



Trish Reed, 51, greets strangers coming into Right 2 Dream Too, saying, "Can I help you, Sweetheart?" Her voice is likely the kindest thing they've heard all day. Reed said she became homeless instantly when the person she was taking care of and living with died. She lost her identification a while back, and because she was adopted, it's been difficult to get a birth certificate, a credit card, anything, she said. "I am so thankful for Right 2 Dream Too and my friends and family here," Reed said.

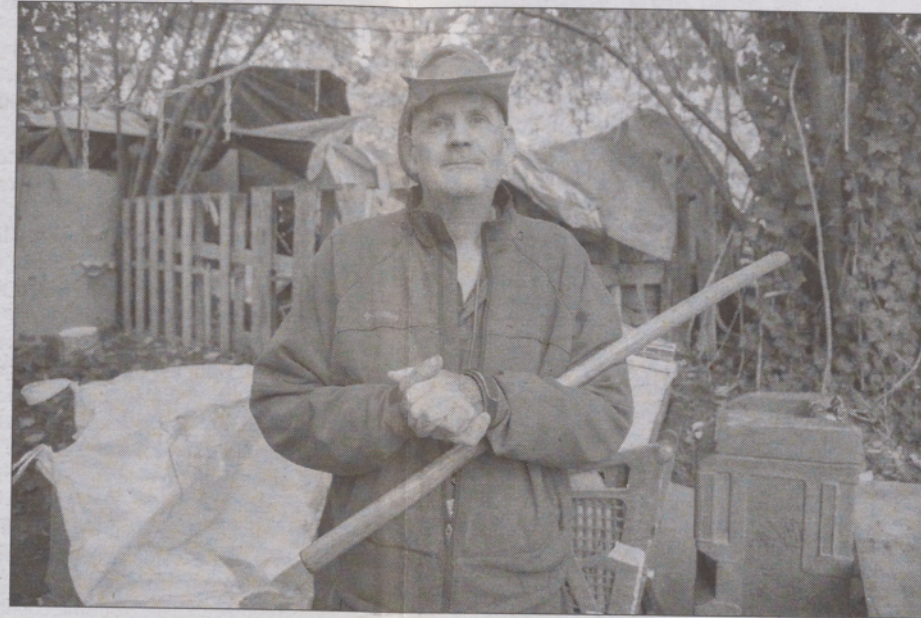


Debra Taylor is a calm, thoughtful person. She described her life as "always above the poverty line" until she was kicked out of the place she was living with her son and his wife. Then it was instant homelessness. She started living at the shelter at Transition Projects, sleeping on a mat. Out at 6:30 a.m. And you can't go back until 7 p.m. Taylor began to realize her needs were met even if all her wants were not. When thinking what she was most thankful for, she carefully wrote out a list. Most important, Taylor says, "I am thankful for God. Without him, I would not have made it." On her list is one thing most people might find odd — until you hear Taylor's soothing voice read it: "I am thankful for people who weren't kind to me." She learned lessons about life she'd have never known without her time being homeless and the people she met.



Christina Miller, 40, said she's been all over Portland in trees. Miller has an affinity for trees. She doesn't like sleeping on the ground. Luckily, Portland has lots of trees. And Oregon, unlike where Miller is from in Colorado, covers the medicine for transgender people like herself. Social Security's Supplemental Security Income isn't enough for rent, so Miller sleeps in a hammock hung in the trees. Miller said she travels light and moves around a lot to be safe from "people who are trying to save me. I am thankful for the ability to live in a tree and be myself," Miller said.

PHOTOS AND PROFILES BY BENJAMIN BRINK



Billy Torrence, 56, seems to be in perpetual motion as he twirls a walking stick and strolls through the homeless camp at Hazelnut Grove just off North Greeley Avenue in Portland. Torrence is missing four fingers on one hand from a machine accident. He said the constant motion of the walking stick keeps his body in tune. After getting divorced, overcoming suicidal thoughts, experiencing health problems and being kicked out of his daughter's place, Torrence is homeless. But he has found purpose in life by offering himself up to others. "I help others to help myself. I am thankful for these people in this place because they are saving my life," he said.

What are you thankful for?

It's a simple question. Your answer can reveal a lot about you and your life. Most of us wouldn't wish for hard times. Yet, it's often the hard times, the difficult situations, the worst moments that become the life-changing event that brings true thankfulness.



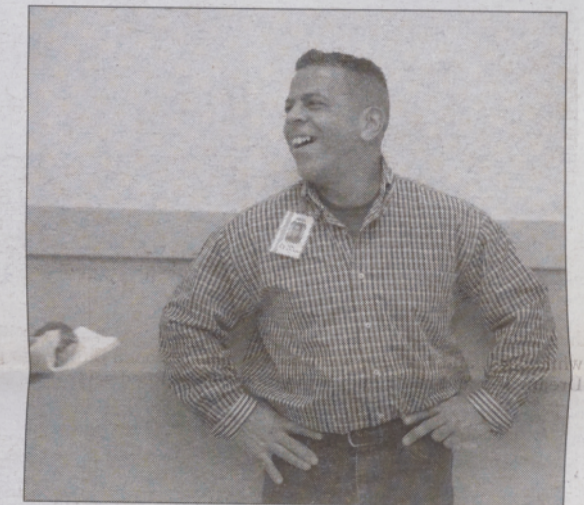
Pamela Boyd, 59, said she's never felt like she fit in. She found the wrong group of people where she grew up in Coos Bay and started drinking when she was 13. Starting in her teen years and ever since, heroin has been her life. Marriage, children, divorce, 14 treatment centers — Boyd couldn't imagine life without drugs. After her 19-year-old son died in a car accident, her world started spiraling even lower. Boyd was so low she didn't have the strength to poke one more needle into her arm. She prayed hard. Within 10 minutes the police were at her door and she was off to prison. Boyd says prison saved her life. She'd grown up going against the grain at every turn. Now that she's out of prison and clean for three years, she said Central City Concern has taught her how to be an adult. "I am thankful I am clean, that I know God, and that Central City Concern has given me a desk job and janitorial work," she said. She knows it doesn't look like much to be her age, living in a studio apartment and cleaning rooms, but she said she feels like an executive.



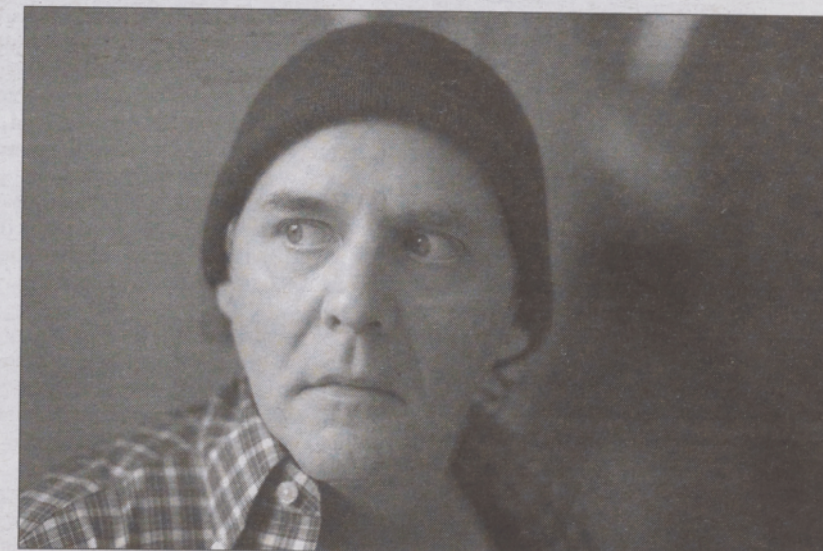
Melissa Neal, 33, was pregnant, fleeing Belize to Guatemala, then Mexico, then San Diego to get away from a bad relationship. Neal was born in Belize but has spent most of her life in the United States. After many bad decisions, identity theft, almost being deported, prison and homelessness, she has found a place of calm. She was used to having material possessions. Now she lives in a room with two single beds at the women's Life Change program at Union Gospel Mission. She doesn't want to jeopardize losing her daughter, Shiyah, who is 3. "I am thankful for a second chance to allow me to forgive myself for all my past," she said. Neal hopes to become a counselor to at-risk youths. She said she didn't have anyone to look up to when she was young. She wants to be that person for someone else.



Kyrsten Roth, 19, has found her refuge at P'ear, an organization that serves homeless and transitional youths through education and art. She met her first love there and got married. It's the place where she can get out of the cold and have a warm cup of coffee with friends. P'ear helped her get her general-education diploma, or GED. It's provided stability while she went through a rebellious time. She's not a fan of being homeless and sleeping under bridges, but that's her life now. She said you grow a love for it and a hate for it at the same time. "I think I am most thankful for my second chance." A second chance at not becoming the drug addict her parents thought she would be. Roth intends to be at Mt. Hood Community College this next term. She would like to work with at-risk youths.



Carl Hackley, 55, said he's lived most of his life doing it the devil's way, and that didn't work. Now he's going to give God a chance. Fishing, fighting and drinking is what Hackley learned by the time he was 8. His parents were both alcoholics. By 15, he was headed to prison for armed robbery. The day he got out of prison, he was arrested for another armed robbery and given a longer sentence. He was married once, with a son he hasn't seen in 20 years. When he was homeless and sleeping on the doorstep of the Union Gospel Mission, a woman invited him in. He's been in the Life Change program at Union Gospel Mission ever since. "I am thankful for a forgiving God," Hackley said. "A God who watches over me."



Hugh Watson, 47, said he came to Portland to get away from Thibodaux, La., where he had a life of singing, the Marine Corps and a failed marriage. He said he was drawn to the Northwest because of the mountains, the ocean and the desert. Portland became a different kind of hurdle. After dropping 100 pounds through various medical procedures and four months in the hospital, Watson is now back on his feet again with a little help from a cane when he wobbles. "I am thankful I am able to walk and am not paralyzed," Watson said. "I'm thankful the doc hasn't come up to me and told me I have two months to live. Life is good."