

Why I am walking with the homeless

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There are walks and races to cure breast cancer and diabetes. There are even walks to raise money for homeless shelters, but I don't know of any walks to draw attention to the connection between abuse and homelessness. So I decided to create one. My journey to this place has been a long one.

I was sexually abused as a child and raped on a date as a young adult, but I did not come to terms with these events until I was in my 40s. In 2007, together with other survivors of abuse and our supporters, I formed a group to support survivors and to bring them together with other members of the community for mutual healing and understanding. We called the group Compassionate Gathering. Our first public program was to screen a documentary on abuse at the Hollywood Theater. To advertise the screening, I walked around downtown Portland posting flyers. I encountered four men selling the Street Roots newspapers written by and advocating for the homeless. I worked with survivors of child abuse who struggled with homelessness, so I offered my flyers to these men. Two of them revealed that they were child sex abuse survivors. One man had been abused in many of the series of foster homes he shuffled through as a child. These two men lived long struggles with the symptoms of abuse - depression, low self esteem, difficulties maintaining jobs and relationships, and drug and alcohol addiction. Both of these men were struggling to rebuild their lives. Both were receiving treatment for addictions. Both lived in shelters at night and sold Street Roots during the day in an effort to take a step towards employment.

Neither of these men came to the screening of the documentary, but a woman came who was the mother of two adults who were child sex abuse victims. She brimmed over with energy and ideas.

In 2008, she asked for my help walking from Ashland to Portland. She wanted to raise awareness about abuse by getting the attention of as many people as possible. We

wore t-shirts that proclaimed our issue and what we were doing: "Help Stop Child Sex Abuse" and "Walk Across Oregon".

Homeless survivors of abuse kept appearing along the way... the street kid in Eugene, the recovering heroin addict in Portland...

In the summer of 2009, the mother stepped back, but I continued walking across Oregon to end abuse and heal the wounds. As a single mother of two school aged children, I could not walk every step of the way as the other mother did. So I walked through towns and on scenic trails with my children, friends, and, occasionally, staff and volunteers from other not-for-profits working on child abuse or domestic violence. We started walking in Joseph, Oregon, and paralleled the Columbia River, ending our walk by the Pacific Ocean near Astoria.

We encountered many homeless survivors that summer too. Our most significant encounters took place at the end of our journey - in Astoria - where we were joined by the Clatsop County Women's Resource Center. Their group included the residents of the Center's shelter for victims of domestic violence which also served as a shelter for homeless families and adults. Three residents from the shelter approached me and shared stories of horrendous abuses they suffered as children while we walked along the Columbia River Walk in Astoria.

Inspired by all the homeless survivors of abuse I met over the years, I decided to include a "Walk with the Homeless" in the Walk Across Oregon to End Abuse and Heal the Wounds.

My first "Walk with the Homeless" took place late on an August afternoon in the summer of 2010. I walked alone without an itinerary or publicity through Waterfront Park to downtown Portland, carrying with me a large bag of leftover t-shirts from the 2008 and 2009 Walks. On a street corner in downtown Portland, I met a man seated on the sidewalk holding a sign that declared his

status as a homeless Vietnam vet. My heart is open, so I sat down beside him and offered him a t-shirt. As I listened to his story, a young man walked up and dropped some change into the vet's cup.

"I might be sitting beside you soon," the young man said to the older one.

"Are you a veteran too?" I asked.

The young man faced me but backed up to the edge of the street.

"Yes," he said.

"Which war?" I asked.

"The one that is doing nobody any good," he replied as he walked away.

The young man was on edge, but his wariness was familiar to me. I've encountered that same wariness in survivors of abuse. Both survivors and veterans of combat suffer Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD alters brain structure and chemistry, affecting how the brain processes emotions and memory. Some people recover from PTSD with therapy and time, but many never recover. The symptoms of PTSD include outbursts of anger, chronic depression, anxiety, trouble maintaining jobs and relationships, alcoholism and drug addiction - all things that cause people not to be able to maintain homes to live in.

After chatting with the vets, I rounded Pioneer Square and walked back towards

Waterfront Park.

A group of fresh faced, young men in dark pants, white shirts, and ties stood on the sidewalk outside the courthouse. They were gathered around a table holding a placard advertising a website - Mormon.org.

I looked beyond this group of young men and saw a girl seated on the sidewalk beside a dog, a can, and a sign asking for help. Beyond her sat a young couple with their own can and sign.

I sent a mental message to the Mormon missionaries, "Why don't you proselytize among the poor and the forsaken, the way Jesus did?"

The Mormon missionaries did not get my message, so I walked down the block and proselytized my own message - End Abuse, Heal the Wounds.

The girl with the dog took a t-shirt and thanked me.

The young couple further down the block declined my offer of shirts, but the young woman said, "You're doing good work."

By that time, two hours had passed, and all but my smallest of t-shirts were gone.

"Time to go home; try again next year," I thought.

Now it is next year. I plan to Walk with the Homeless on July 18. I will start at 9 a.m. by Whole Foods in the Hollywood District, walk down Broadway and NE Multnomah to Lloyd Boulevard and cross the Steel Bridge to Waterfront Park and downtown Portland. I will be wearing a bright blue t-shirt that says "Walk Across Oregon" and "Stop Abuse, Heal the Wounds".

I am asking the people of Street Roots newspaper to join me. Can you come too? Will you walk with me to listen to and be present with the homeless? Will you walk with me to share your story of abuse and survival so others may know that the homeless are not homeless for trivial reasons? Today, support is being cut in our country for people who are hurting and on the edge. We need to come together and take up the slack ourselves, support the wounded and vulnerable, and be the change we need in our community.

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