

Now and Zen

by Dharma Bum

Fire in the heart
Fire in the eyes
Seeing mystery on all sides
Walking in wonder with wings
Bound for Here and Now
Bound for the future without a clock
Mindless and timeless in the moment
All clocks in all worlds have stopped
Everything always happens Now!
Phantasmagoric worlds forever spinning

Untitled

by Shannon Andrews

The skeletal hourglass tree figurines
embellish the sky as its bleak silhouettes
reach out an eerie feeling
of the cold and crisp winters return
as the sky falls into the night.

At dusk, beaming traffic lights
dot the highway and shine too early
for warning showing the way

The smell of woodstoves and fireplaces
emit a smell of fresh sap and
burning wood with the smoke mixed
into brisk cool air.

Wintertime, a thought that could never
be forgotten,
as nature's
beginning at last to shed
the simplicities of the year that has past.

Benefits specialist takes training statewide

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

Mellani Calvin remembers vividly the day Oregon did away with its General Assistance program. She was working as a paralegal for a disabilities attorney, and the program helped disabled clients survive while they waited, often years, for Social Security benefits.

Then one day in April 2004, it all went away.

"One client fell to her knees in the office, bawling," Calvin says. "It was a black day in Oregon's history."

On that day, thousands of people with mental and physical disabilities, unable to work, were dropped from subsistence by the state. It was a \$2 million program that kept people with no income in housing, off the streets, while applications languished for Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability assistance.

"It was a small price that got cut but it was devastating to the homeless community," Calvin says. "I was bent on becoming more active."

So she quit her job, studied the benefits process and became a representative for Social Security claimants. She began working with Central City Concern and became the Program Manager of the Benefits and Entitlement Specialist Team (BEST). In her first three years with CCC, she enrolled 100 people for SS benefits. More than 300 have qualified for benefits during the time Calvin managed the program, assisted by a network of liaisons and a psychologist to speed the process.

Today, Calvin is branching out. She has started her own business training people to help those who qualify for assistance but are unable to navigate the system. She's launched Disability Benefits Training and Consulting, which will work with non-profit



Mellani Calvin

agencies and state and local governments to reach more people across Oregon.

Statistics provided by Central City Concern indicate a high number of people who are homeless could qualify for benefits that could help them sustain housing: up to 40 percent are estimated to be eligible for SSI and SSDI and Medicaid based on their mental illness. More than 45 percent could qualify based on their physical health conditions. That's according to a report from the Government Accountability Office. A fraction of these actually receive benefits, and Calvin says so many are unable to deal with labyrinthine system on their own.

"It's fulfilled my dream of having as many people as possible doing benefits work," Calvin says. "I really hope to show facilities more avenues for their folks to get SSI help."

Calvin calls herself a myth buster. "You don't have to get denied three times before

you get benefits. You don't have to have an attorney to get benefits. And you're not on Social Security benefits forever. The average is between three and seven years."

Among the first groups to sign on the multi-service non-profit company, Woape, Inc., which works with east Multnomah County and Northern Clackamas County. Woape is the Lakota word for hope.

It's always been tough for people to get their benefits, says Calvin. The need for assistance for mentally and physically disabled people became more urgent in the 1980s after housing programs were cut by 70 percent. Then, in 1996, under President Clinton, people with addiction as a primary condition were disqualified for assistance.

And the structure of the system provides little incentive to expedite cases through the legal system, Calvin says. Attorneys get 25 percent of the back pay or \$6,000, which ever is less. So the longer the case carries on, the more the attorney receives.

"There is no incentive to win the case, it's not proactive at all," Calvin says. "My mission is to expedite this process, to restore that money flow as fast as possible."

In Salem, advocates continue to press to have General Assistance restored, so people are not destitute during the wait.

New efforts are being made statewide to employ a training curriculum to teach professionals in the mental health community and those working with prisons to help people get their benefits. There are also efforts in Salem to ensure that people leaving prison get their Social Security benefits upon release. People leaving often get only a 30-day supply of medication, and without income or support, they can't buy what they need. Their benefits would keep them supplied with their medications and the health care they need.

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