

In September 2012 the snazzy new Blanchet House opened, leaving the original three-story brick building alongside looking forlorn. Over the 60 years that the Catholic Worker-inspired program operated there, at the corner of NW 4th and Glisan, nearly 16 million meals were served and countless men given shelter and hope when life looked most grim.

Although posted with a big red U, the Fire Marshall's signal that a structure is unsafe for firefighters, the old Blanchet's days may not be over: Portland Development Commission has an option to buy it. According to PDC Senior Project Coordinator Sarah Harpole, any development on that site would most likely be a remodel rather than new construction. "That parking lot," Harpole points out, "is tied up with a 99-year lease to provide 130 free parking spaces for Northwest Natural, so there's no room on the site to expand the footprint." PDC's option expires in June 2014, and Harpole, who oversees a five-year

action plan for Old Town Chinatown, expects a decision early this year.

Among the many people who hope to see the building saved is local author Martha Gies, who worked in Old Town back in the late '80s. "In order to certify tenants eligible for LIEAP money, we visited all the SRO rooms in Old Town, including Blanchet House," she recalls. "Later, when I ran that program I would take new staff to lunch there, by way of introducing them to the neighborhood."

Gies even wrote a short story set at Blanchet House. "O'Keefe Sober" won a prize from PEN, was syndicated nationally to newspapers, read on NPR, and was later collected in, "The World Begins Here: An Anthology of Oregon Fiction," (Oregon State University Press, 1993).

She had renamed the building "Bernadette House," not wanting anyone to worry about invasion of privacy. By way of sending the old building a little cheer, she's given its name back for this publication.

O'Keefe Sober

BY MARTHA GIES
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Three days out of Hooper Detox, O'Keefe woke up scared. He lay in his assigned room at Blanchet House tasting blood in the back of his throat and heard the day start up with water whining through the pipes and the food locker door creaking in the kitchen below. This time had been the time he was going to make it. But he was losing his nerve. With his eyes pressed closed, he patted the night table for an open pack of Parliaments. He figured it was the statuary in the dining room was doing it to him, that blue-robed madonna with her feet entwined in a plaster serpent, the black-robed friar toting a crucifix like a picket sign. This whole outfit reminded him of St. Vincent's Orphanage in North Platte, Nebraska, which he'd run away from at age 16. At least there were no nuns hanging around spying on him.

Thirty-four years old, with thinning hair, wiry in jeans and T-shirt, O'Keefe was a fighter. He was also a grinner, and people usually hit him first. These days his deep smile lines were the street map of a ghost town.

O'Keefe knew he'd have to fill every minute today. Blanchet House, which ran the 30-day program, required him to help serve breakfast and lunch to the homeless in exchange for his room and board. (This would eventually make him eligible for a job in the restaurant industry, he was told.) He worked the kitchen from 5 in the morning until 3 in the afternoon. At 3 he'd find the closest AA meeting, come directly back here for dinner with the other residents, and install himself safely in his room before 8:30 curfew.

The rhythm of the work pushed the day forward. The two meals were the strongest pushes, each bringing a surge of 200 people who lined up the length of the block. He patrolled the dining room, offering more scrambled eggs, more Cream of Wheat, more day-old pastry, more hot coffee. The room was painted green with a row of high windows from which streamed shafts of northern light, fixing faces like photographs. O'Keefe found himself watching a gaunt old man with high-voltage black eyes, who wore a grey blanket over his shoulders and spoke to no one. O'Keefe didn't know how long he'd been staring.

After breakfast, O'Keefe helped swab down the long tables and benches, scalded plates in the huge dishwasher, and began chopping lettuce, cabbage, turnips for lunch. Then the room quickened and filled again, humming with footsteps, curses, cutlery and laughter.

The hard part was evening. At 6 p.m., O'Keefe's fatigue suggested a drink, even though he'd just sat through the Marshall Street Community Center AA meeting. Something to pick him up, get him going

again, lift the deadweight of routine.

The worst was dinner, where he had nothing to say. A dozen guys sat around chattering. About what, for godssake? Just one drink, a quick jolt of whiskey eased down by a beer and O'Keefe was sure to utter something significant, maybe even shift the way everybody saw things. But he ate in mind-numb silence.

At the other end of the table, Tiny was waving a folded section of The Oregonian. "Here's just what I'm talking about: they got this kid born with a messed up heart. It's obvious he's never going to make it. But they spend thousands of dollars!" The bench creaked as Tiny shifted his massive weight to reach for the salt.

"They have hospital committees who decide that stuff," said Zack, who was sprinkling tobacco from a pouch onto a cigarette paper. He was considered a pretty bright kid because he'd worked on a salmon processor in Alaska and had learned to speak Tagalog. "That baby could have a life ahead of him." He lit one twisted end of the cigarette and inhaled.

"Could I see that over here?" O'Keefe asked with a grin.

"You're not getting the crossword puzzle," Tiny said, and he slipped off one page of news sheet and passed it down the table.

O'Keefe finished his chili and lemonade, and took the story upstairs to read slowly in his room.

The baby looked like a lively little tyke. He was photographed sitting up, wearing diapers, one hand buried in the fur of a sleeping cat. He had already had two open-heart surgeries. The young parents, who met in their freshman year of Bible College, had no other children.

O'Keefe knelt down stiffly in front of the window. He hadn't prayed since the old orphanage days. After a moment he shut his eyes. "Dear Lord, please help this baby named Shawn Samuels in Galesburg, Illinois."

Then his mind froze, and he opened his eyes. A dead fly lay, legs up, in the dust of the sill, which was painted sky blue. He'd heard this used to be a brothel - spacious dining hall, 24 tiny bedrooms, the river four blocks away. But wasn't the same thing said of every hotel, mission and boarding house O'Keefe had stayed in from Nebraska to Oregon? It must be one of those things people said.

He knelt until his knees ached bone-white under his jeans. The next part of the prayer appeared in his mind: "Give this baby a perfect heart. In Jesus' name, Amen."

That's about as basic as it gets, he thought. He stood and shook out his thin legs. Then he lay on the flowered bedspread and smoked Parliaments and waited for the evening to be over so he could go to bed.

The next morning he thought about that baby as he mopped floors and watched the

crowds shuffle through the dining room. He thought the part about the "perfect heart" was pretty well-stated. It might do some good.

After work, he cut across the railroad yard on his way to a 4 p.m. AA meeting. Bottles and old clothing collected near the siding where people were sleeping in boxcars. Out of habit, O'Keefe eyed each bottle for a little Tokay or Mad Dog that might be left. When he caught himself doing it, he jammed his hands in his jeans pockets and picked up the pace. He remembered how little it took last time to fall off the wagon. He reviewed his prayer for that baby.

At AA, the subject was blackouts. O'Keefe sipped a cup of instant coffee and listened to a man with his arm in a sling tell a story about coming downstairs in the morning after his first alcoholic blackout. "I wasn't no more than 16," the man said. "I went right to the front window and looked out." The man lifted the sling and rubbed the back of his neck. He said he was sure glad to see his car parked safely at the curb, no ripped metal and no blood. "Then I realized my old man had come downstairs and was standing right there beside me, staring out the window at his car," he said. "We was worried about the very same thing."

O'Keefe said, "I'm Daniel. I'm an alcoholic." Then he passed. He didn't have any stories about his dad because he never knew him. This last blackout, he shuddered to recall, he was crawling across the Coliseum parking lot in the dark on his hands and knees. There was broken glass. A big motorcycle chopper wailed past.

Back at Blanchet House O'Keefe ate one helping of spaghetti and coleslaw. Then he collected the leftover sections of *The Oregonian* and climbed the stairs to his room. He perused the paper, looking for someone who needed his prayers.

He studied the pictures of several brides, and one in particular, a pretty girl with seed pearls and a hyphenated name. But then he looked away. There were pictures of timber industry officials, a severe-looking black prime minister, a kidnapper in handcuffs, and the power forward for Benson High School. There was nothing he could add to their lives.

He found the obituaries and read an entry about a school-teacher named Alva Hauser who died of respiratory failure in a Portland nursing home. She had moved to



Oregon from South Dakota, and taught for 41 years at Good Shepherd Elementary School. One paragraph. Was that a life?

"Dear Lord," he prayed, "please give Miss Hauser an easy death." He stopped and thought about that for a minute. He shifted his knees on the orange shag carpet and saw where a cigarette burn had welded the shiny strands together.

Was it too late to pray for that? How long does death take? Could his prayer still assist her? Between buildings a slice of the river glistened bronze in the evening sun. He had a bold thought: "Dear Lord, hear a prayer from Daniel O'Keefe in behalf of Alva Hauser. Forgive her sins. Amen." He got up and stretched his legs. He felt connected with events.

After that, he found himself coming in early to locate the obituary section. During dinner, he kept track of it, as the newspaper made the rounds of the dining room.

The best were the dead. O'Keefe could not know what choices they had made, nor whether anyone was left behind to pray for them. Perhaps the dead needed him a little. He was impartial and maybe, because of that, his prayers just might carry some weight.

He began to think of his room upstairs as a factory of prayers for the dead, the place where his important work was done. He applied himself to it daily. And in this way, O'Keefe moved through his first 30 days without a drink.