

EDITORIAL

A reminder of the connections
as necessary as housing

In this edition, Colleen Sinsky shines a light on an element of homelessness few people outside of the field truly understand (See page 12). That being homeless often means being alone, in the most extreme sense under the most extreme conditions. It becomes tangible for Sinsky when, as a retention worker for the nonprofit JOIN, she becomes filed as the “emergency contact,” often above a blank “next of kin” line on apartment applications for people trying to get off the streets.

It’s heartbreaking, she says, and it illustrates how isolated, physically and emotionally, people in poverty can become. Of course it’s no surprise that depression is common among people experiencing poverty and homelessness. It is a reality of the streets, and it often never goes away even after a person gets into housing. “This real and compassionate level of authentic human connection,” she writes,

“is as necessary as housing.”

The popular news has been dominated recently with the suicide of Robin Williams, who battled depression and addiction much of his life. Comedian Jackie Kashian met Williams on several occasions, and spoke in this edition of his positive influence on comedians – and on people in general – “leading by the example of courtesy and support.”

Williams was also a powerful advocate for ending homelessness, and for dispelling stereotypes that perpetuate isolation, and yes, leading by the example of courtesy and support.

It’s been nearly 25 years since William testified before a Senate panel in support of the Homelessness Prevention and Community Revitalization Act of 1990. He testified to the conditions at the time, to the fastest growing population among the homeless being families with young children, as well as to the nonsense from former president Ronald Reagan that the only people who are homeless are those who have chosen to be so.

In his own words and speaking on behalf of fellow comedian Billy Crystal, Williams urged for long-term solutions that involved creating more affordable housing and a better understanding of the dynamics that drive people from their homes onto the streets.

With his passing, we lost a great advocate for people experiencing homelessness, in a sadly familiar way.

The struggle for dignity and stability continues for people who are homeless, and small triumphs occur every day, thanks to those human connections, and the courtesy and support of workers and residents in this city. While most of us will never be in a position to be an emergency contact, as Sinsky writes about, we all have it within ourselves to be a part of that support, to recognize nonsense and stereotypes when we see them, and to better understand that homelessness is about more than not having a home.

Let’s give people something to believe in

It’s time to embrace the idea of organized camping in Portland for people experiencing poverty.



Israel Bayer is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach him at israel@streetroots.org or follow him on Twitter @israelbayer.

DIRECTOR’S
DESK

By Israel Bayer

We are now three decades into the rise of massive homelessness in the United States. During that time we’ve seen tens of billions of dollars decrease from our housing stock – only to see wave after wave of hard working individuals and families end up on the streets. The story has been told a million and one times over.

We’ve heard from the politicians that we can do better than tent cities. We’ve heard from the political insiders to hold on – we’re getting there. We can end chronic homelessness. We can end homelessness for families. We can end veteran’s homelessness.

The policies all look the same to the outsider. It really doesn’t matter what kind of bow you put on it. It all looks the same to me and I’m a so-called “expert.”

The plan to end family, veterans, and chronic, women’s homelessness goes something like this. Create a community wide process, follow a data driven system, adopt changing policies, tweak those policies 20 degrees in one direction or another, make nonprofits and people experiencing homelessness jump through hoop after hoop and break out the yellow ribbons just in time for campaign and fundraising season.

The most important part to the entire equation will be that organizations around the country will be asked to end homelessness with little to nothing, scraps in fact, all while having right-wing editorial boards and the public remind us that we’re

failing at every step along the way. It’s the reason we shouldn’t fund the poor, don’t you know. Send them to the island!

Here’s the thing. We actually can end homelessness if both local and federal governments prioritized the issue. It’s not so much the plans or the political will that is lacking, it’s having the resources and tools in the toolbox to get the job done. It’s really that simple.

Through it all, local governments and law enforcement will claim to have to pick up the pieces through the criminal justice system with campsite cleanups, sidewalk ordinances, trespassing agreements, on and on. Never mind that all of these strategies lead to people having a criminal record that ends up being a barrier to get into the housing they were criminalized for not having in the first place. Did I mention the overcrowding of our jails and an enormous tax burden?

The cold, hard reality is we have more than 2,000 people on the streets at any one time. Until we receive adequate government support, that’s not going to change.

Regardless of your reasoning, no one wants people on the streets, especially people living the trauma of homelessness itself.

Which leads me back to the point of having safe rest areas for people experiencing homelessness. It’s a no-brainer. Right 2 Dream Too specifically has shown that it can be done in an organized, non-violent fashion that gives people both dignity and shelter from the storm. It’s time we embraced this idea and worked towards creating organized camps and alternative housing options that are given resources to thrive. It’s time to cut through the red tape, and give people without a home something to believe in.

Noises from a Classroom

by John Lawson

I think back on the time
I was in school
The kids around me
Strangers at first
Paper airplanes flying through air
Teachers shouting
Classmates laughing
Then like a screech in the night
We all hear nails
Raking over the chalkboard
The room grows silent
As the teacher starts the lesson
For the day

Our mission

Street Roots creates income opportunities for people experiencing homelessness and poverty by producing a newspaper and other media that are catalysts for individual and social change.

Street Roots publishes every two weeks, launching on Fridays, and is available exclusively through our street vendors or by subscription. We are proud members of the International Network of Street Papers.

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Street Roots Rose City Resource

Street Roots publishes the Rose City Resource, a comprehensive booklet of services for people experiencing homelessness and poverty. To inquire about getting guides, call 503-228-5657. Resources are online at www.rosecityresource.org.

Vendors

Street Roots vendors buy the newspapers for 25 cents each and sell them for \$1, keeping the 75 cents in profit for themselves. In order to keep the cost low to our vendors, we receive additional support from donations and in-kind contributions.



75¢
goes directly to the vendor
who sold you the paper

25¢
goes toward
printing costs

Vendor orientations are at 1 p.m. every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at the Street Roots office.