

A room with a view: One year on in housing

BY LEO RHODES
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

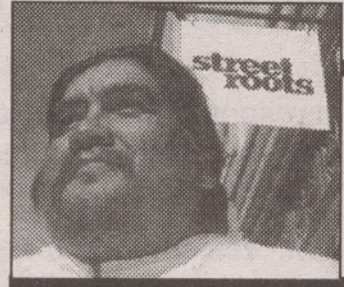
Dec. 7, 1941, is a day that will live in infamy, as President Roosevelt put it. Coming from Arizona, this day was and still is a big date as the USS Arizona became the first ship to sink into Pearl Harbor that December morning. In the Northeast corner of Arizona is the Navajo reservation where most of the Navajo code talkers came from. My hero, Ira Hayes — one of the men who raised the flag at Iwo Jima — came from my reservation. Also on my reservation were two internment camps. Years later, I was asked to write poems for the 20th anniversary of the memorial for the camps. What I was going to write was a comparison of how they treated the Japanese-Americans to how they treat the homeless today.

Change of plans.

My first day in my new place was Dec. 7, 2011, and since I've been inside, people have been asking where I've been and what I've been doing. So instead, I thought I'd write this column about my first year in my own place and the time leading up to that day.

When I first was on the streets my Native brothers and sisters would always say to me, "Why are you on the streets? You're too smart for the streets." They would take me to fill out job applications. I usually got the job. Sometimes I lost it because of drugs or alcohol. Then there were the times I lost my sleeping spot, my blankets or a backpack full of clothes and other important stuff to sweeps. A couple of times I had mini breakdowns. With the pressures of street life, the obstacles of trying to get out of the streets all seem to cave in at once. My friends helped me and I helped them.

In 1999 I started having a nightmare. I couldn't sleep more than 10 minutes. My good friend Joann Martinez told me I needed to go home and find closure with my family. So I went home. First thing I found out was that my biological mother had died. For eight years, my reservation was trying to contact me to tell me. A few weeks later, my biological father ended up in intensive care. I told the family he wanted us to pull the plug, that we had made a pact that if we were to ever end up on life support, we wouldn't want to live like that. My nephew kept asking me to help him get out of gangs and alcohol. I didn't believe him at first but he convinced me and I told him I'd help.



Leo Rhodes is a street activist and homeless advocate. He is also a vendor with Street Roots and a regular contributor to the newspaper.

THE
WANDERER
Leo Rhodes

Hours later, he got shot. I patch him up. Then he dies, I give him CPR and he came back to life. He dies again with the paramedics no more than 50 feet away from us. A few months later, my favorite aunt dies. I decided to go to Alaska and catch a fishing boat to clear my mind. In Seattle, I found out all the ships were full, so I ended up homeless in Seattle.

In December 2001, when I first arrived in Seattle, I filled out applications for housing. The first one I went to the lady behind the desk was excited to tell me that they had an opening. All I had to do was fill out an application and I should have a place that night. I didn't believe her, but she assured me I would have a place that night. It didn't happen. Another lady came into the office and both of them went to another room. When they came back the lady behind the desk said I wouldn't get the place. I asked why but she wouldn't tell me. So I asked when I would get a place. She said they would put me on their waiting list, so in about five years I should get a place. Shocked, I asked why she told me I was going to have a place that night. She never did give me an answer.

Homeless providers and homeless supporters would often try to get me into housing. Most of them were shocked to learn that a guy like me — clean and sober — didn't fit the criteria of people they were looking for. They were looking for drunks, druggies, the mentally ill and criminals. I didn't fit any of those categories. It became so crazy that whenever someone told me they could get me a place, I refused. A lot of homeless people told me that if you want a place you have to play the game and just say you're a drunk, druggie, mentally ill or a criminal. It's rough being clean and sober.

I found a shelter under I-5 and Jackson in Seattle's Chinatown district. It was in a parking lot. It was run by SHARE (Seattle Housing and Resource Effort), an organization of homeless and formally homeless that has 15 indoor shelters, two tent cities (one that I helped start) a

housing-for-work program storage lockers, and is self-managed with very little staff their my mentors. Its sister organization WHEEL (Women's Housing Equality Enhancement League) deals strictly on women's issues.

After working on about 15 projects in Seattle I got burned out and came to Portland to rest. Then I started to advocate for shelters and tent cities. Everybody told me they were going to put the homeless in housing. Housing is good, but you can't keep up with all the homeless. Criminalizing the homeless shouldn't be an option either. We need shelters and tent cities until there's enough affordable housing for all.

I was on a committee to figure out what we could do for the homeless to keep them safe and secure. I write a column for Street Roots, and a member of the organizations board of directors. I'm also involved with the Empowered Voices Media Project to make documentaries about homelessness through Sisters of the Road, and I also worked with Right to Survive on the Pitch-a-Tent campaign and Right to Dream too (R2D2).

I sell Street Roots at 39th Avenue and Sandy Boulevard in front of Whole Foods. I try to dispel the myth of homelessness by my presence and talk to anyone that listens.

In my poem "Excuse Me If I Don't Cry I'm Putting on My Game Face RIP" I stated that I will fight the fight until everybody gets in or my health gets bad. Well, I'm inside now. And it was one of the hardest decisions I ever made.

I went through the VETS program. When I signed the papers to get my housing I became ill. I ended up in the hospital with a temperature of 104. I had pneumonia. I barely get my papers to get a place and I got sick.

When I got the message that I was accepted in the Morrison I was really excited. I imagined getting the message during a meeting and shouting out, "I got housing." It was actually during the mayoral candidates' forum on housing. I didn't yell but started to text everybody. Signing the paperwork felt weird. For years I'd been signing on behalf of the homeless and now I was signing for just me.

People were happy and excited for me. I wasn't happy.

Even though I did a lot, it's not enough. I go outside and through my window I see the homeless. In my place I still hear their cries

for someplace safe, secure or understanding. Then I hear the decision-maker's side of why they can't or how they're limited in what they can do.

I used to tell people that when I got my own place I would lock my doors and grieve for all my friends who died on the streets. That took four days.

I also had to get to know my body again. One thing I knew was my body needed rest and lots of it. I put my body through a lot. I had to get the survival mode out of my head.

When I first started my advocacy I put my personal life on hold. It got filled up with mental and physical abuse. Going inside, all these pains and ailments — both mental and physical — came crashing down on me.

I have a case manager, Emily with the veterans housing program, who I meet every month. I always ask her if the place is still mine and her answer is always yes. Once she asked why I always ask her that question and at the time I didn't know why. But I think it's because, on the streets I was told I could sleep in certain places, and then I was told I couldn't. Sometimes when I was inside they would tell me the same thing.

I have friends like Wilbur and Joann that I turn to for help. Wilbur and I used to drink together on the streets, Joann and I did some serious talking. Wilbur is clean and sober like me. He also helps the homeless any way he can.

One of the biggest adjustments is having everything in one area. On the streets you're on a time schedule. You eat here, you sleep there; you get out of the rain for a few hours here and there. From the time you wake up to the time you go to sleep, my friend says, "It's like a freight train hitting a brick wall."

I'm writing more. I'm writing a book on Tent City 4, a play, and outlines for different projects, future columns and poetry. I also want to make a PowerPoint on homelessness. Soon I'll work on my documentaries.

I am glad I have this place. I'm still trying to get used to it.

Next year I'll be out more. This first year I was just trying to adjust and get my bearings. It is a lot bigger than a tent. I can also do a lot more stuff.

I want to thank everyone who helped get me into my place and the people who supported me through everything.

KEEP PORTLAND WARM!



JOIN OUR
2012
COAT
DRIVE!

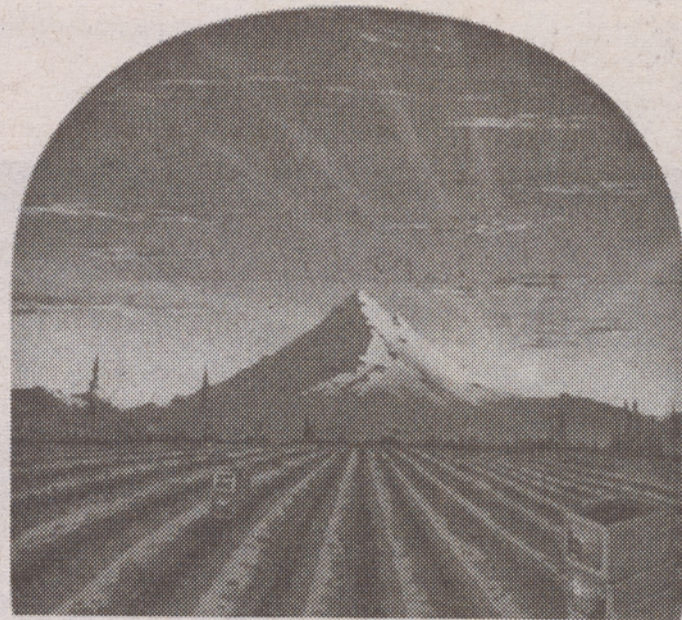
Transition Projects needs
warm coats for winter.

You can help by hosting
a donation barrel.

Call or email for information
volunteer@tprojects.org 503.280.4741



Family fare from Oregon fields and farms since 1980



OLD WIVES' TALES

1300 East Burnside · Portland
503-238-0470

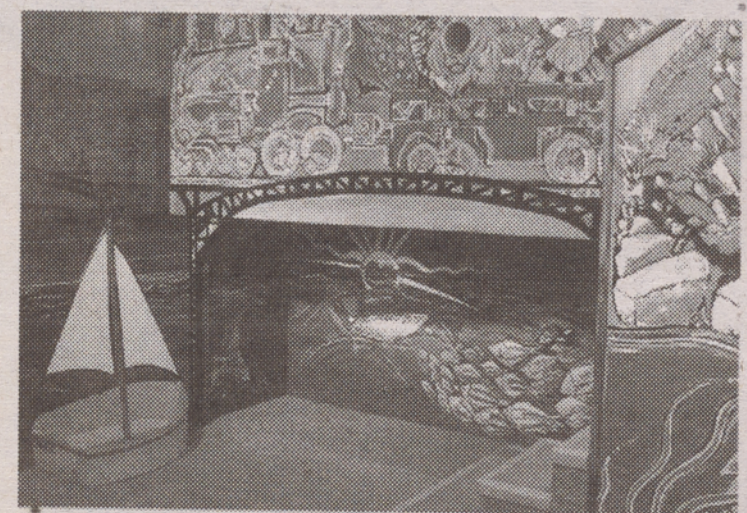
www.oldwivestalesrestaurant.com

Breakfast Anytime · Lunch · Dinner
Beer & Wine · Salad Bar · Soups

Multi-ethnic vegetarian,
chicken & seafood dishes

Largest, healthiest
children's menu in Portland

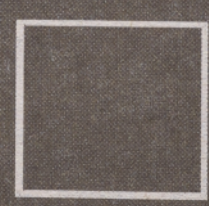
Many choices for all special dietary needs
Gluten-free · Lactose-free · Soy-free



Children's playroom



Dignity



Poverty