

Plaintiff in camping lawsuit puts award toward homeless campers

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

Leo Rhodes, one of nine plaintiffs in a lawsuit against the city over homeless camping, says he will take his small payment from the settlement and give it to, well, other controversial homeless campers.

Rhodes was unhappy with the recent settlement, which presents new guidelines for police but falls short of reversing the city's anti-camping ordinances, because, he says, it doesn't address the larger problem of people who are homeless having no place to go.

"All my money is going toward Right 2 Dream Too," Rhodes says, referring to the rest site for people experiencing homelessness at the corner of Northwest Fourth Avenue and Burnside. "Because this is giving them a place to go — some stability and some sanity. Where they can have a safety zone."

It's not a lot of money, a few hundred dollars each under the terms of the settlement finalized earlier this month.

The plaintiffs — all homeless men and women at the time — sued the city for property damage and civil rights violations by the Portland Police Bureau. They were represented by the Oregon Law Center. The monetary terms are inconsequential: The city has agreed to pay \$3,200 in damages among the nine plaintiffs. In lieu of attorney fees, the city will pay \$37,000 to the Portland Housing Bureau to fund rental assistance programs.

The significant impact of the settlement comes in the non-monetary terms, which expands the definition of an established

camp, extending certain protections to the property and people in sleeping bags or sleeping outdoors. That includes longer advanced warnings to vacate an area and documentation of personal belongings by the police.

Monica Goracke, the attorney with the center who worked on the case, says that while there is some progress made with the settlement, the changes in police behavior and interaction with people actually have been occurring over the life of the lawsuit.

"As we worked on the case over the past four years, the city realized it needed to change some aspects of how they were enforcing this ordinance. The change happened, I think in part, because of the lawsuit. Instead of enforcing without warning, they could maintain better relationship with people on the streets in ways that didn't lead to people getting citations and fines that they could never pay that keep them in homelessness longer."

Mayor Sam Adams said in a prepared statement that the city's work to prevent and end homelessness is ongoing.

"This agreement is a step forward to improve relations between individuals experiencing homelessness and officers enforcing the law," he said.

Goracke said that when the case was filed, she heard many more complaints from people saying police had taken their property without warning and given them citations for erecting a structure on the sidewalk. "I haven't heard complaints like that in a while."

Rhodes, who was homeless for many years before getting housing this year, said

the biggest issue for him is that the settlement still leaves no place for people to go if they're sleeping outdoors.

"They're finding places to go out of people's comfort zones, and yet they're still being pushed out and still not given a place to go," he said. "That's why it was so hard for me to go with this."

Right 2 Dream Too, however, has existed as a peaceful overnight site for the homeless for nearly a year. The city has been fining the owners of the property, which have a one-year lease with Right 2 Dream Too, for months over code violations. Rhodes was involved in the creation of Right 2 Dream Too, and is also a board member and vendor with Street Roots.

"There are people who are surviving living in a tent, and yet this (the anti-camping ordinance) is stopping them. It's really, really hard," Rhodes said.

"There's a long way to go," Goracke conceded. "This settlement marks an improvement in the city's treatment of homeless people, but the reality is that there are still a lot of people out there, and the fact that they are cited for sleeping outside is still a reality. The city needs to keep improving its policies. Hopefully, one day, there won't be criminal penalties for behavior that is life-sustaining."

More than 2,700 people were sleeping in shelters or on the street in the city/county one-night count in 2011. The city and Multnomah County estimate that the true number of homeless people, including those sleeping outside, in shelters or doubled up in someone else's home, is about 15,000 people.

Settlement terms

The definition of "established campsite" will be revised to include "a camp structure such as a hut, lean-to, tent or other temporary structure such as carts and/or personal property".

Unless an exception applies, officers will provide advance notice before citation and property removal to all campers. If a citation without property removal is to occur, the minimum notice will be a verbal warning with reasonable time to relocate, which is usually one hour but may be shorter.

Police will be required to post a seven-day notice of a camp cleanup. Cleanup may take place at any time within that seven-day period.

Officers must keep for storage any item that is reasonably recognizable as belonging to a person and that has apparent use.

Officers must photograph and document all confiscated property. Containers, including bags and backpacks, will be photographed, but their contents will not be inventoried or photographed.

Police are required to videotape the campsite after all items are collected, to show what is being disposed of instead of confiscated and maintained.

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"It's fun to let steam off in the evenings here. A lot of these guys have stressful days, this helps us relax — just talk and play," says Ramos, waving to a teammate as he tightens his cleats. "We would do this all day if we could."

For other teams, focusing immigrant efforts toward the PWC is a replacement for other options. Pupsa Sharma, the coach of the local Bhutanese team, says he works hard to keep his players away from drugs and gang violence. "I let my team play soccer and organize some cultural program (for the PWC event) yearly," says Sharma. "This makes them a dynamic, friendly and well-rounded group in the community. Soccer helps them focus."

Even the final PWC tournament is not solely soccer-centric. As with the practices, VOZ uses the September event as an organizing tool as well as a cultural festival. Families and friends of players cook traditional food and entertain the crowd with cultural performances between matches. Unlike most traditional soccer events in the States, this tournament is a blend of both competition and community festivities.

But the event is not entirely trouble-free to everyone involved. Althea Mickiewicz, 24, found herself behind the wheel of this year's PWC event and the coach of the Mexico's Jornoleros after applying for an internship at VOZ. Interested in social justice work, Mickiewicz took her background in soccer and rusty knowledge of Spanish to the field for the first time this past September. Within weeks, she was the head of the event.

"It takes a source of undying commitment," Mickiewicz says with a large grin. "But it's so worth it."

With little information about the past years' structure, and with the previous event staff lost to funding cuts, Mickiewicz as thrown together her own guidebook.

"I had to rethink how we did everything: finding sponsors, finding teams, finding a spot to play. Thankfully this community is receptive," she says. Mickiewicz found financial sponsors in a range of local non-profits, including Causa Oregon and the Cascade Aids Project, and even worked with Concordia University to use their brand-new athletic center to hold the tournament's final games.

As for the structure of the event, Mickiewicz has added a few new components. This year, the PWC will welcome its first female league along with opening the door for co-ed groups. And, in the

future, Mickiewicz says, she hopes to start a youth league.

Despite the hectic nature of planning the event, Mickiewicz says she's involved for the long run. She says she wants to see the PWC round the corner into becoming a key part of the region's culture.

"In 10 years, I see the Portland World Cup standing on its own as an independent organization," she says.

But how can it reach that stage?

In a city recently swept off its feet by the Timbers' jump to major league status, it's hard to see why the PWC can't draw an equally passionate crowd. According to Timbers Army co-founder and PWC "uber" volunteer Eric Berg, this kind of following takes more than just a T-shirt gun.

"Trying to link soccer supporters to the cup is what really attracted me to the event," says Berg. "If we can bridge this traditional Anglo-Saxon, hipster culture with the immigrant community, then wow. We've done it. It's so much more than a game."

Berg has been vital in connecting immigrant players to the event, simply through soccer-centric word-of-mouth. From chatting at a sports bar while watching the Olympic soccer matches to stumbling upon a scrimmage in a nearby park, Berg has recruited a wide variety of teams. While he hopes to see the PWC someday as successful as Seattle's equivalent, the All Nation's Cup, Berg says he's unsure what popularity could do to the event.

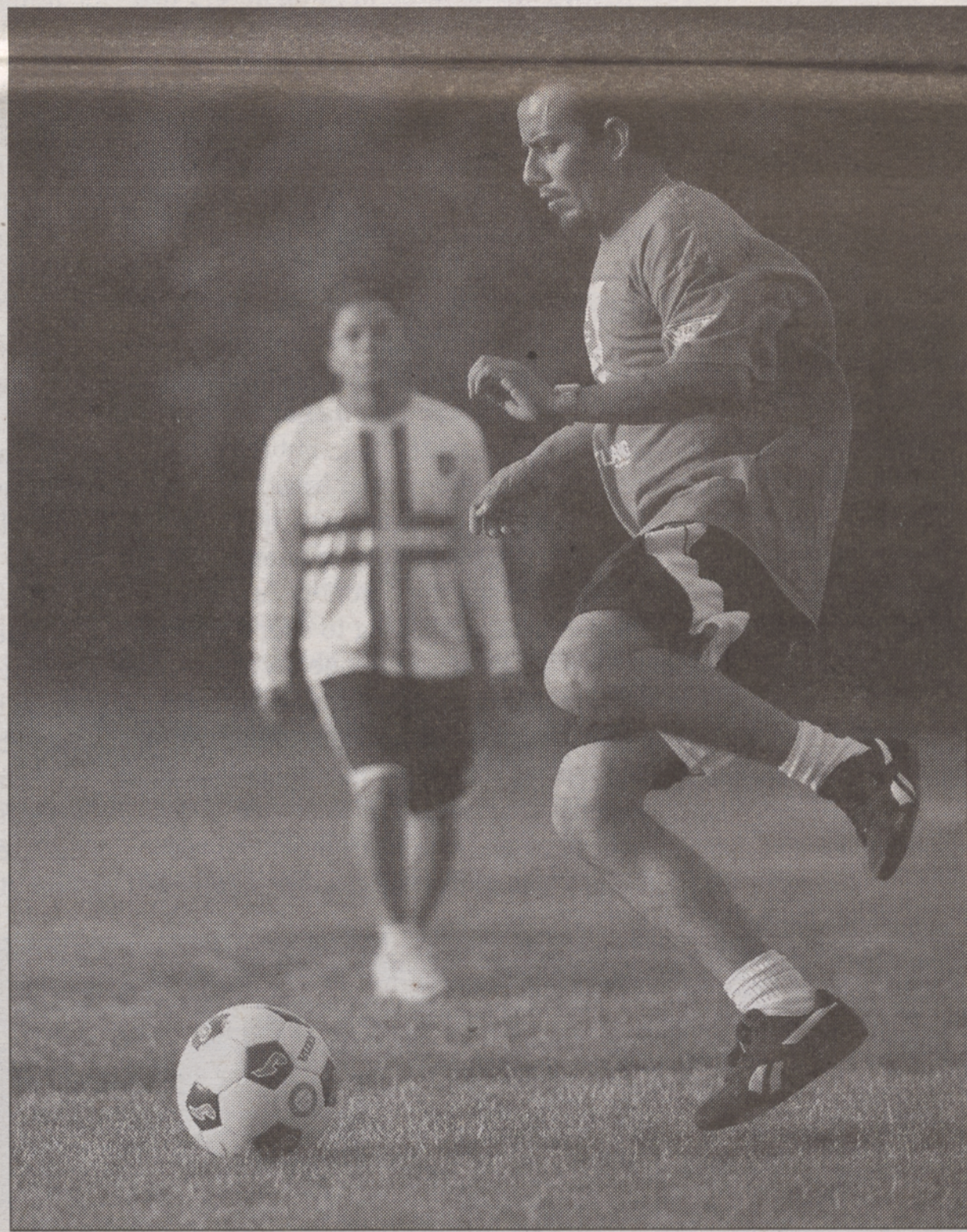
"Once you jump into a bigger role, it could take on an entirely different feel," says Berg. "I mean, we need funding and sponsorships, but big sponsors could change the way it runs. A victim of success. It may not be the cultural community organization it currently is."

But, he adds, there's something irreplaceable in bringing a city together through the sport.

"There's something about soccer that brings people together, making it a great organizing tool for any group," says Berg. "And in Portland, it's hard to say if we have a culture supporting soccer or if soccer supports our culture. It's a blurred line."

At Fernhill Park, Mickiewicz struggles to attach a ripped soccer net to the field's goal posts in preparation for a scrimmage. "Here, wait!" shouts a neighborhood man, emerging from his car with his young daughter and a stuffed bag. "I've got a better one."

He helps Mickiewicz attach the new net and kicks a soccer ball around with his young daughter on the sidelines, only stopping to watch Mickiewicz's team



Participants in the Portland World Cup practice Tuesday evening, Aug. 28th.

PHOTO BY KEN HAWKINS

play. From surrounding fields, the other young players stop mid-field to watch the team's tricky maneuvers and boisterous scuffles, awed.

But not all observers are taken by the lighthearted team. An older white coach, sunglasses and stern, walks by the group as they share jokes and stretch before practice. "Buenos dias, Hello!" one player says cheerfully to the man. Despite his obvious recognition, the coach stoically passes without a mere nod.

The player shrugs, but returns to his teammates' lively conversation with a smile. "I'm not sure why people do that. Ignore us," he says, furrowing his sweaty brow. "We're both enjoying the same game. If people here are going to support our league, they've got to see that. It's what counts."