

Keeping watch over Vista Bridge

A group of volunteers patrol the scenic structure to prevent others from jumping to their deaths

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

The Vista Bridge, that beautiful, arching structure in Goose Hollow, is in the news today less for its beauty and historic status than the scores of people who have used the scenic perch to end their lives. In the past six months alone, four people jumped to their deaths from its heights.

This month, the City of Portland is hoping to end that streak with a temporary, 9-foot mesh barrier at a cost of \$236,000. (Because the bridge is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, no permanent change can be made to the bridge's appearance without formal approval.)

If you visit the Vista Bridge between now and then for one last unobstructed view, you will find inspirational chalk messages written along the concrete guardrail: "It always helps to hug a cat" and "Turn pain into beauty." There is a bucket of chalk there so you can add your own inspirations.

You will also find the Friends of the Vista Bridge.

The volunteer group, founded by Bonnie and Kenneth Kahn, are patrolling the bridge regularly – especially in the late night and early morning hours – in an attempt to intervene in any more potential suicides onto Southwest Jefferson Street below. The couple started the organization in March, with Oregon Partnership Lines for Life as their fiscal sponsor.

For the past eight years, the couple have operated a business out of the building on Jefferson Street, adjacent to the place where four deaths have happened this year. From that space, Bonnie's husband Kenneth has witnessed eight deaths. I met Bonnie Kahn at her office under the Vista Bridge to talk about the effects of suicide on the community.

S.Z.: Aside from the obvious, is there

something that prompted you and Ken to become proactive in your efforts to stop people from jumping off the Vista bridge?

B.K.: We started the group because people are jumping off the bridge and they have been since 1925. I was working with a man named Frank, in my work as a life skills coach. He was a Grand Ronde tribal elder who had lived under that bridge for many years. He said to me once, "You can't believe what I've seen." He was making reference, in part, to the deaths that he had witnessed from people jumping off the Vista Bridge.

One day, about two years ago, someone jumped off the bridge, and my husband said, "Don't look." I didn't want to see that. But the very fact that there was someone who had just jumped to his death in the street in front of our offices, I couldn't take that. I just felt that something had to be done.

I called a friend at the Examiner and he came over and did a story. That sort of opened the door. When the media started talking about it, then other people started talking about it.

It all came back to my friend Frank. I thought about how these deaths impacted everyone – including people who live under the bridge.

We started the Friends of the Vista Bridge because no one would talk about the impact of these deaths and we wanted to raise awareness.

S.Z.: There were 13 suicides from the Vista Bridge in the last decade, then this year there have been four suicides since January.

B.K.: There is a lot of debate on that point. The bridge has always had the name "Suicide Bridge."

Unfortunately, if you search for "places to commit suicide in the world," there is a



PHOTO BY SUE ZALOKAR

Bonnie Kahn, co-founder of Friends of the Vista Bridge, says she and her husband started the group to talk about the impact of the suicides there, and help prevent them.

Wikipedia page that ranks the Vista Bridge as the number twelve spot to commit suicide in North America.

S.Z.: There is some debate over the temporary barrier that is going up on the Vista Bridge in mid-August.

B.K.: When we formed friends of the Vista Bridge, our intent was to create a

barrier that would be architecturally appropriate to go up on the bridge. Then Steve Novick announced that we would get a barrier in August. Right now, it will be a temporary fix, which I'm thankful for.

S.Z.: The temporary barrier is being fabricated right now. How long do you

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