

Aubrie (left), T.J., and their daughter Abbie are one of more than 30 families – 126 people in all – who slept at the homeless family shelter on Tuesday, May 12.



PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER

Poverty is exhausting, but the human spirit is strong

“There’s really nothing that can prepare you for an experience like this,” said T.J., holding his four-week-old child. “I’m working full-time, but we just couldn’t hold on. We’re doing everything we can to get back on our feet.”

That was the story told to me by family after family this week when I visited the homeless family shelter in East Portland.

I’ve personally experienced a lot traumatic things in my life, and in many ways have become hardened to circumstances that

would be shocking to some. But nothing really prepares you for sitting and listening to the stories of dozens of families struggling to survive on the streets. The number of small infants sleeping in the shelter caught me off guard.

Each night, hundreds of men, women and children are sleeping in their cars or in shelters in Multnomah County.

The thing about it is, Multnomah County is very well organized when it comes to both coordinating services and getting families off the streets. It’s the sheer number of people that continue to fall through the cracks that is overwhelming.

The reasons many families end up homeless has everything to do with the lack of access to living-wage jobs, rent increases countywide, and the lack of affordable units being created in our community. The combination of all of these factors creates a real crisis in people’s lives.

“Being a parent is the hardest job there is. I know this first hand,” says Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury. “When you don’t know where you’ll be sleeping that night, or whether you’ll have enough food for your kids to eat, it adds a level of stress that isn’t healthy for anyone. We all need help in our lives.”

Popular culture projects an image of people experiencing homelessness as being lazy and somehow at fault for their circumstances. Obviously, at Street Roots we know that to be false – understanding that the vast majority of people on

the streets have a complex set of circumstances that led their homelessness.

Family homelessness is no different. Many of the parents I talked to were working part-time or full-time jobs. Besides housing, the biggest challenges were overcoming low wages and limited access to transportation. The most important thing, they said, is maintaining an education for their children.

“We aren’t talking about parents that don’t care about their families,” says Mary Li with Multnomah County. “Parents are doing everything they can to keep it together. Given the circumstances, families experiencing homelessness are doing super human acts to support their children.”

Talk about super human. The vast majority of the children at the shelter remain in school full-time. It’s a testament to the social workers, school liaisons and the kids themselves. Where there’s a will, there’s a way.

A school liaison from the Reynolds school district was at the shelter at 8 p.m. making announcements and engaging both kids and their parents.

One fifth grader I talked to told me, “Each day is like an adventure I couldn’t have imagined in my wildest dreams.” He paused for a minute, and sighed. “I’m doing the best I can. My parents are doing the best they can. I see how hard it is for them.” Shrugging his shoulders he told me, “I wake up every day from here and go to school. It’s my only chance.”

What an extraordinary kid.

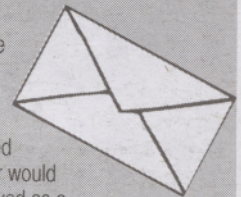
Poverty is exhausting. Still, the human spirit is strong. Life is hard enough, friends. The idea that we live in a Portland that results in so many families suffering is simply unacceptable. It’s a tragic affair. It’s one of the many reasons we as a community must prioritize housing. There’s nothing more important in our community.

“Kids deserve to feel safe, secured and loved,” Kafoury says. “Making sure that all kids go to sleep every night in their own bed, in their own home, is my top priority. It should be the top priority for all of us.”

True that.

Write in

If you would like to have something that you’ve written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author’s name and contact information, if available.



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