

# Where wisdom sleeps

Author Linda Ross Swanson chronicles the lives of addiction and recovery on the streets

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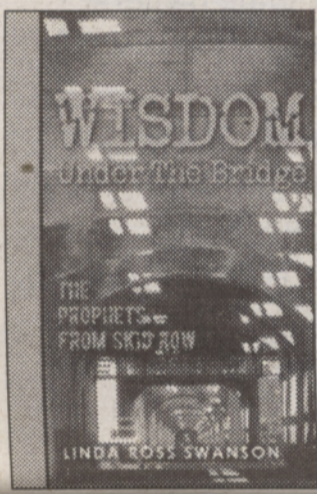
Between 2005 and last year, Linda Ross Swanson began making regular trips to Backspace in Old Town. But she wasn't going there for a cup of coffee or to see live music. Instead, she went there to listen to stories of despair, grit and redemption from Portlanders who've struggled with poverty and addiction before getting on the road to recovery. Swanson

used the material for "Wisdom Under the Bridge: The Prophets from Skid Row."

The book includes the stories of 12 individuals who have overcome addiction and street life to become sober and productive people. The stories are presented as oral histories and take on stream-of-consciousness-like qualities, which Swanson used to capture each prophet's voice and narrative. Swanson, a private grief counselor who serves as an associate sister at the Holy Names Sisters Foundation, hopes that telling the

stories of how these individuals overcame adversity will provide lessons to others, while also challenging readers' perceptions of the homeless.

Jake Thomas: The stories in the book are meant to be similar to or modeled after "ethical will" or "wisdom will." I was hoping



Linda Ross Swanson



The Burnside Bridge

you could talk a little bit about how you discovered wisdom wills and why you wanted to use this format.

Linda Ross Swanson: Well, in 2005, I got my master's degree in applied theology at Marylhurst University. It's an inter-faith program, and one of the exercises in one of our classes was to do a ritual from one of the major religions. I came across the Jewish tradition of an ethical will, which dates back to biblical times when Jacob gathered his 12 sons around his death bed and bequeathed his blessing and his wisdom and his instructions.

It was an oral tradition for centuries, and when writing became popular people began writing these and they were like last letters passing your wisdom onto the next generation. I didn't like the name "ethical will" because I didn't like the connotation. So I trademarked the name "wisdom will."

I had thought about putting a book together using them even when I was still in school. I thought, we don't learn from sheltered lives; we learn from adversity, so

who has the most adversity? Certainly people who live on the streets or people who have lived on the streets.

I'm a recovering alcoholic for 25 years. I had two brothers who were alcoholic, both homeless. One of them lived in the Mark Hatfield for a while after he got sober. He's only been sober about a dozen years. But both these brothers lived on and off the street most of their adult lives. So I found the downtown chapel, which is Saint André Bessette Catholic, and I started going to church there, and I met three recovering heroin addicts and they were all housed and giving back to society. They were working and volunteering. So that's where I got those three. Then the other folks I found through Sisters of the Road Cafe, and a fellow I met through Central City Concern who works there.

J.T.: How did you go about building a rapport with the people you interviewed?

L.R.S.: It was easy. "Hi, my name is Linda. I'm a recovering alcoholic. Would you

like to be interviewed for a book telling me your story?"

As soon as I say who I am and what I'm doing and I'm a recovering alcoholic, and I had brothers who lived on the streets, it levels the playing field. We know each other. People in recovery know each other. As soon as you meet each other, the boundaries disappear. That's true for everyone in recovery pretty much, no matter what your social status is. People pretty much open their mind.

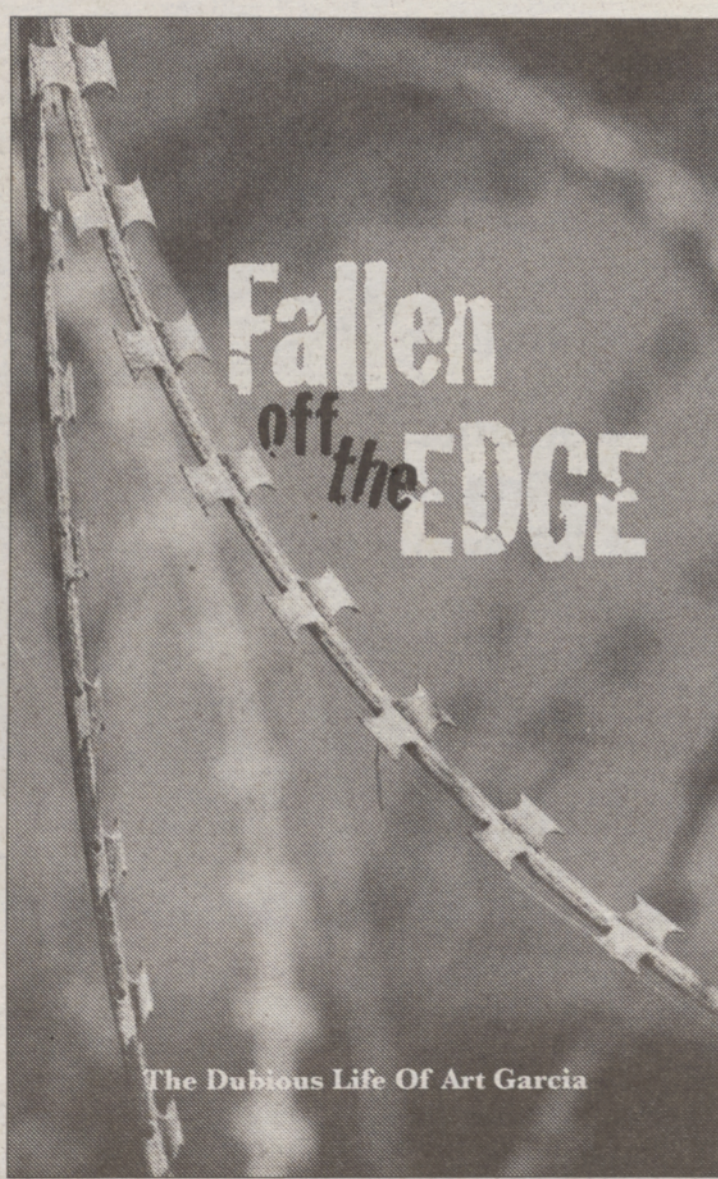
J.T.: What sort of wisdom did you find under the bridge?

L.R.S.: First of all, people can change. The people in the book are the hardest-core addicts and alcoholics you can imagine. They were in and out of jail and in and out of recovery. Everyone had given up on them, including themselves. But somehow by the grace of God they got sober. Some of them had been in treatment centers 13 times. A couple of people in there were helped by the mentor program through Central City Concern.

So it's pretty obvious that if these people can change their lives, anybody can. No matter what. And so many of them had traumas that you wouldn't believe. Mary's mother and brother were murdered and she found their bodies. Every single one of them is grateful for every single day they have. Every single one of them wants to give back. Every single one of them believes in a higher power of some sort. They've found happiness in the most minute ways. We take so much for granted.

In one of the stories, there's Mary Sue Rich who is spiritual director at the McDonald Center right behind The Downtown Chapel. It's an assisted-living facility for poverty-level folks. She made friends with this guy from Haiti, and he was severely mentally ill, and one day he invited her into his room and he was just beaming, and he had something in his hand, and he just couldn't wait to give it to her. So he made her pick which hand and finally she picked and there was a \$20 bill in his hand, and he said, "Look, my sister gave me this for my birthday, and I want to give it to you so you can give it to other people that need help on the streets. That's what I want to do with it." And she said, "Oh, but your sister gave you that for your birthday. I'm sure she wants to buy something nice for you." And he said, "Look, and he opened his closet, and said, look at all my clothes." And he had one t-shirt and one cotton shirt, a pair of jeans, a couple of pairs of socks. And he popped open his cupboard, and said, "Look at all the food I have." And he had three cans of soup. "I have so much," he said. All of them want to give back. When you start to rise you really realize what's important —

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## Fallen Off the Edge

A new book by Art Garcia

"Fallen Off the Edge" is a chronicle of one man's experiences after returning from the Vietnam War. Told through the eyes of Street Roots columnist Art Garcia, this book celebrates the major victories born from a series of questionable choices. Art's jocular storytelling takes the reader along with him in and out of the California prison system over the course of 10 years until he found the strength and courage to pull himself up from the fall.

The book is available online at [www.blurb.com](http://www.blurb.com) under searchword Art Garcia.

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