland Yard," said Tim McCarthy, a one-time Dignity resident. "It was cold and nasty. The wind coming off the river in the winter is brutal. The first winter we were in tents. One of the reasons we starting building structures was because of the elements. Our

tents were collapsing because of the weight of the water. We took control and starting building structures out of necessity."

Three years later in 2004, after surviving three winters at Sunderland Yard, Dignity Village became the first city-sanctioned tent city after reaching a compromise with City Hall. It became a symbol of success on America's homeless front.

The village would continue on under the radar for the next four years, working with various faith-based organizations, non-profits and individual volunteers who helped set into motion what the village has become today.

Testimony

"It was a relief to be able to take a breath from being homeless and surviving," says Shirley Smith, describing her arrival at the village two months ago. "I can't tell you how hard it is to survive as a woman on the streets. Being able to have a safe and supportive place to relax was a blessing I can't really describe."

Smith says she is a hard worker, and she enjoys contributing to the larger goal of the village. "It's a step up from living in a constant state of fear. I feel very good about myself today."

Street Roots talked to countless individuals who told similar stories. Matt Demichele, 26, and his partner

are both guests of the Village, currently on the waiting list to live there. Both products of the foster care system, Demichele and his partner became homeless after he lost his job. "The idea that we had become homeless left us both in complete shock," says Demichele. "Dignity Village has been a blessing in our lives. We're hoping to be able to stop and rebuild our lives."

Palinkas, who talked with Street Roots at length, told his story on a rainy morning last week at the village.

Palinkas worked for 28-years covering floors in Wilsonville, Oregon. He began to have problems with his sight. He was told he had developed glaucoma and needed to have surgery, but he had no insurance. He continued to work while his sight became worse and eventually had to walk away from the trade he loved.

He went on to work a series of minimum wage jobs while also providing for his partner, who has a disability. In 2006, when they could no longer afford housing, they were evicted and became homeless for the first time.

Palinkas and his partner did not want to be separated in the shelter system, so they found Dignity Village.

Last year Palinkas was able to get the eye surgery he needed, and now he oversees

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Top: Sign in front of Dignity Village. Bottom left: Joe Palinkas, Dignity Village's public relations and work project manager. Below right: Structures on site. Photos by Ken Hawkins www.kenhawkins.com

