

# A haven in the storm

*Rose Haven expands with the growing needs and numbers of women on the streets*

BY ERIN FENNER  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Black and blue, on a holiday no less, Jo knew of one place she could turn in a crisis.

Rose Haven.

She arrived at the hospitality center on Thanksgiving with dark bruises on her face. She was scared. On the streets she had faced odd looks and felt unsafe.

"I had never been suicidal but that point I really doubted my wanting to live," Jo said.

Jo came to Rose Haven because it had been a resource to her for years and she knew she could feel safe there.

"They were just real loving and directed me to a shelter I could stay at and be safe," Jo said. "Their kindness and love; and directing me the right way so I could sleep at night and be safe. It was amazing."

As one of the few programs directed solely toward supporting homeless women and children with hospitality, resources and community, Rose Haven has witnessed from the front lines the rising number of women needing help. Multnomah County's 2011 homeless count figures suggest that 37 percent of the people experiencing homelessness are women. And the numbers are up — from 662 to 787 — since 2009, although the increase could be due to more thorough counting procedures.

In the past year, Rose Haven has seen a 23 percent increase in the number of women and children coming through their doors, on top of a similar increase the year before. To meet the demand, the organization has gradually added hours, going from three to four days a week last year. In February it added one more day and is now open Monday through Friday. Last year, Rose Haven served 2,000 women and children.

Long-time volunteer Amy Kelly describes the center as a family living room.

"It's just a place to put the feet up (and) have a little while to be normal," said Kelly who has been a regular volunteer at Rose Haven for four years.

Jane, a regular guest who preferred we didn't use her real name, said Rose Haven is an environment where it can feel like her birthday every day.

"You're always greeted with a smile, warmth. You just feel very comfortable," Jane said. "They take care of basic necessities, but they also do pampering. Which is perfect. It makes you feel really special."

The center has been around in some form since 1998 after Sister Cathie Boerboom conducted a survey with the women who lived on the streets in Old Town/Chinatown. Boerboom asked women what they needed most, and the answers all pointed to the same thing: a day shelter for women with access to social services.

Rose Haven started out as a program with Catholic Charities, but in 2007 the

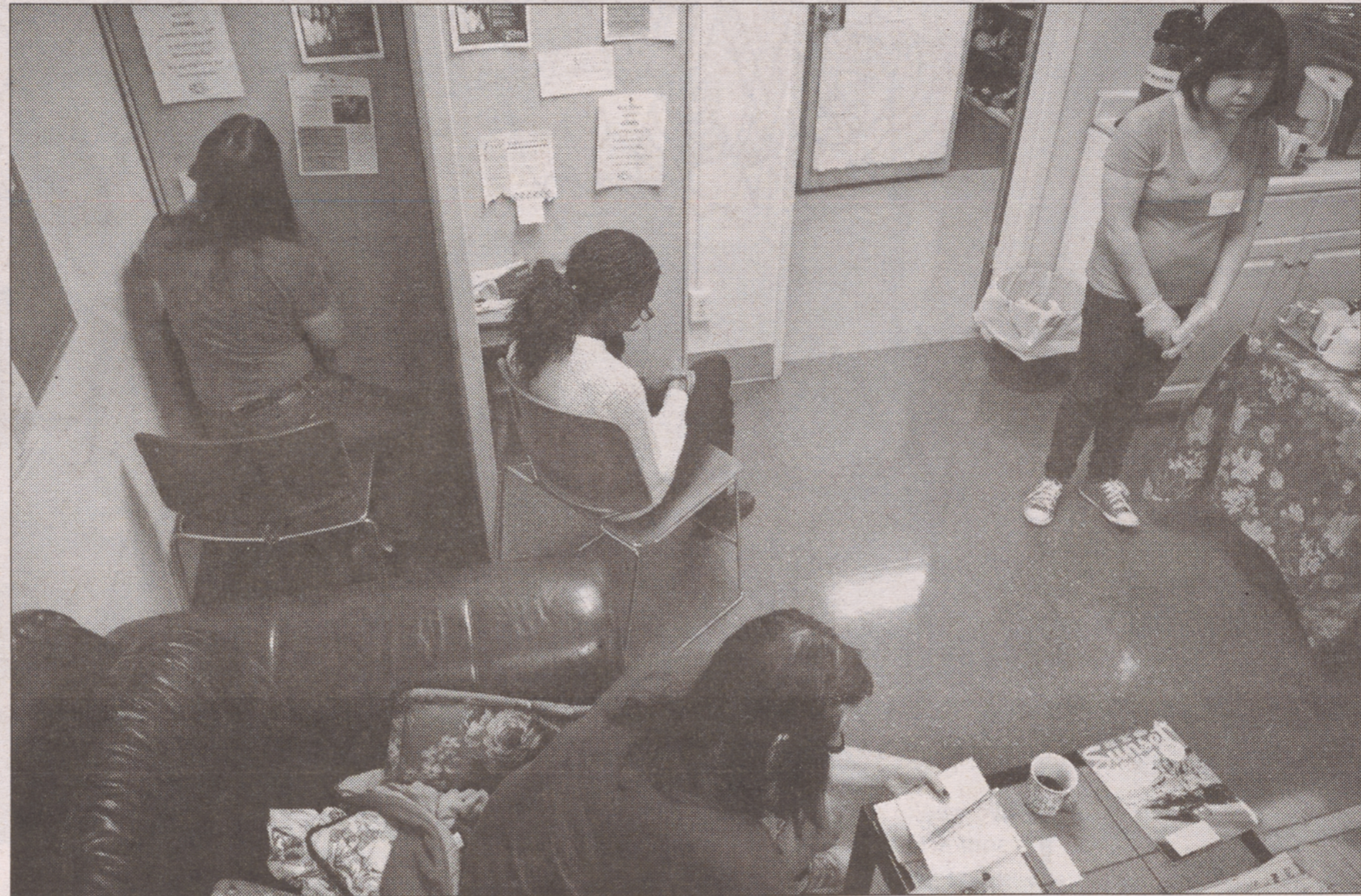


PHOTO BY KRISTINA M. WRIGHT

organization moved to a new location in the Northwest and began operating independently. Its services range from providing free clothing, food, medical information, advocacy support, career and housing advice.

Rose Haven is the place where a woman can go to address immediate needs as well as longer-term solutions with staff and volunteer support. The organization and its network can also be some women's avenue to transitioning into permanent housing, getting a job and going back to school to seek out a degree. For others, it's a place to take a nap after a sleepless night, and to get a warm meal.

"When women come in, everyone is asked what they would like to do today. It's a choice. For some people the choice might simply be to come in and eat something and sleep and that's a good choice for a lot of people," said Rebekah Albert, executive director of Rose Haven. "Only when they can have some rest and some food can they look to address anything else."

The staff at Rose Haven want it to be an all-purpose center, where women can pursue what they want, whether it's going after long-held dreams or just getting through a day.

Some of Rose Haven's resources are obvious; they serve two meals a day with food donations brought in by Urban Gleaners. They have a shop, where women can get up to three free outfits a month with help from a volunteer who functions as a personal shopping assistant.

But some of their services focus on the day-to-day mental wellbeing of the women who come into the center.

Kelly volunteers with the knitting and crochet circle — which she said mostly involves chatting over various yarn projects.

"On Thursdays we have a group and we're able to provide — through donations — yarn (and) needles that people can keep and take with them," Kelly said.

Albert said they have workshops and groups on writing, knitting, bingo and manicures because it contributes to the

general well-being of each woman and the whole community.

"A lot happens when people are getting manicures or doing an art class or doing story-telling class," Albert said. "That would probably qualify as having therapeutic value along those lines, but it's a much more comfortable setting."

Primarily, Rose Haven is the spot where women can be comfortable and then find other resources from there.

"Most women who are in transitional or emergency housing have to leave during the day and they can't stay there," Albert said. "So, if they do have some kind of housing they still have to have some place to go where they can just be during the day and be safe."

Their approach is simple and straightforward but, it substantially helps guests by focusing on the basic day to day issues.

"Even the most motivated women who come in ... become discouraged and frustrated along the way. While we can't wave a magic wand and provide housing, we are here every day," Albert said. "Sometimes their path out of homelessness will take months. And we're that place where they can keep coming if they're sleeping in cars or under a bridge or in an emergency shelter."

Katie O'Brien, the development officer, said that Rose Haven grew carefully since it separated from Catholic Charities and became independent.

"We leverage so much community to make this happen. We have a really small staff and we get a ton of donated goods. And we partner with all the other agencies," O'Brien said.

About 300 active volunteers served 6,000 hours at Rose Haven last year. With its 85 partners and a vast volunteer network, the organization spends only \$189 per woman for the year.

"What we want to tell people is that we're so efficient," O'Brien said. "This is really because we have great community of people that give their time, money and donated

goods that allows this place to exist."

Much of center's work actually extend beyond its doors. Rose Haven has two on-site advocates that meet with the women on a daily basis. They held more than 1800 one-on-one appointments with guests last year, working to better understand their situation and help create a plan to improve their lives.

"It's a holistic approach to helping women and children improve their lives," O'Brien said. "This means practical and emotional support: helping women heal emotionally in tandem with helping them harness the community resources available to them. One without the other won't provide a long-term solution to their problems."

The volunteers range from people who help with hospitality, to people who teach classes to nursing students who can offer medical education and basic first aid assistance.

Volunteer Marge Hill hosts bingo every Wednesday. She said she started because she empathized with the struggle of women who were living on the streets.

"The ladies — it got to me. Seeing them like that. I thought, that could be someone in my family," Hill said. "I've gotten to know different guests and one lady told me, 'This is my therapy.' And I considered that a compliment."

Albert said that Rose Haven is a place for women to do normal things, which, while simple, is also very important. The facility is not just a center where people can seek resources but a place where people connect and stay connected; a place where a moment to relax can become a moment toward social recovery.

"Rose Haven only exists because everyone here, the staff, the volunteers, the guests, work together to keep this a safe environment for everybody," she said. "It is community that we create here every day together. And that's probably the most powerful thing."



PHOTO BY KRISTINA WRIGHT

Left, three guests and a volunteer gather in Rose Haven's main room. Rose Haven provides a place for women to seek counseling, make phone calls, check their voice mail, gather their thoughts, handle their calendars, read, eat, shop and more. Above, guest Soon Park (left) and Rose Haven Executive Director Rebekah Albert.