

24 hours on the streets of Portland

Street Roots conducted a 24-hour Twitter project reporting around the clock on homelessness in our town. Here are the stories we heard.

This report is drawn from the Twitter feeds of Alex Zielinski, Jake Thomas, Joanne Zuhl, Robert Britt, Erin Fenner, Sue Zalokar, Sarah Beecroft, Cole Merkel and Israel Bayer.

STAFF REPORTS

If you traded one day of your life for homelessness, what would it look like? That's what Street Roots did on Dec. 13. For all of the 14 years we've been covering the streets, we've never broadcast for a solid 24 hours.

But through Twitter, over the course of more than 1,700 tweets, we gave a panoramic view of Portland's streets, from the shelter exodus, throughout a dark wet night, and into the dawning hours when the cycle started all over again, as it does 365 days a year, here, and across the country.

We talked with people from all walks of life, sharing the tragic circumstances that

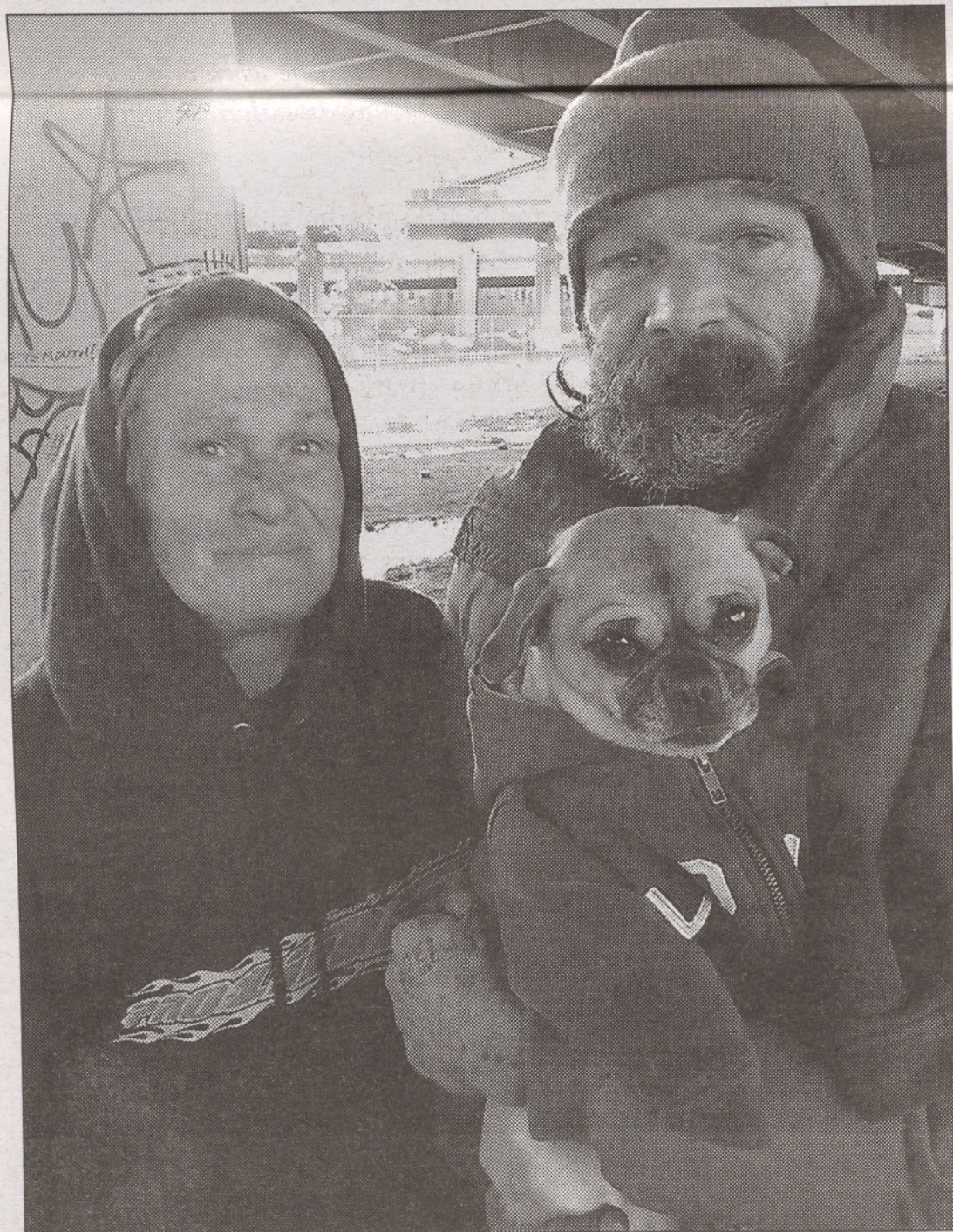


PHOTO BY JAKE THOMAS

Lisa, Bill and Little MN under I-5. They've been surviving under the bridge for a week.

placed them under a bridge at 2 a.m., or in line for a meal with 200 others, or simply trying to find boots to fit a broken foot. We visited with many agencies and organizations working with people experiencing homelessness, including shelter providers and housing assistance workers who have seen the cycle for years, and know just what it takes to break it.

What follows are some of the streams from the 24-hour project, beginning at 6 a.m. in Old Town, as the shelters prepared to close up for the day, sending their occupants out into the predawn hours.

The warming shelters for men and women are emptying out to the streets, still more than an hour before the sun comes up.

Only people on streets are asleep, only bicyclists are bike cops.

Vendors are rolling into the StreetRoots

office early - wide awake at 7 a.m.: "It's cold as #\$@% out there."

At 7 a.m. it was only 39 degrees in Old Town/Chinatown, and the streets were waking up. The early vendors at Street Roots are making coffee, arranging their packs, buying papers for the day.

7:30 a.m. The Street Roots office begins to come to life.

"Someone stole my bike seat off my bike last night ... One of the worst things is that you can't hold on to anything out there."

"A bike trailer the BTA gave me was stolen last week. It was really nice - I used it to store my sleeping pack."

"If you have to hold onto your sleeping pack when you walk into a store, the first they say to you is, 'There's no public restrooms.'"

"In the last week, I've lost three sleeping bags," SR vendor. "They get stolen. It's ridiculous. Would you climb into someone's sleeping bag if you didn't know who slept in it?"

Another reporter went out early with Liz Weber, an outreach worker with the homeless housing organization JOIN. She has been doing outreach for seven years and has stayed in contact with many of her clients the entire time.

"Sometimes bad things happen to them," she says. One couple lost a baby to SIDS.

"There's no way to not take that home with you," she says.

Under the cacophony of the Interstate 5 overpass on the east side of the river they encountered numerous camps, "I had no idea they were here," the reporter notes.

"We definitely find people who are working" says Weber.

People are sometimes recently evicted or can't afford move-in fees she says.

I met Lisa, 54, and Bill, 52, and their dog "Little MN." They were camped out underneath I-5 near the Rose Quarter.

Bill gets SSI. Lisa says they want to get off the streets, but are having a hard time.

They are burning a couple old pallets for a fire. They are making coffee.

"It's cold out here," says Lisa. "Real cold." They've been here under the bridge for about a week.

Jacob came to Portland looking for work, after losing his job in Florida. But it didn't work out as planned. He now sleeps in a doorway with an agreement from the business owners. "I keep it clean, quiet." Been here for "about a month."

"It's hard out here. Feel like I gotta watch my back, not without reason. I've been jumped, mugged several times."

Do you feel safe here sleeping in this doorway? Jacob: "From the street people, yes. But not from the drunks. It can get scary."

What happens w/drunks? Jacob: they kick my tarp, jump on top of me. One guy kicked a book out of my hands because I read. One threatened to kill me."

We meet Steve, 33, a husband looking for cook work. Like most people, he never thought this would happen, that he and his family would become homeless. But, he says, he "lost focus." The most difficult thing, he says, is "not stressing out."

"That's our plan. Find a place and get stability."

For them, stability is not having to move 10 times a year.

Kids keep saying, "When are we going to go home?"

Steve is a trained chef. Posts three resumes a day either in person or online. "I'll get a job that way."

The Clackamas Service Center just off 82nd Avenue reveals another aspect to the streets, the families and the immigrants who are struggling with each meal and the most basic of services. Like Ed, 55, who has been homeless off and on. Most recently he ran out of unemployment, was evicted, and is now homeless. Surveys by Portland and Multnomah County show that the unsheltered population is no longer concentrated downtown, but distributed throughout the county.

Was camping out off of 92nd and police kicked him out. Police were real cordial, he says.

Every morning he tells himself sun is shining, birds singing, but he doesn't see them.

Julius Brown is formerly homeless and now a long-time volunteer with Potluck in the Park, which serves meals to the 500 or so community members every Sunday. And he's an occasional guide through the McLoughlin Caves, the camps under the Ross Island Bridge east bank, where he used to live. It's a dangerous area, he says, but it was dry and it stayed warm there in winter.

"I used to judge people who were homeless. I used to look down on them," Brown says. "And then I became homeless."

"Working with Potluck in the Park was my way of giving back. They treated me like I was human, like I was normal."

As the day went on, it soon became dark again. The sun sets around 4:30 in December. For youths on the streets, it's a vulnerable time, and in winter that vulnerability grows even stronger with the threat of sickness always in the air.

Janus Youth is part of a local youth continuum that serves homeless youths across the region. Janus Youth runs the Street Light/Porch Light shelter, that has capacity of 60 youth for shelter. The shelter is full on this night.

Watching so many young teens pour out of youth shelter who have no home.

Is it choosing to be homeless if you are choosing to leave an abusive home? Misconception on the streets.

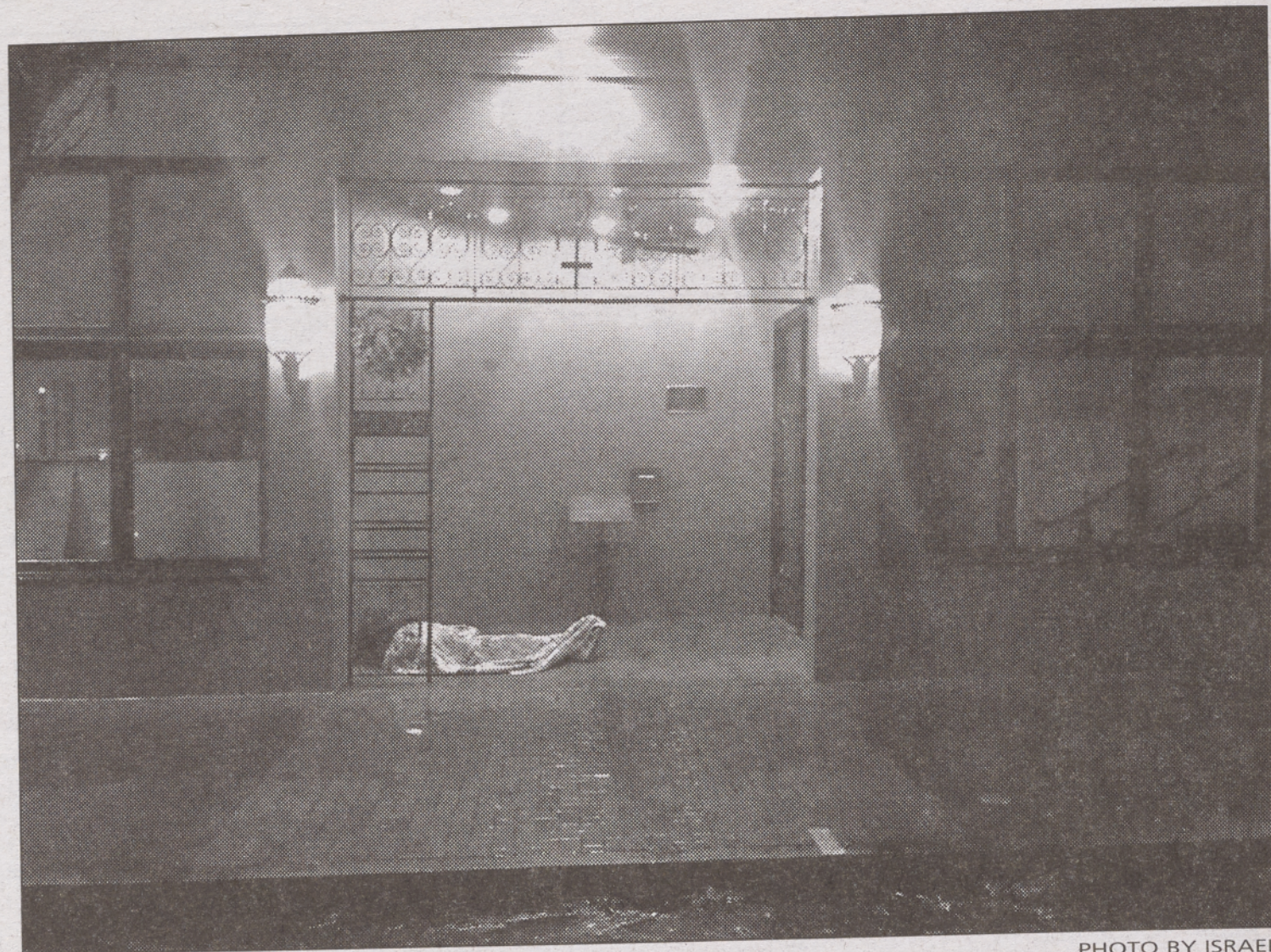


PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER

A lone camper sleeps in a well-lit area beneath a Christmas wreath.

Every two years, Portland and Multnomah County compile a point in time count of people experiencing homelessness. The 2011 report counted nearly 4,700 people either, on the streets, in a shelter or in transitional housing.

The number of unsheltered homeless families with children has increased by 35% since 2009.

48 people died on the streets of Multnomah County in 2011