



PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

Randall McKee moved into his Multnomah County apartment in October. Central City Concern connected him to housing.

'I jumped through the hoops' to earn this

BY JANE SALISBURY
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Randall McKee and I met to talk about the vicissitudes of homelessness and his new life after having been homeless for decades. A tall man with a deep voice, bright blue eyes and a full beard, he was dressed in jeans, T-shirt and boots.

In his new, warm, neat-as-a-pin apartment, he offered me a comfortable chair and a fresh cup of coffee, both welcome on a cold, windy day.

He told me that he had spent most of his homeless years right there in Multnomah County, just a few miles from Rockwood, where he grew up.

"Alcohol played a major role in my homelessness," Randall explained. "I partied a lot. I worked 16 years in the shipyards as

an onboard marine electrician, lived out in Seaside for a while – I loved it there, and I'd like to go back someday – worked on Coast Guard vessels." In fact, he worked on whatever kind of ship was in port, solving electrical problems.

But eventually, unemployment and some time in prison led Randall to a life lived mostly outdoors, one period lasting for 15 years. He stayed on one of the loading docks downtown near Blanchet House for a while, and in various shelters. For a time,



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

Randall also lived at Dignity Village, where he was the secretary of the council. The politics were difficult, in his opinion, because he was required to be involved. So he went back to living on the streets, in communal camps or in a camper on a friend's property, for many years.

Camping, Randall learned the unwritten laws that develop naturally, away from the mainstream. One's possessions are crucial to survival and a theft can threaten your precarious balance. He learned to buy more than he needed, and how to live with others in similar circumstances.

"Homeless life is very difficult. If you're not in a commune where there are others who can protect your property, it's very

hard. You learn to accommodate those who don't ask. For example, having had many things missing or displaced, I'd buy four propane canisters instead of two, per month, so that someone would take two and leave me some."

Thinking about the severe weather we've had this winter, I wondered how he could survive in the cold.

"I'd be in my three-layer sleeping bag, and I'd be just fine. Until it got burnt out – someone came once and burned out my campsite, which was far away from anyone else." After that, he said simply, "I walked away. I've been to jail. It's easier to walk away." He lived at Thousand Acres, the huge semi-wild off-leash park in the Sandy River delta near Troutdale, at one point, but there were too many people there for him.

"Things have changed," Randall said. "When we were kids, we played out anywhere. Now there are people living here in those places, and it's not so safe for children."

He went off by himself to camp under the railroad bridge near Sandy Boulevard in Wood Village. In the low space at one end of the bridge, in a cave-like hollow, his home was a nightmare of soot and diesel and the bitter east wind. He stayed there for nine months. The railroad bridge was a rough place to live, but he was alone and preferred it that way.

Even so, Randall had hope during those years.

"It was always in the back of my mind to

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RANDALL MCKEE

After he lived most of his life outdoors, an addiction treatment program gave him a fresh perspective that led him to his new apartment