

# Street-level lessons on the urgency to end trauma

It was a situation that easily could have gone badly.

By the time I walked up, a clearly distressed man was sitting on the sidewalk, yelling, while an officer towered over him. Down the block, a man filmed the scene with his cell phone. People walked up; a crowd swelled. More cell phone cameras

clicked on. Police cars pulled up, lights flashing, and more and more officers – seven in total – soon stood over the distressed man. One officer stretched rubber gloves onto his hands. The man was on the sidewalk, vulnerable, shouting about his fears of police, while numerous

uniformed men occluded his view, police lights flashing.

But here was the stroke of luck. Of all the blocks for this to go down, this had to be one of the most skilled, per-capita, in de-escalation. Because on this night, people were gathered for the annual Pitch a Tent event, June 8, kitty-corner at Southwest Fourth Avenue and Washington Street.

First launched in 2010 by Right 2 Survive, an organization dedicated to the rights of homeless people, Pitch a Tent calls attention to the sanctioned camping by people holding spots for the Rose Festival Parade. The event, explains one of the founders, Leo Rhodes, is “in protest, not against the parade, but against the idea of letting people pitch their tents for leisure but not for survival.”

Organizers heighten the contradictions of how housed and homeless people are treated by pitching tents for homeless people to sleep along the parade route, too. The one-day-event is festive with live music, dance and poetry, burgers on a grill – an evening for people to catch up.

So the crowd around the police and the distressed man understood that a shouting, screaming person does not always pose a threat. How we respond creates more options for a good outcome.

It was a situation that easily could have gone badly, but didn't.

Leanne Falzon, the Sisters Of the Road Cafe Program Manager, convinced the officers to allow her to approach the man. Instead of hovering over him, she knelt down offering him cornbread on a paper plate. He clutched the plate and his voice calmed just a little. Leanne also offered him a cigarette. As he inhaled from it, he calmed a bit more.

And then, the police let the man go – and go he went, clutching his cornbread, dashing quickly across the street and out of sight. Safely.

Everyone in the crowd watched, still not making any quick moves, then dispersed back to the festivities of Pitch a Tent. The documentarians

swiveled their cameras back to the stage.

Internalized biases, miscommunication, heightened emotions – a scene can swirl into violence. There is so much trauma on the streets that any encounter has a train of other encounters that have gone badly behind it. The scene goes in and out of focus.

“People need to know that people are on their side,” Leanne Falzon explained to me later. “That’s what we have learned in the cafe for how people de-escalate each other.”

Please do hover here with me for a moment on what Falzon said: people de-escalate each other. Sometimes, the person spiraling out of control needs the help from others, and sometimes, they are in the position to help. Fear can transform into belligerence, but it doesn't always stay there, and it doesn't have to get worse. Many people who live on the streets and in self-governed villages possess these skills. It was through a previous Pitch a Tent event that I received my first de-escalation training from organizers who had been homeless, and who also helped with security at Right 2 Dream Too and Hazelnut Grove.

Falzon told me that before I walked up, the man was yelling, “I have PTSD. I have PTSD.” He was advocating for himself. His conduct might have been bound up in his traumas. The people who have already suffered suffer more for their suffering.

I think about this as I follow in horror how the Trump administration is ripping children from families who cross into the United States seeking asylum. The very reason those families are targeted is because of their previous traumas: They are trying to escape violence and poverty. Now, children are imprisoned, facing the terror of losing their parents, and parents are imprisoned, facing the terror of losing their children.

All we can see is a present moment – like a man yelling out belligerently on the sidewalk – without knowing those layers of the past. I think about images from that Portland street corner – the strobes of light of police cars, flashes of cell phones. And then a hand offering corn bread on a paper plate. Each moment has so many possibilities. I try to remember this on the streets of our city where people suffer poverty and violence in public view.

Out of public view are these families separated from their children; some parents, in fact are now incarcerated in Oregon, at Sheridan Prison. These forced separations and incarcerations are not just present-day cruelties; these are curses into the future. Some day, the families torn apart by our government will have to lug these traumas with them.

Here at Street Roots, as we grapple with how to act in this moment, we gathered some steps on the back page of this issue. Please step forward and take action.



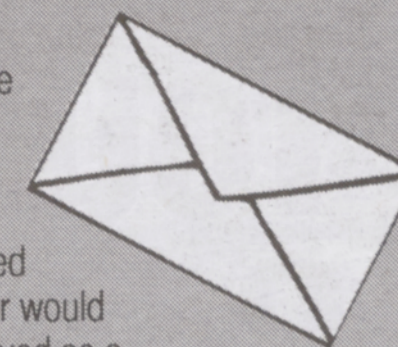
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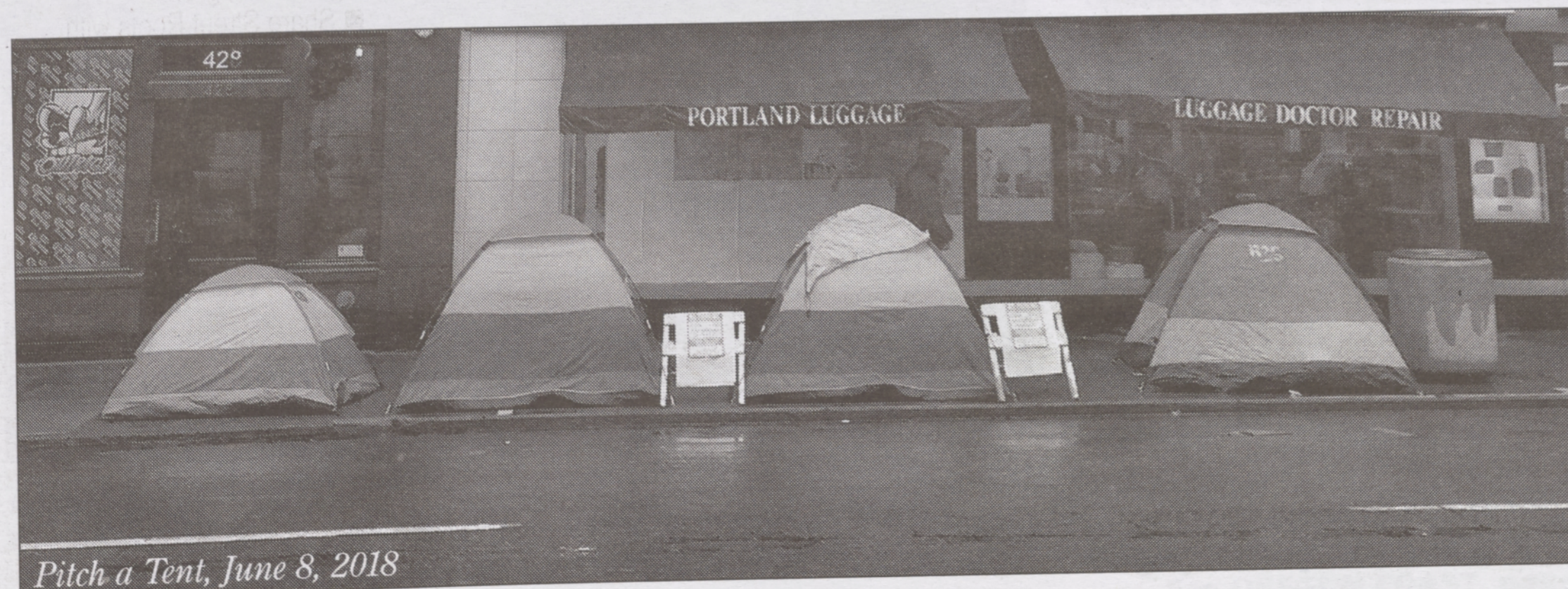
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