

IN MEMORIAM

Justin Buri: A life committed to human rights

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It was Oct. 7, 2015. City Hall was packed. Tenants, community members, organizers and advocates from housing and social justice organizations, and housing and health agency staff lined up along the walls, elbow to elbow, and squeezed into the benches in the upper balcony. With a clear mind and steady voice, Justin Buri, then executive director of the Community Alliance of Tenants, delivered an emotional and focused testimony calling for the City of Portland to declare a housing state of emergency.

"Tenants cannot wait for incremental change. We need bold, courageous action to address this human-made disaster... It's time to recognize that Portland is not livable, equitable, nor sustainable, when tenants are being pushed out of their homes... We are in a renter state of emergency."

Supporters listened and clapped throughout the speech, and afterwards, patted Justin on the back, thanking him "for having a special kind of courage" and being a "warrior."

On Nov. 1, Justin Buri committed suicide after suffering from chronic depression for several years. He fought his depression, a disease that, in the end, became the battle that wore him down.

"Depression is a disease, is mental health. Suicide is one of the 10 leading causes of death in the United States. Every 13 minutes, someone in our country commits suicide. People that commit suicide, like Justin did, are not weak, selfish or cowards. They have a disease and sadly we don't really know much on how to cure it or even how to talk about it. It is hard – very, very hard, but he was seeking help, doing all the things you should do when you are sick, but a disease like this is a mystery for all in and out of it," Juliet Maya, Justin's wife said.

Justin was born in Denver and grew up in Louisville, Ky. When Justin was a toddler, his Uncle John would wrestle with him and ask, "Justin, are you a lover or a fighter?" Chris Buri, Justin's dad, said "We always took Justin for a lover; he was so sensitive and such a cuddler as a little boy. But as he grew, we realized what a fighter he really was. As an impassioned advocate for fair housing in Portland, Justin fought for the under-served and made significant changes in local and regional housing policy."

He earned his degree from University of Colorado Boulder. After college, he lived in San Francisco and then in Washington, D.C., where he did graduate work in International Affairs – Latin America Studies. Then Justin traveled extensively in South America and eventually landed in Portland. Justin began his journey with Community Alliance of Tenants, or CAT, in 2009 as a volunteer and eventually stood at the helm of Oregon's only statewide renters rights organization as deputy director from 2011 to 2014, and executive director from 2014 to 2016.

During Justin's time at CAT, he worked with staff to champion historic changes in landlord-tenant law, including making it illegal to discriminate against Housing Choice Voucher recipients, increasing the



Justin Buri

PHOTO COURTESY OF OREGON COMMUNITY ALLIANCE OF TENANTS

notice period for significant rent increases and no-cause evictions from 30 days to 90 days for tenants living in their homes longer than one year, and leading the charge on declaring Oregon's current #RenterStateofEmergency.

"We talked a lot about housing as a human right, and shared philosophical positions and brilliant conversations about housing," Juliet said. "Justin was a compassionate soul, always thinking about the impact of his work and words, and used his energy for good, not only for him and his family but the community. His passion was contagious."

Justin helped eliminate the ban on inclusionary zoning with community partners in 2016. He worked alongside the tight-knit and

dedicated crew of housing leaders that imagined, loved and built the Welcome Home Coalition into existence.

"This election's major win for affordable homes – the first voter-backed ballot measure ever in Oregon, for affordable housing – was made possible by Justin's vision, thoughtfulness, dedication and true companionship," said Jes Larson, Welcome Home Coalition's director.

"Running this campaign was stressful, and at times, I doubted," Larson said. "But Justin told me that all of this was exactly normal territory when running an organization. He talked about how often we don't have the answers but we need to do the work anyway. How we only become the experts we need to be through the trying, the doing and learning to do it better next

time."

Justin had a fierce curiosity for understanding cities as living entities and how to improve access to all the different elements of a city. A candidate in the graduate program on urban studies at Portland State University, he was fascinated with learning about places where inversion in poor communities improved the quality of life for all the inhabitants of the city. He was part of a local podcast series called "Why

Isn't Anyone Talking About This?" that gave him the "opportunity to work with an amazing, passionate team and engage in stimulating, difficult conversations about the various intersections of social justice and the built environment," he once wrote.

One of his favorite topics of curiosity over the last few years was the impact of mega events like the Olympic Games on the host city, especially the communities that have experienced generations of poverty, oppression and marginalization. "They undermine democracy, increase economic inequality and unravel the social safety net," he once said. Justin used the podcast platform as another venue to bring visibility to these issues.

Standing up for human rights was a core value to Justin. He joined a human rights delegation to Colombia to document the effects of U.S. foreign policy on marginalized communities and advocated for federal policy change from military training to community development. It was there, in Medellin, that he met Juliet.

"When I saw Justin in the hostel for the

Help is available

If you or someone you know suffers from depression, you can seek help by calling the Multnomah County Crisis Line at 503-988-4888. When you call the Crisis Line you get:

- Free, 24/7 mental health support
- Translation services for non-English speakers
- Referral to low-cost or sliding-scale agencies
- Help finding mental health providers
- Information about non-crisis community resources

Clackamas County
503.655.8585

Washington County
503.291.9111

Clark County
360.696.9560
1.800.686.8137

first time, there was something amazing about him. His eyes were so genuine, and his laugh. His laugh was infectious. When he laughed, it made you laugh harder," Juliet said. After weeks of talking into the night, the two parted, Justin promising to return to be with Juliet. "I didn't believe he would. It was so rare and special, and the circumstances were not working out. But then he came back. He returned. We spent two months together, and then he returned to the U.S., and eventually I moved there and we married in 2009 in Peninsula Park. Even then, I could see his persistence. He wouldn't let me go, and it's been the best years of my life."

Justin loved bicycle riding, and combined bike touring with camping, often waking up before the rest of the crew to have coffee ready in a French press. He could be found every August out at Pickathon, a local bluegrass festival, jamming to the tunes with a beer in hand. Goofy outfits, crazy dance moves and his love of food were among the many memories shared by friends and family at his celebration of life this past Sunday, Nov. 20, at Augustana Lutheran Church.

Justin ended his life because he was suffering from a devastating illness. Depression can be a terminal illness similar to heart disease or cancer. Despite psychiatric therapy, medication and the support of his family, Justin's emotional immune system, after months of suffering, could no longer fend off the ravages of this disease.

"We see that his falling victim to suicide was not a choice, but the result of the most desperate need for relief from the overwhelming anguish of depression," Chris Buri, Justin's father, said.

"It does not discriminate and can affect the ones we think shine the most," Juliet said. We all need to work to make sure that there is no stigma with this disease and all those that struggle have access to the help they need without shame."