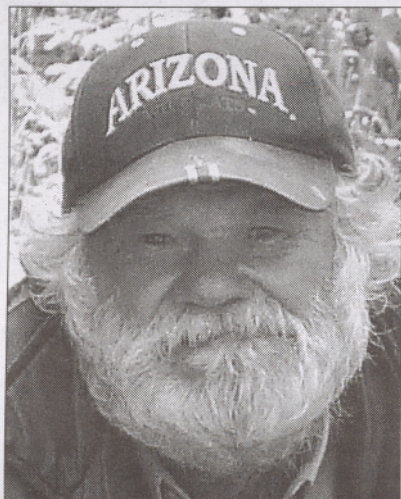


Walking Dan's last retreat

BY GARY DAVIS
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

I remember my first encounter with Walking Dan. It was one of the first nights I was serving as Nightwatch's Executive Director, almost eight years ago. I was standing on the sidewalk outside the



Walking Dan

door of Julia West House, and he came up and introduced himself. "You're the new director?" he said warmly. "I'm Walking Dan."

I wasn't sure I heard him correctly. "Walking Dan?" I said.

"That's 'cause I'm always walking!" he said, and smiled.

I always enjoyed Dan whenever he came by. "Hey, Brother Gary!" he'd greet, and we'd do a fist-bump. Or sometimes, when I wasn't at the door when he entered, after taking a seat in the Hospitality Center,

once he caught my eye, he'd wave from across the room.

Like Mr. Bojangles in the song, Dan could say, "I drinks a bit." But no matter how much he had imbibed, Dan always

remained the gentleman. One cold night, as Dan passed me on the way to the smoking area, a can of beer fell out of his parka pocket. "Dan," I said, "you know you can't have that in here." "I know, Brother Gary," he replied. "It won't happen again." And he was true to his word: Never again did he allow his beer cans to drop on the floor right in front of me.

For the longest time Dan had been camping out on the little wedge of land between the ramp onto Interstate 84 and northbound Interstate 5 where the two diverge on the east waterfront. It was a challenge for him to reach his camp — it required him to cross one or another active freeway. But he liked it there. It was a spot so isolated (while, ironically, being in the middle of everything) that he knew he wasn't harming anything and no one bothered him.

That is, until a few months ago, when the Oregon Department of Transportation decided to move in, clear out his camp, and put him under the stress of finding another place to sleep.

Walking Dan's body was found in his sleeping bag under the Ross Island Bridge last week. He had been dead for at least a week when he was discovered. There were no signs of foul play. Indeed, indications are that he died in his sleep. There's no denying Dan had his physical ailments, all of which were no doubt complicated by his drinking. Generally speaking, the lifespan of a homeless person is 14 years shorter than that of someone who is housed — and Dan

was not a young man anymore. So there's no telling to what degree the stress of being forced from his old camp might have been a factor.

Dan loved going on our annual spiritual retreats. In fact, the last time I saw him was about six weeks ago and he asked whether he could go along on the retreat this year.

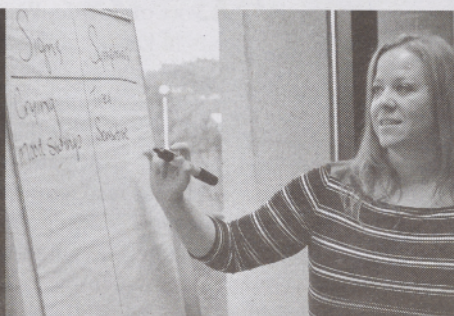
"Well, Dan," I said hesitantly, "we'll have to consider that." What honestly concerned me was Dan's health. It seemed to me that I had not seen him completely sober a single time over the last couple of years, and for him to be on a retreat for three days, deprived completely of alcohol, might make him physically ill. Dealing with withdrawal would not make the retreat pleasant for Dan himself, and it was also something that didn't quite fit the agenda we had planned for the rest who would be attending.

But a determination as to whether to allow Dan to attend still had not been made when I heard about his death this week. Dan on his own had gone on his last retreat.

So there will be a missing chair when the rest of our retreatants take off for Camp Adams in a few weeks. And though Dan will be missing, he has indeed affected the retreat's agenda, as we have planned a memorial service for him in the outdoor chapel in the place he loved so much.

Gary Davis is the executive director of Operation Nightwatch, a nonprofit organization that since 1981 has provided hospitality for people experiencing homelessness.

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