

On course

At Community Transitional School, Tom Lechner is an art teacher, IT expert, photographer, facilities manager and role model. He's also the one who makes sure dozens of homeless children get to school each day.

BY ROBIN SCHAUFFLER
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Tom Lechner sits at a schoolroom-style desk in one corner of a busy office, a computer screen in front of him, folders of paperwork on the desk, pen in hand, phone at the ready. He's a tall, slim guy with tightly curling black hair showing wisps of gray, and frameless glasses perched on his nose. It's his job to get 80 elementary school children to school every day, no

matter where they may have spent the night.

As transportation coordinator, Tom is crucial to the Community Transitional School on Northeast Killingsworth Street. The CTS serves one special sector of the metro area's population of school-age children: All of

the students are homeless. They live in cheap motels or doubled-up in the apartments of relatives or friends; they sleep in shelters or in family cars or outside, on the street. Some students might be in the school for just a day; others have stayed for years. The average length of stay is 13 weeks.

CTS takes care of these complexities one family at a time, wherever they are. How do they do it? Size and intimacy explain a lot. It's a small, close-knit school; everyone knows everyone. They don't have to follow each federal guideline. They can be in touch with every family, answer every call.

And they have Tom.

He had no experience with homeless people before coming to CTS. But, he said, "I always had this urge to do something that had some sort of good mission to it."

He's been touched by seeing the things these kids deal with on a daily basis.

"Sometimes there are circumstances that just stick with you through the evening, and

that's hard." He looked down and turned his palms up, a small gesture, matter-of-fact.

"I'm a newcomer here," Tom said, downplaying his role in a way I came to learn was typical. In fact, he's been running the school's transportation system for about 10 years.

Before getting the transportation job, Tom was the school's night janitor. He had been studying physics and math, but at some point, he said, "I noticed I was spending all my time making art, so I dropped out and went off to be an artist." He graduated from Pacific Northwest College of Art in 1998, and it was tough to find work.

"It seemed like when you apply for jobs, if they see the math-science side, they'll say, 'Oh, you're overqualified. You don't want to work here; you'll just quit,'" he said. "And if they see the art side, they'll think you're a flake. It was by pure chance I found out about this school."

He heard about the janitorial job through friends. "It sounded great, interesting. And part time, so I'd still have time to do art."

One by one, he acquired other responsibilities. "Whenever they had a computer problem, I'd be just hovering in the background, and I think it was just kind of noticed." He became – informally – the school's entire tech department. Then in August 2006, the transportation job opened up, and there he was.

"Every single part of it was difficult," he said of the early days. "Figuring out all the laws, and then the requirements of the parents. And getting the buses repaired. If it's just changing lights or something simple, I do it."

He still makes art, and he's become the school's main photographer. Once a week, he teaches a drawing class for a group of lucky students. There are other regular art classes, with all kinds of materials, but in Tom's class, he said, "we usually just use paper and pencil." Tom calls it observational drawing, but the kids simply call it Art with Tom.

Visit on a sunny spring morning, to watch four school-bus-yellow mini-buses pull into the small parking lot and line up. The



Tom Lechner is the transportation coordinator at Community Transitional School in Portland. The private, nonprofit school for children experiencing homelessness serves about 80 students per day – this year 221 students total from 121 families.

PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

children look eager as they climb down the steps to start their school day.

Tom is uncannily calm; he seems to operate in a pool of quiet space. He doesn't hurry, doesn't raise his voice, speaks slowly and carefully. A vibrant grade school bustles around him, and his little pool remains unrippled.

As though to illustrate the multiple roles Tom plays, a small boy knocks and hurries through the door, a worried look on his face.

"Tom, there's no soap in the boys' bathroom."

"Are you the bathroom monitor?"

"There's no bathroom monitor for the boys."

"All right. Are they both empty, or just one?"

"Both!"

Tom nods, and finishes the thought he was working on before the boy comes in: "Every single part has more to it than you really expect going in. Sometimes each component of that is easy, and sometimes it's not easy at all."

Moments later, a girl (the official girls' bathroom monitor) comes in with the same bad news about the girls' room.

Next, a younger girl, in a dither.

"Tom! There's a spider in the bathroom! And I hate spiders!"

The kids are lively, eager, friendly, curious – as grade school kids tend to be, wherever they live.

"The kids are really pretty happy for the amount of chaos that they live through," Tom said. "They always have an unusual perspective on everything."

Patient, and not in a dither, Tom gets up to take care of the three emergencies.

A few minutes later, back at the desk, he explains: It's not in his job description, but "during the day, if someone throws up, I'll take care of it. For janitorial supplies – well, I've got all the keys."

Tom arrives each morning by bicycle before the buses and settles in at his desk. His final task of the day is to take out yesterday's kitchen trash.

He enjoys the diversity of people who come through the doors and interact in the busy, welcoming office: the homeless children and their parents; the dedicated staff and teachers; the many volunteers from all over town, coming in just to help out for a few hours; the neighbors dropping by to donate clothing or school supplies; the high school kids from Lake Oswego who collected breakfast cereal; the big donors bringing a check for a thousand dollars. Everyone becomes part of the team.

What holds this team together is the focus on children. Every CTS student shares the stresses that children with a stable home do not understand – even tease them for. They may be escaping domestic violence, or a parent has lost a job, or there's been a medical crisis that left the family unable to pay rent. They are all equals in that one important way; no one's going to put anyone down for where he or she lives. And there are new students every week. It's one of the benefits, Tom points out: "You're never the new kid for very long. That's a great situation."

And the bus system Tom runs is a vital part of the support the children feel here at CTS. Juli Osa, the school's development director, told me: "Kids will say, 'The bus driver knows my name!' Someone knows they're out there and is coming to get them."

Founded in 1990 as part of Portland Public Schools and originally housed at the YWCA downtown, CTS is today a registered private school, an independent nonprofit organization serving homeless children. It's the only such school in the state. With about 80 students each day – this year 221 students from 121 families – it can reach only a tiny portion of the homeless children in the metropolitan area. But the school does what it can. It operates on a tight budget with a staff of three full-time teachers, one part-time Title I teacher, two teacher's aides, three office staffers, one meal server, four bus drivers, and many loyal volunteers – all focused on the school's mission of providing to these children "a place where they have room to learn, laugh with friends and build hope," according to the school's website.

Osa outlined the astonishingly simple application process: no birth certificate, no proof of immunization, no paperwork. And no tuition. Families learn of CTS through word of mouth, and the shelters and other support organizations post signs and help spread the word. CTS maintains a close relationship with those in social services; the school depends on these people to help homeless families learn about CTS. A parent calls and gives the child's name and birth date and most recent grade level, and "in five minutes," Osa said, "they're on Tom's list for the next morning."

Although the 1987 McKinney-Vento Act made it a federal requirement that all public schools provide support for homeless children, and later amendments included transportation to and from school, the requirement doesn't guarantee that it's affordable or that school districts can effectively comply. Every school district in Oregon has at least one homeless-student liaison whose job is to support homeless children toward success in school. Portland Public Schools, the state's largest district, has only two liaisons.

It's hard to pin down statistics. The one thing that is clear is that the number of children without housing has increased dramatically in recent years. The 2015 Multnomah County Point-in-Time Count of Homelessness found 374 homeless children on the night of the count and 2,103 homeless students attending public schools in the county. Sixty-one percent of homeless schoolchildren were people of color.

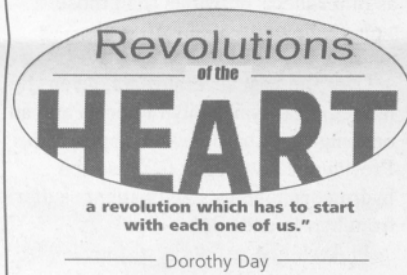
But these numbers include high-school-age students, whom CTS does not serve. And they do not include those who aren't in school at all – or, of course, those who were not found.

"It's impossible to know the number," Osa

"Kids will say, 'The bus driver knows my name!' Someone knows they're out there and is coming to get them."

JULI OSA,
CTS DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR

"The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart."



Dorothy Day

The *Revolutions of the Heart* series originates from a workshop taught by Martha Gies, whose students are profiling people in the community who inspire us. The title comes from Dorothy Day: "The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us." (Loaves and Fishes: The Inspiring Story of the Catholic Worker Movement.)