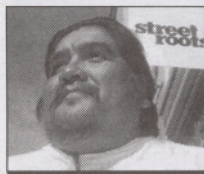


Inception to completion, a tent city is always a work in progress

The idea is simple: Give the homeless a safe, secure place to be. A core group of people gets together and starts brainstorming, on getting support, infrastructure, etc. After many meetings, discussing, arguing, and compromising, the core group sends out a press release stating they want to start a shelter or a tent city.



THE WANDERER

Leo Rhodes

Leo Rhodes is a street activist and homeless advocate. He is also a vendor with Street Roots and a regular contributor to the newspaper.

I did this many times with my mentors SHARE/WHEEL (Seattle Housing and Resource Efforts/Womens Housing Equality Enhancement League) in Seattle. It

was a little different here in Portland how we started Right to Dream too. In 2009, there were three of us telling the City Council of the need for shelter and/or a tent city. Most of our pitches were for a tent city. Around that time a lady asked me why they let non-homeless people pitch their tents for 24 hours on the route of the Grand Floral Parade, but they won't let the homeless pitch their tents any other time.

Good question, I replied.

In a meeting with the Committee to End Homelessness I asked the question. There was a big gasp and looks of shock on a lot of people's faces. The tension level went way up. Then somebody sarcastically said, "The city buys them a permit."

The tension went down again. People looked relieved.

"OK," I said, "So what you're telling everybody is that it's OK to pitch a tent for leisure, but you can't pitch a tent for survival. There's something wrong with that. About 85 percent of the people at that meeting agreed with me.

In 2010 Right to Survive, with their allies, friends and mostly homeless people, pitched tents in protest on the Grand Floral Parade route, in protest, not against the parade, but against the idea of letting people pitch their tents for leisure, but not for survival. This was the start of Right to Survive's "Pitch a Tent" campaign.

This year was their fifth year. When we were taking down our tents at the first "Pitch a Tent" event, some of the organizers and homeless asked where they were going to sleep. Where are they going to go? Some months later a Street Roots vendor came to me and asked if I had read about a man wanting to start a tent city in downtown Portland. The article was in The Portland Tribune. It was about a man who was having a long battle with the city over his property on Fourth Avenue and Burnside. Toward the end of the article, the man said he wanted to work with the homeless on a project with his property.

A proposal was made at a Right to Survive meeting to work with the landowner. We impressed them with our knowledge of infrastructure of a tent city, shelters and advocacy work we had done in the past.

A core group started brainstorming, on infrastructure, support and so on. A few months later, on Oct. 10, 2011, we started Right to Dream Too. One thing I've noticed about, tent city, shelters, and rest areas such as Right to Dream Too is that they have three stages.

Stage 1: Herding cats. Homeless people are human beings with different backgrounds. Some are youths, vets, minorities, single adults, single adults with kids, families, disabled, and so on. They have different mindsets of survival and coping mechanisms of an ever-changing world of homelessness. Like where to get

out of the rain, where to rest, where to eat, where to sleep. With very little shelters and a safe place to be, society and the way it treats the homeless, ostracizing, downgrading, physical attacks, verbal attacks, the cops and rent-a-cops bullying the homeless, telling them they can't sleep, where they can't rest, where they can't get out of the rain, and so on. Most of the homeless, not all, are thinking as individuals.

Stage 2: Evolving. After a while the participants settle down, or at least most of them. Instead of thinking as individuals they start working together. In this stage you find out who are workers, lazy, leaders, followers, and so on.

Stage 3: Infrastructure. Since the beginning the core group has been working with the participants on infrastructure. Once the participants settle down it makes it a little easier. Everything seems to be running smoothly at this point. Then some months later, about 30 percent of the participants move on, get a job, housing, some are barred after breaking a rule. When the tent city, rest area, shelter, moves to another site, the percentage can be way higher. Either way you have to start all over again, Herding cats, evolving, infrastructure. Seems like you're constantly training participants.

Sometimes the shelter, tent city or rest area has a meltdown the tension is really thick. Even though we all have our differences, there is still love and concern.

There are a lot of good things that happen like friendships are built, a strong support system, people stabilizing themselves to get out of homelessness and love. Through all this the core group goes through an endless, emotional rollercoaster ride.

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