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Over time she has created the job by doing what she does. In the course of a week she has to be diplomat, bouncer, social worker, quartermaster, counselor, stevedore and more. She has never actually been hired, and she doesn't get paid — not in the usual way, at least.

"You get endorphins from this work, like that high you get from exercising. Every day there's a list, I check things off, and at the end of the day I feel like I've accomplished something."

Her enthusiasm for the complex work shines through in everything she said. "I love my Fridays! That's my big day. I go shop the dock at the Food Bank. I make sure Saturday Breakfast has everything the kids need to cook with, including for the Asian breakfast (dumplings for Chinese and Korean elders living nearby). I love making sure that everyone has what they need for their meals."

Stephanie knows what it's like out on the streets. Seven years ago she was there herself.

"I had a little trouble in 2009," she said, sounding almost off-hand. The fact is, it was more than a little trouble. Up until then she'd been living what seemed a normal life: a husband, two kids, a steady job, a home of her own. Then things started to go downhill. "A marriage ended badly," is how we agree to say it. "It left me with half a house, half a heart, and a deep depression." She paused, as if reviewing her own words. "That pretty much says it."

Her husband moved out in August of that year, and within two months she couldn't afford the rent. She lost the house and got herself and the kids into an apartment; that lasted another six months, until she also lost her job. She describes her slide down as a series of gradual shifts: "You go, OK, yeah, he left me. I can't afford the house I've been living in. That's a stress. Crap, lost the job. The kids have to move in with their dad. Oh, OK, I'll go sleep on this couch. Everything crashed around me."

Suffering depression and anxiety, she began drinking.

"People don't understand. It doesn't matter what kind of decisions were made. It's what was the trigger that made that domino fall? It's not just the one thing. It goes all the way to the end where you're just down and out, homeless, period, and you've got nothing left. I had the weight of the world on my shoulders, and I was drowning."

It took Stephanie four years to find her own place again. Today, in her mid-forties, she said, "I'm happy, healthy and OK with my own life. And OK with being me, as a human being. I don't date, I have my friends, my family, my volunteer work, that's what keeps me content."

I tell her it sounds like a fairy tale. She laughs but looks serious. "Maybe it does," she said. "But no, I lived it."

"What was the very worst moment?" I ask.

Stephanie pauses and runs different possibilities through her mind. "When I slept in a parking garage," she decides. She likes short, straightforward answers that don't need elaboration. I wait for more, and she drops the other shoe. "In November. It

was in November, and it was freezing outside. That was when we still had Fareless Square, so I'd ride and ride. Over at the library stop, I got off and slept in the stairwell of that parking garage.

"The next day I didn't know what to do. But I didn't want to sleep in any more parking garages. Then I remembered seeing, you know, the Harbor Light. So it's late at night, it's dark, and I was knocking on the door, yelling. Two guys looked out at me, and it kinda freaked me out a little. They said, 'Are you looking for the women's shelter?'"

She ran up to the Salvation Army Female Emergency Shelter (SAFES), but found they didn't have space that night. Stephanie broke down crying: "Is there anywhere I can sleep?" The woman at the desk called the YWCA, and Stephanie got a mat for the night there. "They're called winter mats, only available until April," she explains.

She kept checking at SAFES, and when a temporary space finally opened up, she went there. But that makes it sound simple. Stephanie elaborates, "Now you have to understand, these are only three-month stays, and you have to work their program: You have to call in every Monday, you have to get sober, you have to be looking for work. I called every Monday, and I got into Jean's Place (a women's shelter). There, you get to sleep in a bunkhouse-style room, with other women. You get a month, with good behavior, do your chores, and then you get to move into a room. Three months. Then back to SAFES. It's a repeating process until you can find a job."

I consider Stephanie a very high-functioning person. "Not everyone can do all that," I said.

"In the beginning I wasn't," she said. "I don't do good in crowds. I have anxiety and depression. SAFES got me hooked up with Multnomah County Health Department. They got me a doctor, a bus pass, the right meds for my anxiety. I do better now. SAFES saved me."

As Stephanie tells her story she often stops to reconsider, or to emphasize. "When I moved into Hamilton West, it was November 2013. Nov. 8. You know, food stamps don't go as far as the public would think." At her new apartment she learned of St. Stephen's Food Pantry, right across the street. After a while she walked over to see what help she could get. It was around Christmas, cold and wet. The pantry had plentiful food available, all for free, and the people giving it out had come in off the street to get help themselves. She liked that. But it was an organizational nightmare.

"When I first stepped in here," Stephanie said, "I saw a chaotic mess." She laughs. "Then I asked somebody, 'Who's in charge?' Someone pointed and said, 'That guy.'" She rolls her eyes pointedly and we share a laugh. I also know who was in charge: Paul Davis, the Outreach Minister.

Paul is a visionary, an expansive, welcome-everyone, if-you-ask-them-to-help-you-build-it-they-will-come-kind of guy. He had a great scene going: food available for

anyone who needed it, a big, open room with long tables, enthusiastic, committed volunteers, and no idea how to organize it all.

Stephanie grew up Catholic, and today she's a member of the congregation at St. Andre Bessette Catholic Church. But her faith is not the source of her calling; rather, it was something about the atmosphere at Clay Street Table. She took those groceries home, stashed them in the kitchen, thought about what she'd seen, and went right back over there.

She walked up to "that guy" and said, "Do you need help?"

"Sure," he said, "we always need help."

"No," she said. "I mean help organizing this."

Here she gets dramatic, throws her hands in the air, imitating Paul: "So he goes, 'Do I need help?! Can you help me with this?'"

He showed Stephanie the basement where the supplies were stored. It's down a steep staircase: dark, cramped, a bit damp, with a packed dirt floor. "It was a crazy mess," she said. "Enough dried beans for six months, cans of refried, all in a heap. Plastic drawers with mix-and-match Christmas items, old doors, tarps ... things were just thrown hither and thither, nothing labeled." She shakes her head. It took three months to clean and organize the basement. Volunteers carted three truckloads of spoiled food to the dump.

Today that basement is her favorite project. "In the beginning I was afraid of that place. Now I know every nook and cranny. I know what wall has its leaks." She has transformed the "chaotic mess" into an orderly world. "I'm Chief cave woman. And then I've got this crew I call my cavemen; they take it all upstairs for me. I've even saved the Pantry money," she boasts. "I've learned what to order."

The work has given her a better sense of her own strength. "I'm that jack of all trades, master of none," she said. "Let's see ... I've been a bartender, dance instructor, roof and window company site manager, I've worked at Sears, Dotty's. If someone had a job, I'd do it. I figure if I don't know how to do it, teach me, and I'm willing to learn."

"Before I start something, I plan and picture everything, how I want it to be, and then how am I going to get it there? Whereas Paul is hilarious. He'll go, 'Oh, this will be great!' He sees the end product, the dream." She paused, working to get the right words, then decides on: "I implement the process to complete the dream."

Other volunteers say she's helped to ground Paul, to tame his expansiveness. He would serve the whole world a full meal every day, open the church to Portland's entire street population, house them all. But even Paul knows one small parish cannot do all that. Stephanie's work helps to keep it practical. Paul and Stephanie both believe in the Table's mission: "We are building up a community around the table, with and for our vulnerable neighbors who often feel isolated and alone." They just deal with it in

different ways; they complement each other.

The Table now serves over 2,000 meals per month, in addition to providing Last Thursday Food Pantry. As part of Pantry day, some of the Underground youth run a "Street Table": food people can use if they have no way to cook.

"People on the street were coming to Pantry and shopping, but how were they going to cook?" Stephanie said. "They can't cook pasta. They need peanut butter, shelf-stable milk, protein bars, power bars, things they can toss in their backpacks that they carry around all day. We load up a shopping bag and each person gets one — every bag has the same things."

Though she has her moods and can be a tough taskmaster, she takes good care of her volunteers. "I always try to do something special, give them that great 'attaboy,' because everyone needs to hear that."

Clay Street isn't the only place Stephanie volunteers. She also remains loyal to the program she credits with saving her life.

"I take care of the women at SAFES down there on Second and Burnside, feed them lunch every Wednesday, and get them clothing, diapers for the babies, et cetera." She's gotten her family involved at Clay Street: Her brother is one of the "cave men," her daughter is a pantry volunteer, and even her grandson, at 2 years old, "knows how to sort a box."

SAFES helped her get a grant through the Women's Collaborative that will help with her rent as long as she keeps giving back, and her daughter, now 22, pays her to babysit her 2-year-old.

There are plenty of hard times in this work, and she is sometimes downed by migraines. It's not an easy population; many have some form of mental illness or PTSD. "There's the arguing, fighting over the food. Last month I had to pull two guys together and tell them, 'Please leave that outside. We're just trying to take care of those folks like I'm trying to take care of you. Let's calm down, respect each other.'"

"It's part of the Clay Street philosophy. 'This place is non-violent, non-condescending, whether it be speech, actions, anything. This is a safe place,' she said. "I want people to feel welcome."

Moving through her underground realm on this Wednesday afternoon, Stephanie is focused on tomorrow's pantry and on the long-term view, talking almost to herself as she touches the neatly-piled and labeled boxes in the orderly basement. "So, yeah, I wanna replace all these shelves. They just raised the money to fix this place up. This will all be gutted, they'll put in new shelving. Now that over there is the juice for Saturday breakfasts, this is Tuesday Chili, and that's Summer Sack Lunch stuff. The rest all belongs to the pantry. Used to be icky before we got the flooring last year. We've got one, two, three, four, five, six fridges of frozen meat (she gives each fridge a friendly slap, like on the rump of a favorite horse), plus there's another up in the Sacristy, and I have an annex too."

She stops, laughs, as though she's caught herself in the mirror. "I have the whole pantry in my head. If they need something I can say, 'Go in there, turn left here, it's on the second shelf.'"