

East of Eden

A former pastor, Mike Davis has extended his ministry to the trails and riverbanks of East Portland where hundreds of people live homeless

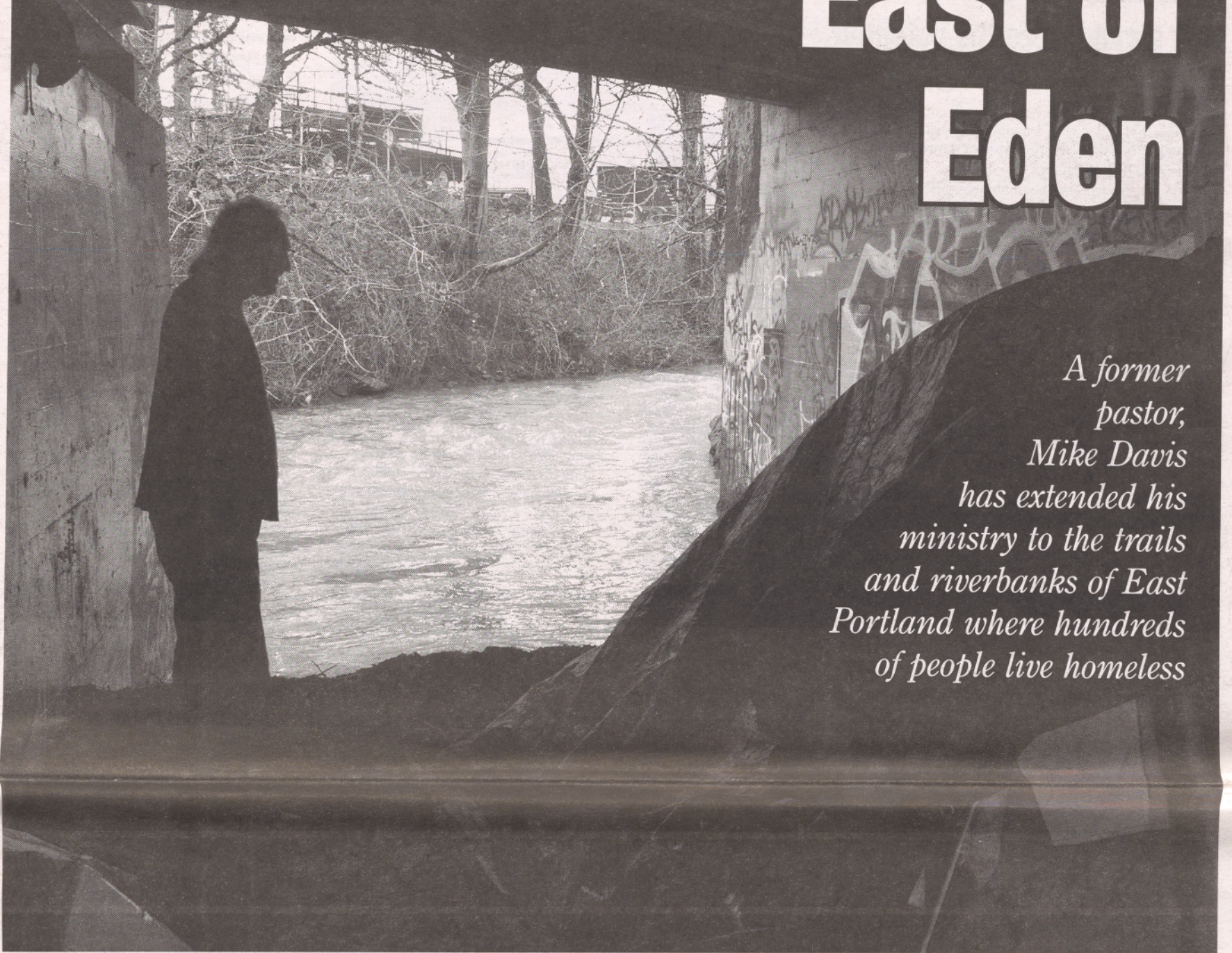


PHOTO BY ADRIENNE BARNETT

Above, former pastor Mike Davis stands under an overpass where people have stored their belongings. It's one of many places of refuge in East Portland Davis visits to check in on men and women experiencing homelessness.

BY ALEX ZIELINSKI
STAFF WRITER

Crouched in the trampled underbrush along the Springwater Corridor, Mike Davis pulls back a loose tent flap to reveal a quietly sobbing woman.

"I don't know what to do, Pastor Mike," she says, shakily raising an unlit cigarette to her lips. "Can you help?"

It's mid-morning on a Tuesday and the first wave of February snow has begun to dust the muddy makeshift campsite. But with a broken jaw, wavering eyesight and withdrawal-fueled chills, the change in weather is the last thing on the woman's mind.

"I left my boyfriend after he did this a month ago," she says, pointing to her swollen jaw. "But it's getting worse and I can't afford a doctor. I've been staying in this guy's tent for a couple days — but I don't know how much longer I can be here."

Davis takes a slow, deep breath and furrows his brow in thought.

"OK," he says, exhaling. "I'm going to see if I can get you into safe temporary housing. It's going to be OK."

Thanking him through tears, the woman pulls her thick winter coat tighter around her chest, finally acknowledging the flakes falling outside. "Do you know where I could get more propane?"

So begins an average weekday for Davis.

A former North Portland pastor (hence the nickname), Davis

now runs his own small nonprofit, Knowing Me Ministries, formed specifically to help people experiencing homelessness or prostitution around 82nd Avenue and the Springwater corridor. This one-man show has Davis driving his silver sedan — and trekking down trails — between the handful of migrating Southeast camps at least four times a week, checking in on the hundreds of campers he knows on a first-name basis. And he's more than qualified for the job.

Two years ago, Davis found himself homeless, living in similar camps along Johnson's Creek and the corridor. After a year and a half, Davis found a home, but he didn't leave behind his experiences.

"I feel responsible for standing up for these people, since I've been there," says Davis, one of the few people who actually visits these camps on a daily basis. "There's no other way to understand the situation."

That's Davis' main drive: to be the messenger between much-needed services and the homeless camps in deep Southeast Portland — a part of the city lagging in facilities while hosting the majority of the region's homeless population.

However, an increase in camp sweeps in Southeast Portland, including one that has sparked a sensitive lawsuit against the

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— MIKE DAVIS

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