

Homeless are not Public Enemy No. 1

The stories of people experiencing homelessness are many. Starting today, readers will be able to get a 32-page zine of stories about people's experience of sleeping outside and in Portland's shelters. Street Roots has been working with vendors and others outside for nearly 16 weeks to capture these amazing stories and artwork. You won't want to miss it.



DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

Israel Bayer is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach him at israel@streetroots.org or follow him on Twitter @israelbayer.

The zine will cost readers \$4, with all proceeds going directly to vendors. The book is full of hope and triumph, love and laughter,

heartache and despair — a true reflection of our streets.

I was reminded of the diversity of people's experience this past week when I met Virginia, a 78-year elder who has been living in her van in a Wal-Mart parking lot for the past five years.

Virginia's story is heartbreaking. Suffering from lung cancer, Virginia has been undergoing radiation treatment for the past seven weeks. Her body is frail. She will find out her fate at the beginning of May — not knowing if the cancer will eventually take her life.

Five years ago, at 73-years-old, Virginia's husband passed away. She had no income. By the time her husband's Social Security had been transferred to her nine months later, she had lost everything, including her home.

The only thing she had left was a van and personal belongings. For the most part, she's been cut off from the rest of the world since that time.

If it weren't for a team in Clackamas County with Free Hot Soup, Rose City Backpacks and Boots on the Ground, her

story may have never come to light. All three organizations are volunteer-run, a harsh reality in a place like Clackamas County, where services are so pathetic that much of the social safety net system for thousands of people living on the streets is volunteer only.

Then there's Lorie, a 29-year-old homeless woman who is escaping a domestic violence situation. She is 8-months pregnant. I sat with Lorie and her dog, Layla, over dinner this week.

Lorie has been homeless for close to a year. Her story isn't unlike many that we hear. After living in Portland for seven years and working in construction and retail, she was evicted after not having the necessary income to pay for housing.

Lorie began living in an unsafe relationship with someone on the streets for her safety. They were not sexually involved. When Lorie found out she was pregnant, the man she was living with became violent. For two days, she hid behind a Portland bowling alley not knowing exactly what to do next.

For the next several months Lorie found shelter outside and in people's homes. She is currently living with a couple in Vancouver, Wash., but said she has worn out her welcome.

"No one will hire me right now. I have no permanent address. I'm homeless and pregnant," said Lorie, as she clutched her small dog.

Lorie has been receiving prenatal care at Legacy Emanuel hospital, but she said if she doesn't find housing by the time she has her baby, they will be required to call the Department of Human Services to report her.

"My only goal right now, is not get my kid taken away from me," said Lorie. "That means I have to find housing. I'm desperate."

Lorie said she spends three to six hours a day taking transportation from one housing agency to the next trying to find something. "It feels futile," she said.

Virginia and Lorie's stories, unfortunately, are not unique. The wave of extreme poverty and homelessness being experienced right now is overwhelming. That's why it's hard for me to stomach the hate being directed at people on the streets — in some cases portraying people as subhuman, or worse.

The level of hate and hysteria I feel coming from liberal Portlanders about other human beings is blowing me away.

It's politically correct to care about equality nationwide or a refugee crisis far away, but a pain to deal with homeless people in our neighborhoods — our own neighbors in distress.

Just this week, I was in a meeting at City Hall where a neighborhood representative from the Pearl District threatened that if something isn't done about homeless camps in the neighborhood, people were going to arm themselves.

Say what?

Yes, you heard that right.

I understand there are bad actors out there and nobody likes to see human beings suffering, but the reality is there are far more people on the streets that are good,

common folk, caught out on the wire. People on the streets put up with verbal and physical assaults all of the time. Not to mention people are discriminated against all of the time. Need a public restroom? Forget about it. Want to eat at a nice café in the city. Sorry. Have a bike and are homeless? (Gasp). Thief!

I was interviewed by The Oregonian last week for an article that explored ways to respond to people on the streets. These are some of the comments that were posted online in response to it:

"You can help by taking a bum terrorist into your warm home."

"Adopt a bum terrorist! Get them out of our parks in our city of Portland."

"Build a wall around the City of Portland."

"Toss the homeless on the other side of the wall."

"Round them up and send them to desert work camps."

"They are mostly genetic lemons, no program will fix them (except sterilization). All the churches and all the government in the world will still come up short."



Virginia, 78, has been living in her van in a Wal-Mart parking lot for five years. She is also currently undergoing cancer treatment.

The sick reality is people on the streets experience this kind of abuse all of the time.

The truth is, a million Americans didn't all decide yesterday to become homeless and camp in our neighborhood park just to piss us off.

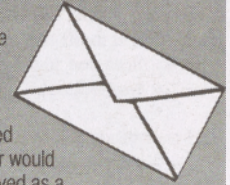
There's a reason thousands of people are living on our streets and it's got a lot more to do with greed and bad housing policy than it does with someone drinking a bottle of wine on your street or a specific mayor's attempt at trying to curb the problem.

One or two bad experiences on the streets doesn't act as a qualifier to label all homeless people as Public Enemy No. 1, especially considering many of the people on the streets are small children and elders.

As for Virginia and Lorie's stories, the housing agency JOIN has stepped in and is now partnering with a team of volunteers to try to help both of them access housing. It's not easy, especially when there are thousands of people in crisis. We're all hoping for the best.

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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The new Street Roots zine hits the streets today. It's \$4, with all proceeds going directly to your vendor.