

Homelessness series packed with many lessons

Anna Griffin has been around the block. After spending 10 years at the Charlotte Observer, Griffin moved west to take a job at The Oregonian. Her first day on the job was Mayor Tom Potter's inauguration. Since that time she's been a City Hall beat reporter covering such topics as the Joint Terrorism Task Force, public campaign financing and lobbying disclosures, among other things.

Griffin has been Metro columnist and is now an editor and senior reporter with The Oregonian after a one-year Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University.

Currently, Griffin has put together what will sure to be an award-winning eight-part series titled, "Our Homeless Crisis." In the series, Griffin tackles a range of matters related to the issue —

including looking at life on the streets for individuals and families, policy efforts locally and federally and asking whether Portland is a magnet for people experiencing homelessness. She spent a night on the streets with homeless outreach workers and built relationships with people sleeping outside — all while trying to capture both the harsh personal and political realities of trying to solve homelessness.

Griffin still isn't done, telling me this week that, "when I started writing about homelessness it went from maybe I'll write three stories on homelessness to maybe I'll write more. I don't think I'm ever going to be done writing about it."

I had a chance to sit down with Griffin this week to talk about the project.

Israel Bayer: So, why do a series on homelessness? Were there things you wanted to come out of it?

Anna Griffin: I started at The Oregonian covering City Hall in early 2005, so I covered the beginning of the 10-year plan. It's been something I've been interested in as a journalist from the beginning, and you and I have had many conversations for years in which I've said I should do something bigger on the topic.

Part of what I wanted to do with this project was help the typical Oregonian reader understand that the reasons people end up on the streets are much more complicated than that gut level, "Oh, you're an addict, or you screwed up in some way." I wanted to give homeless people who don't often have a voice in our publication a voice to help educate the audience.

I.B.: Were there any stories that stuck with you specifically when doing the series?

A.G.: What frustrated me as a reporter, in almost all these stories of people who were living unsheltered, was that invariably it came down to people make mistakes or fall under horrible circumstances in their lives and we don't have a system that makes it easy or straightforward for somebody to rebuild their life quickly and easily. I was struck in a lot of cases by just how long people were waiting for housing, and how few options there actually are.

Going places and seeing children is the worst. I have a story coming out next week on family shelters. The lack of hope among many parents and just knowing it's going to be many months before they get something permanent — it's heartbreaking. I don't know how anybody who pays attention to homelessness in our community doesn't end up heartbroken.

I.B.: At Street Roots, we experience so many people trying to manage the issue of homelessness, from elected and civic leaders to executive directors and foundations to front line workers and people on the streets. Sometimes, it's

a challenge to wade through the politics of homelessness and poverty to be able to tell a story that's accurate and reflects what is really happening. How did you navigate that?

A.G.: I'm always struck on how many different messages and different views you hear from within the elected system, housing agencies and government offices versus what you see on the ground and what you hear from people who work on the ground. I think that everybody means well, and I think a number of elected officials in this community have been passionate advocates and really want things to change and want to make things better. We have a system at the government level where, to get money you have to show success. To get elected you have to show success. I think things are sometimes spun in a way that doesn't necessarily always reflect the reality on the ground. You can make statistical progress, but still have thousands of people sleeping outside tonight. Somebody working in a government office is going to take a long-term approach. People with boots on the ground, working or living on the streets, they have to think about how to respond to the situation right now.

I.B.: So often homelessness is covered in a vacuum in the media. Were there things you learned in doing something more in-depth?

A.G.: I do think we have more people who care about this issue and want to do good and want to help, but I also think, especially within the city of Portland, our form of government makes sustained progress on any issue really difficult. Politically, we've experienced a massive turnover in leadership at the city and county level. That makes solving homelessness extremely difficult.

The notion that we attract (homeless) people to Portland, because we are so giving: I just think that's the wrong question to be asking. At the end of the day, I don't think it matters.

You're talking about people. If they're not going to be homeless here, they're going to be homeless somewhere else. Why not serve people to the best of our ability? It's the right thing to do. We bill ourselves as a progressive community that does things differently. Let's do that then. Let's walk the walk.

I.B.: Portland is changing right before our eyes, but housing costs and population growth seem to be accelerating those realities. Both homelessness and housing are at the heart of the challenges we face in Portland.

A.G.: I look back at all the projects that I've done at The Oregonian. Everything really that I've done goes back to the fundamental question of what is Portland going to be when it grows up?

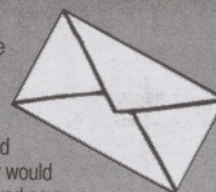
We have this great city that's renowned for smart growth. It's world renowned for its food, and everybody thinks of it as a cool, hip and compassionate place where we do things right. We do things smart. The question is what do we do next?

Is the Portland that so many of us know and love and were attracted to actually sustainable? You and I could sit here today and craft a series on the vanishing middle class in Portland and what that means.

Homelessness — to a certain degree — is its own unique issue with a long history in public housing and mental health care. It's also hard on people who are being priced out of the city. I have young reporters who work for me who can't afford to buy a home in inner city neighborhoods anymore. They have to go to the suburbs or to Vancouver. I have a white-collar job and if I were to buy a house now, as opposed to 10 years ago,

Write in

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