

'THE MOST GRASS-ROOTS GENDER JUSTICE WORK I'VE EVER SEEN'

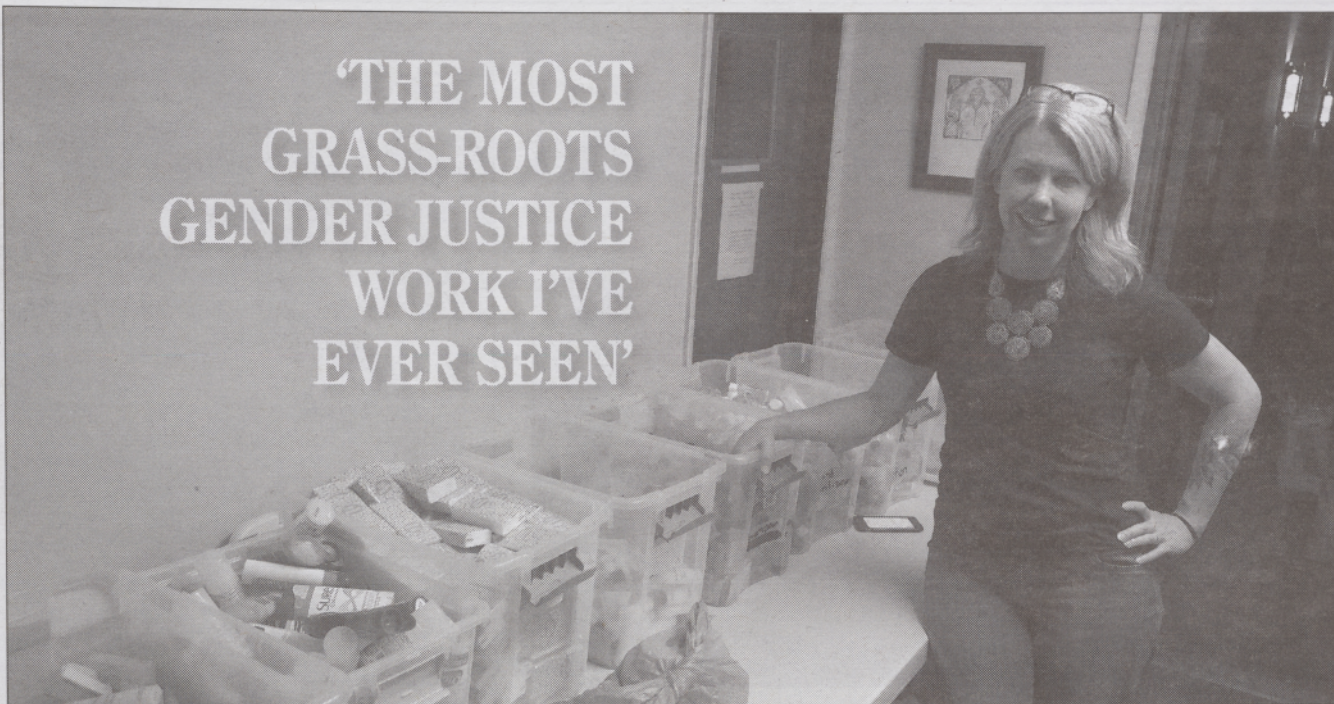


PHOTO BY HELEN HILL

Anneliese Davis is the director of Rahab's Sisters in Portland.

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stands attentively outside, checking to see that only women enter.

"I've been in abusive relationships, and I like to be here without men," says Wendy

Kirkpatrick, who has been coming to Rahab's every Friday night for the past five years. "It's my sanctuary. There is no judgment, no matter what walk of life you are from. It's the one hour a week I know I can put down everything and just relax and not think about anything."

"A meal always makes people feel equal," said Teresa Ricalday, who is

attending with her daughter Katrina. "There's a sense of family, a sisterhood."

IF YOU GO

What: Rahab's Sisters annual fundraiser; happy hour and community-building

When: 5:30-7:30 p.m. Oct. 11

Where: Cerimon House, 5131 NE 23rd Ave., Portland

Tickets: rahabs-sisters.org/events

Lately, however, Rahab's has been caught up in explosive tensions in the neighborhood surrounding the Multnomah County Health Department's needle exchange program, which is open Tuesday and Friday evenings near the entrance to Rahab's Sisters.

"Last week (Sept. 14), there was a group parked across the street, taking photographs and filming and yelling at us," described one woman who wished to remain anonymous. "We had to pull the blinds down upstairs, and guests had to use a different exit to avoid being photographed as they were leaving. It felt very unsafe. We were afraid."

"They seemed to be here for the needle van," she said. "I don't know why they focused on us, too."

The Multnomah County Health Department has been operating a needle exchange in this location for the past 22 years. Originally it was set up a few yards away, on busy Southeast 82nd Avenue. Fifteen years ago, Rahab's invited the needle exchange van to set up in the church parking lot, not far from the entrance to Rahab's, because it was safer and off the street. But now the privacy and

emotional well-being of their guests is threatened because of their proximity to and support for the needle exchange site.

"What we are not prepared to do as an organization is go toe to toe with an angry group like the Montavilla Initiative," said Davis, Rahab's director.

The Montavilla Initiative is a coalition of neighborhood residents who have been vocal about the increasing degradation of their neighborhood. They are frustrated with what they experience as an abundance of used needles, drug deals, increased theft and vandalism in the area around Saints Peter and Paul Church. In a lengthy statement on their website, www.montavilla.org, they say: "Neighbors in the vicinity of this needle exchange have been dealing with chronic crime and livability issues for years and have tried to work with the volunteers of Rahab's Sisters and the Multnomah County Needle Exchange employees. Volunteers and County employees have been condescending to Montavilla neighbors and have refused to take any responsibility for the behavior of their clients, nor have they made any attempts to prevent harm to those living nearby."

Michela Bedard, chair of Rahab's Board of Directors, said Rahab's has been "unwillingly brought into the fray. We work hard to provide a safe space, and to see a protest or calling out or intimidation is incredibly saddening because we strive to offer a place of sanctuary."

Bedard said Rahab's doesn't have much to do with the political world. "Our guests came in here really feeling attacked that night. We are not officially affiliated, but we are in support of the harm reduction needle exchange."

Erin Browne, with the Multnomah County Health Department, has been working in the needle exchange van beside Rahab's for years.

"We hear the neighborhood concerns and want to be part of the solutions," she said. "My take on it is we are in the midst of a housing crisis and opioid epidemic that is affecting most of Portland and Multnomah County, not just Montavilla."

"We currently have a needle return rate of over 100 percent. That means we have brought in more syringes than we have distributed. We know there would be more syringes out there if it wasn't for us."

Other close neighbors in the area have not had the same experience as the members of the Montavilla Initiative.

Yonna Carroll lives a few blocks away. She brought fruit salad to the dinner at Rahab's.

"Being here this week is even more important to make sure the folks here can know the community really does stand with them," Yonna said. "They've been filming and monitoring and intimidating people, taking away their option for anonymity and access to an important service. Filming people at a needle exchange, how can you even do that?"

Kate Sage lives next door. Her house overlooks the church parking lot.

"I've lived here for 13 years," she said, "and I've never had a problem with an abundance of needles anywhere near my house. My kids ride their bikes all around here. I'm trying to think of the last time I saw a needle somewhere. There are needles on the streets; that happens. But it's not clustered in Montavilla. This isn't drawing people here."

Despite the neighborhood tensions, Rahab's Sisters is determined to continue their tradition of radical hospitality, confidentiality and safety for their guests.

"Nothing will stop us from our mission of creating a safe space for these women," Bedard said.

This letter by guest Heidi Eaton illustrates precisely why they remain so committed:

"It took me five months of coming here before I realized I matter. And I'm not sure, but all of a sudden, I couldn't work the street anymore. I've realized I'm not for sale. And I believe it was you and these women that have done that for me. I'm working on quitting drugs also, but it's one battle at a time and that easy money sure was easy to get but not for the price of my soul. So like I've said, there is no explaining what you have done for me. I'm so grateful. Love you and everyone at Rahab's."



Michela Bedard