

Thirty years of hospitality: a personal reflection on Operation Nightwatch

BY COLE MERKEL
STAFF WRITER

Celebrating a 30th birthday can be difficult. While the third decade is certainly a milestone, it is also the beginning of an era where the first signs of aging set in. Many want their 30th birthday to pass quietly and uneventfully with very little pomp and circumstance. In the case of Operation Nightwatch, the 30th anniversary of the organization's incorporation as a non-profit was celebrated on October 29 in a low-key environment surrounded by chamber music, food and plenty of friends. Rather than show its age, Operation Nightwatch used the evening to announce signs of new vitality and the promise of a vibrant future with the wisdom that only 30 years of life can provide.

In the year I had the opportunity to serve as Operation Nightwatch's Jesuit Volunteer and Program Coordinator, I was privileged to become part of one of the most diverse communities in Portland. Primarily, Nightwatch is a drop-in center for people who are low-income and/or experiencing homelessness. More than anything, Nightwatch's weekend hospitality center is a space of friendship and camaraderie for those who are lonely and have no place else to go. People of all colors, genders, identities, orientations, ages and socio-economic backgrounds frequent the St. Stephen's Episcopal fellowship hall three

nights a weekend without fear of judgment or harassment. It's a space where all are welcome.

Looking around the Sanctuary in St. Stephen's Episcopal Church — Nightwatch's home for the past 12 months — I was struck by the diversity of the community present to support and celebrate the organization's core mission of hospitality. Those present filled a spectrum reflective of the organization on any given Thursday, Friday or Saturday evening. It included homeless or formerly homeless individuals, people who are employed and unemployed, members of the Nightwatch board of directors, donors to the organization, congregants of St. Stephen's, volunteers and guests of Operation Nightwatch. All were there to commemorate the agency's past while looking ahead to its future.

Even on stage, the performers and performances were diverse. Coordinated by Joshua Kingsley, director of Portland Chamber Music, an organization based out of St. Stephen's which brings the power music to those who do not have access to it otherwise, the arrangement was an amalgamation of classical and contemporary: Mozart to the Black Eyed Peas with a few Ukrainian folk songs in between.

One of the more moving performances of the evening occurred when Operation Nightwatch's regular guest Tony Clure was

given the opportunity to play guitar for the crowd. From experience, I know that Tony plays music for everyone in the hospitality center each evening Nightwatch is open. That he was able to showcase his talents for a larger crowd reflects the Nightwatch mission as a whole: it is not a space where individuals are asked to change or ascribe to a particular philosophy. Rather, the community reinvents itself organically based on the individuals who cultivate it — guests, volunteers and staff alike — and from that individual investment, safe-space is created where change can take place.

A cup of coffee, a sandwich, a board game, a pair of socks and a genuine conversation three nights a week; it may not seem like much, but strong community can save lives. Weekends can be a tough time to be alone, especially when a person is fighting to stay sober. Loneliness can overcome a person living in a single-room occupancy apartment, especially when all that person's old friends are still living on the streets. What Nightwatch's mission of hospitality creates, then, is a safe, clean environment for individuals to simply *be*: present with one another, and treated with the respect and equality they deserve.

At times, the concert was a walk down memory-lane with a slideshow detailing Operation Nightwatch history reminding attendees of how far the organization has

come since it began in 1981 as a clerical mission serving Portland's "night population" (loosely interpreted, that often meant visiting people at bars on late weekend nights). It was a ceremony to acknowledge three volunteers of the year, and three churches that have been integral in the organization's growth in the past year.

The concert was also a time to reflect on the many community events Nightwatch facilitates outside its regular weekend hours: monthly comedy movie nights, monthly outings to parks and attractions outside the downtown core, weekly worship services and bible studies, biweekly foot care and the Mobile Hospitality Center, an RV that brings basic services and routine medical care to individuals living in East County twice a week.

And finally, the Operation Nightwatch 30th anniversary concert gave a space to look forward. Earlier that week, the organization received a grant from the Spirit Mountain Community Fund to partially endow the Nightwatch Healthcare Initiative, a plan to bring more health services like acupuncture, massage and basic medical care to those who are most vulnerable. After 30 years, it seems Operation Nightwatch is evolving toward a strong future.

Cole Merkel is the Jesuit Volunteer and Program Assistant for Street Roots

Seasons of your life

By Darla Brown

In the winter
You will grow

In the spring
You will bloom

In the summer
You will not burn

In the fall
You will not fall

Winter, spring, summer, fall
All you have to do is call

You have friends

We are all the same

By Jacob "Fluffy" Anderson

We are all the same
Just different names
We are all the same
Whether shame or fame
We are all the same
Just different colors
We are all the same
And should love one another



By Nathan Roper