

Susan Emmons and her beautiful career

BY MARTHA GIES
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Portland is losing one of its most treasured and unique assets as Executive Director Susan Emmons retires from Northwest Pilot Project. Over her career of 31 years, she has provided the moral compass that points the way to keep our poor and elderly housed.

When the downtown Department of Housing and Urban Development contracts began expiring in the mid-'90s, Susan was indignant and vocal as owners and developers proposed conversion to high-end rents, just as she raised the alarm when the old traditional low-rent buildings – the Governor, the Hamilton and Lowndale – were either demolished or transformed and the elderly were pushed aside.

By using her own voice to amplify the frail voices of gentrification's victims, voices otherwise drowned out by the racket of demolition and construction, Susan has had, over the decades, remarkable success at saving buildings or replacing the units lost.

Now that our housing crisis has reached new and unmanageable proportions, some of us look back and remember that Susan figured out years ago that what we need is a local Housing Trust Fund. She was out giving talks to the community about it as early as 1993, when people found the price tag staggering: She knew we were probably looking at half a billion dollars. But for most of the politicians who came and went, it was never the priority as it was for Susan, who arrived in the early morning to see the desperation of the unhoused in front of her office door.

She persevered for three decades, impatiently watching the city manage to find funds for other projects: \$30 million for the Eastbank Esplanade, a great hit with tourists and people walking their dogs; \$57 million for the aerial tram that ferries physicians to work on Pill Hill; \$613 million to fund the Portland Bicycle Plan for 2030. By putting these projects ahead of low-income housing, we have created a metropolis convenient for doctors and cyclists, while the poor wait anxiously for their rent to double or their building to go to condos. And if they have already collided with that emergency, chances are they lie sleepless in doorways, trying to keep their single blanket from wicking in the rain.

Susan loves that quote of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope." At the same time, she has refused to be discouraged by the choices Portland makes, while she keeps pressing us to do better. "We refuse to believe there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of

Portland's leading advocate for affordable housing is retiring from her role as executive director of Northwest Pilot Project

"I would say, as I've gotten older, day-to-day kindness has been one of the things I value most. We are a group of people who try to exhibit kindness to each other all the time."

SUSAN EMMONS

Over the years, author Martha Gies has contracted with NWPP in various capacities: to research and produce the annual Downtown Portland Affordable Housing Inventory; to manage relocations as HUD buildings went offline; and once, at the request of Susan Emmons, to probate the estate of a deceased client. Gies has seen up close the special combination of kindness and respect with which Susan Emmons meets the world.

opportunity of this nation." Dr. King said that, too.

This is the story, as briefly told as possible, of how that beautiful career began, took shape and finally rose to meet the old Quaker mandate: "Speak truth to power."

Born and raised on suburban Chicago's North Shore, where her Realtor father helped integrate their community of Glencoe, Susan Graham moved to Portland in 1965 to attend Lewis & Clark College and there met her future husband, David Emmons.

By the time she was hired by Peter

Paulson, the founder-director of Northwest Pilot Project, she and David had lived in Scotland and Austria and returned to Portland, where Susan completed her degree in English at Portland State University. In the grand old tradition of female English majors, she had worked in various secretarial positions, finally landing at First Congregational Church, where her potential was finally recognized by an enlightened senior pastor. Working with the Rev. Lincoln Reed, Susan pushed far beyond typing church bulletins and homilies; she took it upon herself to fill what she saw as wasted space in this historic church and invited dozens of nonprofits to hold their meetings there, then managed the complicated scheduling.

In 1985, the year Paulson stole her away, David Emmons was employed at Powell's Books, and publishing his poetry. Their twin boys, Gavin and Iain, were already 10 years old.

The Rev. Peter Paulson (1921-2005), who was an Episcopalian priest and a United Church of Christ minister, was one of this city's great visionaries. Already in his 40s

when he relocated to Portland from Birmingham, Ala., he worked first as a hospital chaplain at Good Samaritan Medical Center, where he was alarmed by the practice of releasing elderly patients to the street without follow-up. He pulled together a loose federation of local churches that pledged to support his work and, in 1969, started Pilot Project to address the needs of the poor, the elderly and the homeless. In addition to befriending and championing these people, he started the first Meals on Wheels program in Oregon.

In 1985, Susan moved from her relatively lavish office at the stately old church on the Park Blocks to a crude work space in the (now demolished) Hamilton block, facing the historic Lowndale Square (where Occupy set up camp in the fall of 2011).

Paulson's original idea, which accounts for the name of the agency, was to pilot in areas of unmet need. Traditionally, Northwest Pilot Project identifies a need and pilots a program to address it. Often it test drives and tweaks it until the performance is up to its expectations, then locates an agency in whom they have the confidence to run it

with the same efficiency – and heart.

Thus, when Susan started work, NWPP was still doing money management, a challenging social service meant to ensure that vulnerable clients, at risk carrying their own funds, still have enough to last them the month. When another agency emerged dedicated to this task, NWPP turned this function over to it.

"For the first year, I was Peter's associate director," Susan explains. The agency sent her to a grant-writing workshop. "And it turned out having an undergraduate degree in English gave me transferable skills!" Her ability to write successful grants gave NWPP a wider reach.

But the event that left the biggest impression on her in those early years was the relocation of the Governor Hotel (now the Sentinel). Because, like Paulson, she has a special regard for the elderly, for their particular wisdom and irreplaceable stories

Paulson had entered the field of relocation in the '70s, again, because no one else was doing it. With a crew of volunteers – many of them students and Catholic nuns – he relocated elderly tenants from half a



Susan Emmons accepts the President's Volunteer Action Award from President George H.W. Bush and first lady Barbara Bush in 1990.



Emmons is accompanied by Peter Paulson, the founder of the Northwest Pilot Project. When Paulson retired, the board named Emmons director, a post she's held for nearly three decades.

dozen hotels and, at the request of the police, sometimes even from cardboard boxes. Most of the hotels, such as the Freeway, the Laurel and the Hatchie Rooms, were demolished. But there were a few wins: the Haviland, from which volunteers effected a big relocation when it closed in 1980, was purchased and remodeled by the Schnitzer family and reopened at the end of 1982 as the Park Tower. These 162 units of Section 8 federally subsidized housing represent a precious resource to this day, in the climate of dwindling low-income housing.

As Susan explains it, the Governor Hotel was sold to an out-of-state developer in 1986.

"It was my first experience with a relocation," she recalls, pain audible in her voice. "In October, we found 110 very low-income residents – most of them seniors – living at the Governor, paying \$125 per month for a small studio apartment. Some of them had lived there for over 20 years. We had 30 days to move them."

As usual, Susan does not dwell on the negative, but many of us were scandalized by the eagerness of developers who would rush to get the old people out of the building,

even though it would be *four years* before they found the money for the remodel. It is just this kind of property-over-people mentality that can make the work of

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Church, she told this story about that relocation:

"Estelle was 82 years old and had lived in the building for 23 years. She had coffee every morning at the Ritz Sisters in the Galleria – at that time a vibrant shopping center across the street. She used the downtown library, shopped at the Safeway; it was her neighborhood. When we found her an apartment in Northwest Portland, she said: 'What am I going to do in Northwest Portland?' She refused to move. On the last day, she was carried out by the police and

died in a nursing home. ...

"There were others at the Governor we moved multiple times as buildings kept closing and being converted to another use. Mr. Christiansen had been a school custodian. We moved him from the Governor to the Hamilton Hotel. When that building closed to make way for the new federal courthouse, we moved him to the Ben Stark. When that building was converted to the trendy Ace Hotel, we finally were able to move him to a subsidized building. He was 84 years old. He asked us if we thought he would have to move again. We told him the building had a 60-year affordability requirement. His response: 'That should last me.'"

Within two years after Susan began at the agency, Peter Paulson retired, and the board named her director, a post she has held for 29 years, building a staff of 17 people. She hired Cindy Mosney in 1988 to do emergency services, but by the following year, she realized that, as brilliant as Peter and the agency had been responding to emergencies, what was really needed was an effort in the direction of greater stability. So in 1989, she put out a call to hire the agency's first housing specialist, and Bobby Weinstock was hired to focus on permanent solutions. As with so many who have had the privilege of working with Susan, they were both longtime staff members: Cindy just retired last year, after 27 years, and Bobby is still there, with no intention of leaving.

If the relocation of the Governor is what most stands out in Susan's mind, it was her attempt to save the housing in the old Hamilton block that made her known throughout the city.

In 1992, it was proposed that the Hamilton block would be a perfect place for a new federal courthouse, and Susan waged a long and highly visible campaign to get the city to promise that the low-income rental units demolished on that site would be replaced downtown. Because it was the Lowndale Community, the issue was especially loaded.

Back in the '70s, Portland looked very different. In 1974, there were nearly 6,000 units of rental housing downtown affordable to people on a low income, and a community of 600 people lived in the vicinity of Lowndale Square. A booklet published by PSU's Urban Studies Center in 1971, offers this description:

"Lowndale Square ... is quietly busy even in relatively inclement weather. Older men play rummy on worn-smooth park tables next to the towering war monument, or checkers on a small wager to keep it interesting. Still others converse with an acquaintance or snooze or read a paper in a warm summer sun."

With the 1993 demolition of the Lowndale and Hamilton hotels, the last of the Lowndale Community was extinguished.

And although Susan had extracted that promise from the city to replace the housing, it would be seven years before all 194 new rental units were available.

When the first of those buildings came online, with 92 affordable studios on Southwest 13th Avenue, it gave Susan great pleasure to name it the Peter Paulson.

At the time of Paulson's death 11 years

See EMMONS, page 13