



PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

James Srp slept in his 1993 Buick LeSabre after he lost his apartment and his job. After surgery and in-patient physical therapy – and 16 months without a permanent residence – Northwest Pilot Project helped him get into housing.

Not just surviving - thriving

BY ROBIN SCHAUFFLER
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Just six years ago, James Srp was in his early 60s, relatively healthy, employed, and renting a house in Beaverton, where he'd lived for 15 years. He's well-educated, an avid reader and comfortable around computers. His mobile, friendly face easily

cracks into a smile. Sociable and articulate, he speaks in looping sentences with pauses to consider his words. He describes a long career in health care and computer work.

"I think of myself as a person who works," he says. "You know, takes care of himself."

In short, not the guy you'd expect to find living in his car on the streets of Beaverton.

JAMES SRP

He lived in his car for almost a year, but thanks to an invaluable support system, the former Beaverton resident now has an apartment in Portland

Srp (pronounced Serp) meets me at the door of the building where he now lives in downtown Portland, walking with a four-point cane, in jeans and a heavy winter coat with a wool cap over his head, a little of his graying hair peeking out.

"Between the weather and the pneumonia, and the fact I don't know Portland yet ... that covers why I haven't had a haircut," he says.

It's cold outside, but the small community room where we talk is warm enough.



A series of stories about people who have experienced homelessness, and found their way home

"My story," he says, "is part of a larger story."

When the 2008 recession hit, Srp saw a lot of people laid off, but he kept his job. Then one day in 2011, he collapsed at work. The doctors discovered he needed a pacemaker. Returning home after the procedure, he found a foreclosure notice on his front door. It was a shock, but he felt sorry for his landlady.

"She was caught up in the recession, like so many people," he says.

Looking back, he sees that sign on the door as the first of "a series of cascading events."

Next, Srp was laid off. In effect, he

became retired, though not by choice. ("I don't like being retired. It's boring.") And he developed intense arthritis pain in his hip.

In November 2013, he took Social Security, but he kept looking for work.

He recalls one interview: "I had the qualifications. Actually, I was kind of excited. I got there; it was this really neat old building. I literally could not walk. Propped myself up on the car, got to the wall, crept along the wall, and found that the office was on the second floor, and ... no elevator." Although "the people were great," they couldn't hire him; he couldn't use the stairs. (Oregon's disabilities law exempts employers with fewer than six employees.)

"So, two and a half years in pain, and I was losing the ability to basically take care of myself," he says. A friend gave him a cane to use, and doctors told him he would need a hip replacement.

The owner's foreclosure finally went through, and Srp had to move. Nothing was affordable. He briefly rented a dilapidated double-wide mobile home, then moved into a motel, but knew he couldn't afford it long term, even with help from friends.

He had nowhere to go. He couldn't picture being on the street.

"I don't have the right background," he says. "I'm not a person who can say, 'Hey, I've got a tent, I know how to build a fire, I can camp out.' I don't have those skills."

But Srp owned a car: a 1993 Buick LeSabre.

"You can sleep in a car like that," he says.

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