

## By remembering one we lost, we celebrate those we have

BY ROB SADOWSKY  
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

On May 12th, the Bicycle Transportation Alliance and community partners held a special tree planting ceremony to remember loved ones lost on the roadway and recognize those who are committed to creating a safe environment for all people on the

### HEALTHY STREETBEAT

Bicycle  
Transportation  
Alliance



Healthy Streetbeat is a monthly column for Street Roots written by the Bicycle Transportation Alliance (BTA). Our contributors are Rob Sadowsky, executive director, and Margaux Mennesson, communications director.

road. The event was an opportunity to both commemorate loved ones who lost their lives through traffic tragedy and also an opportunity to celebrate their lives by showcasing improvements in the street environment that will prevent future fatalities.

The Bicycle Transportation Alliance, the Portland Bureau of Transportation, the Portland Bureau of Environmental Services (BES), Friends of Trees, Willamette Pedestrian Coalition and the Beaumont Wilshire Neighborhood Association all cosponsored the tree planting. The tree is the first tree planted as part of the Susie Forest in Portland. The Susie Forest honors Susie Stephens. Susie was a bicyclist, an environmentalist, an activist, and a world traveler. She was dedicated to educating others about bicyclist and pedestrian safety, and she was killed in 2002 after being struck by a bus while legally walking across the street in St. Louis. The Susie Forest is a living, growing, legacy to Susie and her commitment to creating livable communities.

The Bicycle Transportation Alliance worked with Susie early in our history to build the organization and is proud to honor her commitment. BTA cofounder and Metro Councilor Rex Burkholder says, "I remember Susie's incredible, radiant smile and her confidence in the rightness and inevitability of her work. When we bicycle and pedestrian advocates felt like tiny Davids with our knees knocking nervously in front of the indifferent Goliaths of the auto juggernaut, Susie was a bright spot of vision, can-do-it-ness and indomitable spirit that brightened up the room and gave hope to our small band of cranks, dreamers and wonks."

When you go by the tree near Going and 33rd Avenue, you'll see ribbons tied to the young branches. These ribbons capture fond memories of loved ones lost in tragic traffic fatalities. Stop by, read some of the messages and add your own to this living memorial to hope. The Susie Forest is a project of Susie's mother Nancy McKerrow, a resident of Spokane, Washington. I made a personal commitment to Nancy last August to plant a Susie Tree in Portland and was excited to have Nancy come down for the tree planting bringing her special little Peppernut cookies aptly renamed Tree-Kibbles to pass around.

Each tree planted is a reminder that life goes on and starts anew, and except for the two trees planted every year on Susie's birthday and the anniversary of her death, every tree planted in The Susie Forest is associated with someone else. Whether it is to celebrate the birth of a newborn or a special anniversary, as a memorial for someone else taken too soon, or to celebrate a reading program at a local

library or school, each Susie tree is deeply rooted in personal connection. There have been more than one hundred Susie trees planted so far. Want to plan your own tree, learn more about Susie Trees and the Susie Forest at [www.susieforest.com](http://www.susieforest.com).

The event was also an opportunity to honor one of our local champions, Steph Routh, the Executive Director of the Willamette Pedestrian Coalition. Steph recently won the Susie Stephens Joyful Enthusiasm Award from the national Alliance for Biking and Walking. Steph has that same radiant smile and confidence in the rightness and inevitability of her work.

"Susie Stephens was a remarkable, energetic, and strategic advocate for biking and walking and one of the pioneers of our movement," Jeff Miller, Alliance for Biking and Walking President/CEO, said. "Everyone who knew Susie remembers her contagious enthusiasm. Bicycle and pedestrian advocates face daunting challenges with limited resources, but, inspired by unforgettable leaders like Susie, we have a passion and commitment that prevail. The Alliance celebrates this energy by annually recognizing a leader who exemplifies Susie's enduring spirit and joy."

Steph embodies Susie's joyful enthusiasm in spite of the daunting task she has at work fighting to save lives and make the region safer for pedestrians. The Willamette Pedestrian Coalition advocates for better laws, enhanced enforcement, more sidewalks and signed crosswalks, education programs, community improvements designed for pedestrians, and increased funding to support these activities. It is simply more fun, more energetic to work with leaders such as Steph.

## Punish the criminal, but don't destroy the lives of the family

Another Mother's Day has come and gone. This year, again, I went through the usual yo-yo feelings that come with that day for me. I thought of my mother, who I still miss even though she



### FROM THE DESK OF

Ruth Kovacs

Ruth Kovacs is a Portland activist, former teacher and the host of Prison Pipeline on KBOO, 90.7 fm. She writes regularly about the issues surrounding the millions of individuals and families affected by the U.S. prison system.

passed in 1987. I wished I could be with all three of my sons, but two of them have passed. It made getting together with my son Patrick very special. Each year these thoughts bring up many beautiful memories and, yes, a few tears.

Again, I thought, with sadness, of all the incarcerated women at Coffee Creek who are mothers. But I managed to find a smile, as I remembered a program for mothers that is provided by the Coffee Creek Family Preservation Program, or FPP.

The mothers in FPP attend adult education and parenting classes and participate with their children in interactive literacy activities in a classroom within the correctional facility twice a month. Additionally, the program allows for the mothers to maintain involvement in the parenting and education of their children through weekly calls to caregivers, regular communication with teachers, and participation in parent teacher conferences by phone.

But the yo-yo of the day continues because we all know that many valuable prison programs are facing cuts or elimination at the end of June. And I can feel the emotion that Coffee Creek mothers experience on Mother's Day. Here's a story about one of the mothers who was in FPP.

The mother applied for the program after not seeing or talking to her three children for almost one year. She was interviewed and she explained that the shame and guilt

and estranged relationship with her mother-in-law, who was caring for the children, prevented her from having contact.

FPP staff worked hard to convince the mother-in-law to bring the children to the Saturday program to see if they would like it. She was very angry at the mother, who was in for many counts of identity theft associated with her meth addiction and had seemingly abandoned her children. Of course, the children loved being able to spend time with their mother in a supportive learning environment. Unlike the sterile visiting room, the mothers are able to give their children the individual attention, support, and nurturing they need. The mothers and children can relax and play inside and outside without the presence of security officers. The children were able to rebuild their bond with their mother and she with them. It took more work for the mother to repair her relationship with the caregiver and to co-parent effectively from prison, but she held strong and let go of the things she couldn't control.

After the mother was released from prison, it took about one year for her to get on her feet. All three children are now back with her and doing well. She is using the skills she learned in FPP to advocate for their special needs. Most importantly, the children are being raised by a healthy stable mother.

If FPP and other programs are eliminated because of budget cuts, stories like this will not have such positive endings. Instead Mother's Day will be a day of tears for many. And the community will have to continue to cope with the problems of the mother and the children.

Proposed budget cuts to the 2011-2013 budget of the Oregon Department of Corrections will include the Coffee Creek Family Preservation Project and many other valuable prison programs.

The Public Safety Subcommittee of Ways and Means held public testimony on last month and the focus was on programs. The Center for Safety and Justice organized many graduates from treatment, cognitive, parenting and work-based programs to testify. Among those present was Dave Dahl from Dave's Killer Bread, an active advocate for prison issues that concern developing a better system. He himself is a repeat ex-con, now running a wildly successful business and hiring other former felons to his shop.

The staff of Coffee Creek FPP will be visiting the Capitol with alumni mothers and caregivers to speak to our legislators, hoping to again save their program. But they need help and you can participate. You can send a quick form to [safetyandjustice.eactionmax.com/takeaction.asap?aid=5248](mailto:safetyandjustice.eactionmax.com/takeaction.asap?aid=5248).

Or, send an email, that is a personalized letter, or telephone if you have time. Here's the link to find your legislators: <http://www.leg.state.or.us/findlegisltr/>

For help or more information you can contact Partnership for Safety and Justice at 503-335-8449.

Your help and support will be appreciated by all concerned. Preserving effective prison programs reduces recidivism which humanizes all of us, saves tax money and makes our community safer and more productive.

When the system "punishes" criminals, does it really make sense to destroy the lives of everyone in their family? And when it is time for their release (more than half of the incarcerated folks are eventually released) isn't it better to have a person in our community who has let go of the addiction and life of crime, and now pursues values that contribute to our community?

Those proposing the budget cuts just don't seem to get it.