

# Lawsuit punctuates fight to sleep in peace

Call it irony, or possibly a simple twist of fate that Jack Tafari, an iconic leader who helped co-found Dignity Village and fight against Portland's camping ban, passed away on the same day that Portland Business Alliance and others filed suit against the city of Portland for camping policies that allow for tent camping.

Besides co-founding Dignity Village, Jack Tafari was one of the original 10 Street Roots vendors, a poet and writer, an organizer and more than anything, a friend to the poor.

Jack touched many people's lives around the world and was one of my first mentors on

the streets.

Here, Jack describes the emergence of Portland's first city-sanctioned tent city.

"On December 16th of the year 2000, a group of eight homeless men and women pitched five tents on public land and Camp Dignity, later to become Dignity Village, was born. We came out of the doorways of Portland's streets, out from under the bridges, from under the bushes of public parks. We came armed with a vision of a better future for ourselves and for all of Portland, a vision of a village where we can live in peace and improve not only the condition of our own lives, but the quality of life in Portland in general. We came in from the cold of a December day and we refuse to go back to the way things were."

Fifteen years later, the fight continues.

Jack's work, along with others including Right 2 Dream's Ibrahim Mubarak, to fight for the rights of people to have shelter through tent cities has provided safe shelter for thousands of people on the streets.

It's also provided activists and government leaders, whether they know it or not, a roadmap for camps that exist today in the city.

"Jack was the hardest working homeless person in the city," said community leader Marshall Runkel.

As many of you know, last year, Portland Mayor Charlie Hales declared a homeless emergency, a topic I've dedicated a lot of coverage too.

Among the many things the mayor has done beyond his push for more funding for affordable housing and homeless services along with policy change around the issue of housing, was to create camping guidelines that allowed the city to be flexible in its approach to working with people experiencing homelessness, including allowing for tent camping in some cases.

The mayor and others have also become staunch supporters of two camps in particular, Right 2 Dream Too and Hazelnut Grove — both tent cities in Portland that have faced massive resistance from the very groups also suing the city — the Pearl and Overlook Neighborhood Associations.

Is it perfect? Of course not. Nothing is on the streets.

To say that Street Roots is disappointed the Portland Business Alliance and others have chosen to sue the city over the current camping policies is understatement.

Human suffering is not pretty. It's raw and uncomfortable. So is being homeless.

In a perfect world, of course we would have adequate housing and shelter available for people. Unfortunately, we don't live in a perfect world. Making homelessness and tent camping a crime

is no solution. It only serves to punish people for experiencing the hell that is homelessness.

The Portland Business Alliance and others know this. It appears they simply can't stay away from controversy. Just last month the organization launched a public relations campaign geared toward addicts and panhandlers that received major backlash from the community. Like this lawsuit, the campaign was short-shorted and will ultimately prove to be ineffective.

I find it hard to believe that any court is going to err on the side of any business group or neighborhood association for simply not being happy about the way a particular city is enforcing its camping guidelines.

Street Roots reported last August that the Department of Justice released a statement in the case of Janet F. Bell v. City of Boise stating, "If the Court finds that it is impossible for homeless individuals to secure shelter space on some nights because no beds are available, no shelter meets their disability needs, or they have exceeded the maximum stay limitations, then the Court should also find enforcement of the ordinances under those circumstances criminalize the status of being homeless and violates the Eight Amendment to the Constitution."

Like it or not, the statement supports the city's argument to try to find a way to enforce camping policies that are humane.

Beyond the legal ramifications, the lawsuit is divisive and ultimately a huge waste of time and city resources. It does more harm than good by dividing our community even more and ultimately doesn't help our larger goals of trying to find people a safe place to call home.

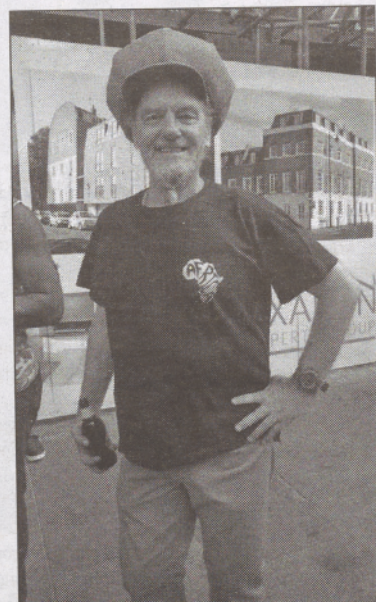
The latest round of actions also calls into question why the Portland Business Alliance deserves to be the executive committee of a Home for Everyone — a decision making body overseeing the our local plan to end homelessness in our community.

It's all a mystery to me.

I'm sure it's still a mystery to Jack too, wherever he is today.

"Jack was always able to see beyond his own exigencies to the greater good of others and the whole community," said Runkel.

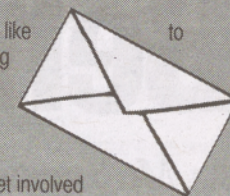
I wish we could say the same about the Portland Business Alliance relationship to homelessness in our community.



Jack Tafari

## 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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