

## Emmons, from page 8

going to be putting chronically homeless people into The Morrison. There was going to be a shared garage underneath them and how would that work? We said we were going to carefully screen people and put good supportive services in place – the problem is not going to be with the chronically homeless people. And that turned out to be right.

You have a successful project like that, it might be nice to go back and say, “OK, we did this.” People said you can’t put chronically homeless people here. We did it and it was successful. Now let’s do another one.

You do hear people saying people are homeless because they have an alcohol problem; they’re mentally ill. When I was first doing this, we had people with alcohol problems and mental illness in the

community who were housed, because we had a lot of inexpensive housing. We had these SRO hotels and some of them were not very nice, but people could flop in and out of them without a lot of credit background. We’re probably not going to build those, but when we lost them we spilled people onto the streets. The question has to be asked, do you know people with alcohol problems that are middle and upper income people that are housed? Is it an economic issue more than a behavior issue? I would say it

is. Without being pejorative and blaming people, we need to really take a look at that.

I think that we do have to have a better community dialogue. There have been some very hurtful things that have been said recently in the community. Demonizing of people because they are poor or without housing, that needs to be combated. I think that’s something that Street Roots is doing very well and is prepared to really show leadership. That’s going to be very important as we move this conversation along. We need the business community to support our efforts and to be a part of this: get people inside.

**J.R.:** *What responsibility do you think the private sector has with homelessness? Are they living up to it?*

**S.E.:** Boy, that’s a big question. I think there’s a role for the business community. As government folks, there’s some very smart business people in our community who would like to be invited to the table and be part of the solution, who know how to do development, who have some great ideas that we haven’t involved. That’s been a shortcoming on our part and maybe on the part of government, not to bring these people in. We couldn’t operate our organization without the support of business and all the property management firms and the building owners that take our referrals and take our people. Beyond that, there is a role to play for the business community in terms of supporting the effort: finding out how they can be involved, thinking about some private philanthropy: If they’re concerned about panhandling and people being on the streets then saying, “OK how do we solve this? What are the solutions?” Being part of that, both in terms of their involvement and possibly donations and leadership.

**J.R.:** *What are some of the milestones, the things we’re doing right?*

**S.E.:** The urban renewal funds are lessening and sort of drying up, but we passed public policy that said 30 percent of urban renewal funds would be set aside to build housing for very poor people. That did create housing to be built and that was good public policy. We’ve done a good job between the city and the county in trying to protect the safety net for poor people and for agencies desperately trying to serve people and get them into housing. The short-term rent assistance program has been important. Home Forward operates it, but my understanding is the city and county and Home Forward all put money in collectively. And there’s quite a variety of community groups serving singles and families and the mentally ill that have access to short-term rent assistance. To help people with housing, hopefully there’s a long-term strategy with each person that’s housed, that it does lead to housing stability. Some of our community development groups have done a brilliant job of developing housing and making beautiful, quality housing for people to live in long term.

**J.R.:** *What in the work that you do gives you hope?*

**S.E.:** On a day-to-day basis, I see people who come in here look absolutely forlorn and without hope. Usually after they spend an hour or two with a worker in this agency, they go out looking more hopeful. That is our idea, that people who have been without housing or without resources for a long time, we want to make them feel hopeful about their future. I see people here getting people into housing, getting them into a shelter, moving them from the shelter to transitional housing, from that to permanent housing, seeing them the day they come in to get their keys for their apartment, their new bedding that the church groups provide – that’s a pretty astonishing transformation. I know it works and I know it can be done for a variety of people.

And then to see those same people who have been so desolate and without hope, coming back here wanting to contribute when finally they have income. It’s remarkable. Usually when we do a letter asking for contributions, the very first people to respond are the people who are the poorest. Almost without exception, the first donations in are from people we’ve placed in subsidized housing, who might be living on \$700 a month. Even if they are sending a \$25 or \$50 check, the percentage of their annual or monthly income is so much greater. It’s remarkable.

We have a man that I know lives on \$650 a month and every month he gives us \$100, because he was sleeping outside and he feels like we saved his life. He doesn’t have cable TV. He’s a bright man and he would probably love the History Channel. But when I say to him, “you don’t need to do this,” he says, “Yes, I do.” So, I do feel very hopeful.

There have been setbacks, but Portland is a progressive community. It’s just having the political will to do this. Getting ready for the talk that I gave, I went out and met with a lot of businesspeople. I shared with them the ideas that I was going to be sharing and said, “What do you think about a local trust fund? What do you think about \$1 billion over 20 years?” They said, almost universally, “the money is here Susan. The money is here in this community.” That surprised me, because I thought they would say, “oh, no way.” We’ve had people with deep pockets who have been generous towards the arts. We have to have a compelling leadership – people who step up and say, “I’m going to be the champion for this.” Give people something to donate to, to respond to. I think the community would, because I think people understand. Housing is so fundamental.

**J.R.:** *What breaks your heart?*

**S.E.:** My husband and I are lifelong renters, married for 45 years. I walk in from Northwest Portland on any given day to come to work and I see people sleeping in doorways, of churches, anywhere people can find an overhang. That to me is heartbreaking, to see the number of people who are outside and have no place to go – people around my neighborhood. I can complain about being cold when I’m inside, in a heated place with a warm bed. To imagine people sleeping out in this weather, it’s just unimaginable to me. I’ve never been, unless I was camping out in the woods voluntarily, but knowing I could leave at any time and come home to a warm place. That is heartbreaking to me, to see how as a community we’ve failed very vulnerable people.

**J.R.:** *How do you battle fatigue, when you’ve been an advocate on the frontlines for so long?*

**S.E.:** I’m very inspired by the people I work with. We have younger people on the staff and they are doing the hard work. I do public speaking and fundraising. I monitor contracts. For me it’s inspiring daily because I think they are the ones doing the tough work. When I overhear them say day after day to somebody who’s calling in, “No, we still don’t have a shelter bed for you.” – knowing that they are highly educated people, working at a lesser wage because they are passionate about this. It’s the hardest thing in the world to take on a job where you want to help people and then you don’t have the resources to do it. To see them come back day after day ready to do that is inspiring.

To talk to the people that we have housed, and to see them year after year. People who were pretty fragile when they came to us, and how they’ve gotten involved in the community and now what they’re doing to be active citizens and living a full life. That’s inspiring.

All of us have days where we feel down and feel discouraged. I’m not an angry person by nature, but sometimes I do feel angry that there isn’t more of a sense of urgency, when I go into some of these public meetings and I think people are concentrating on the wrong things. Collectively we should be talking about what we are going to do right now to solve this. But mostly I don’t feel discouraged because I see what works. I know that we have done it and I know we can do more of it. It’s just a matter of convincing others, of getting the broader community to understand.

**J.R.:** *What would you say to someone who has given up on the battle to end homelessness?*

**S.E.:** I have been in City Council meetings where I have heard public officials say we’re never going to end homelessness in this community. And I just totally disagree with that. It might be fair to say we’ll always have poor people among us. It’s the kind of system we have – inadequate minimum wage, we have companies that don’t give full hours. There probably always will be poor people. I don’t like to say that. But I don’t think that it’s true to say that we always have to have people without housing. That hasn’t always been true in Portland.

I was struck yesterday (after the speech) by the number of older people in the audience that came up to me afterwards and said, “I was here in the 1960s and I know exactly what you’re talking about. There weren’t visibly homeless people all over our streets. That’s right and I remember that.” That was validating.

For our workers that get burned out, I can understand that. In that case we have to give them more to work with. They need to have more funds and they need to have better tools. One of the tools and the most important tool we can give them is more housing.

You can read the full transcript of Susan Emmons’ Oliver Lecture Series presentation in which she outlines Portland’s homeless history and how we can end it, at news.streetroots.org.

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