

New solutions for those living in natural areas

Curbing climate change, protecting our natural environment and ending homelessness. In a world gone mad, these challenges sometimes feel so enormous that people don't have a clue on where to begin.

More so, what do we, as a community, do when for some of people experiencing homelessness, the only options for camping are on those very natural resource areas we are trying to protect?

I've written before about why some people's only options for sleeping outside are parks, wetlands and other wooded areas around our

region. The city is booming. New developments, a robust economy and a growing population have created neighborhoods that have less tolerance for people experiencing homelessness.

Just this week, the Portland Mercury reported that some members of the Piedmont neighborhood are looking to slap a new label on any property owner who helps a homeless camp or shelter to spring up without a formal OK from nearby residents as "bad neighbors" – threatening not to cooperate with such a neighbor for up to five years.

It's the latest in a long line of disagreements between people on the streets, advocates, government and neighborhoods around the city.

Hence, more and more homeless campers are being forced from downtown and neighborhoods due to gentrification and moving their camps to natural areas and parks throughout the city and region.

It's my belief that the vast majority of Oregonians care about the homeless and more so, care about the environment and curbing climate change. People simply don't know how to respond to these enormous challenges outside of giving to nonprofits and doing their part to recycle and become more conscientious consumers.

What do we do?

Poverty and environmental advocates along with

natural resource managers came together this past week for a daylong training on homelessness and the environment hosted by the Bonneville Environmental Foundation (See "Advocates, park workers seek solutions to illegal camping," page 7).

The goal was to educate the environmental community and natural resource managers on the history and trauma of people experiencing homelessness, while also thinking about solutions to the challenges that we face collectively. It was a great first step.

I have long believed that with a shift in thinking and funding, we could actually be utilizing people experiencing homelessness to help maintain our natural areas. More so, people on the streets could be utilized to help clean up trash around the city on a larger scale.

With the right kind of investment, we could offer both work and educational programs geared toward giving people a hand up, while also helping solve what's at the heart of making our community so angry. I've long said, it's not homeless people themselves that make the general public believe they are subhuman – it's the trash that goes along with the ongoing struggle of living outdoors.

There's no reason we couldn't be thinking about new programs that are not so different from Street Roots, with individuals working to clean up natural areas in the region and also learning about the benefits of supporting our bird and animal sanctuaries, wetlands and parks.

We have both the expertise and the desire to do it. What we need are a shift in thinking around economic development strategies and political will. What we need is cold hard cash.

It's my opinion, that if such a nonprofit was created, people would flock to support it. Maybe business leaders, government and investors should be thinking about ways to create and maintain organizations to solve the problems we have right in front of us, instead of simply investing in companies whose sole purpose is to make a profit. In the meantime, we're working on building the foundation for such an effort. Stay tuned.

DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer



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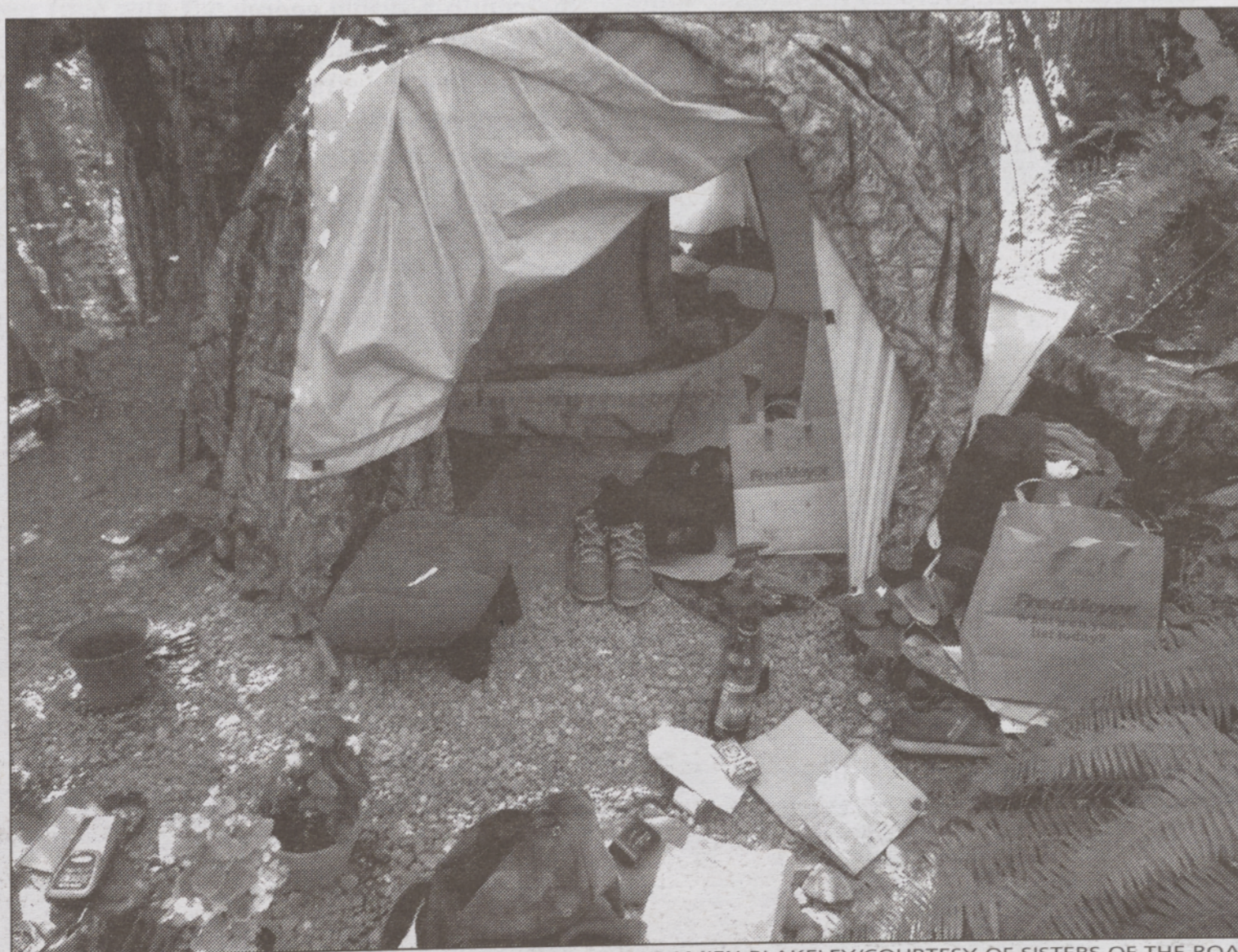
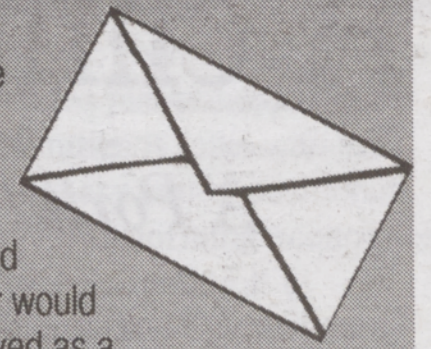


PHOTO BY DAMIEN BLAKELEY/COURTESY OF SISTERS OF THE ROAD

Last winter, Sisters Of The Road provided people experiencing homelessness with photography classes and disposable cameras so that they could document their lives for a project called "Through Our Lens." This photo depicts the campsite of a participant, Phoebe O., who was sleeping in a wooded area of Southwest Portland. She is also a Street Roots vendor.

Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Executive Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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