



PHOTO BY HELEN HILL

Kitchen volunteers assemble meals at Rahab's Sisters in Portland. Director Anneliese Davis, right, is the organization's first staff member; it has always relied on volunteer power.

# RADICAL HOSPITALITY

*Rahab's Sisters gives sanctuary to women with a range of needs, but it faces challenges in the wake of protests over a nearby needle exchange*

**BY HELEN HILL**  
STAFF WRITER

Pastel tablecloths are flung over large round tables. Flowers are arranged in vases. A team of volunteers in the kitchen is creating 100 hot meals out of random food donations. There are stacked cartons of fried chicken from a school down the road, trays of potato salad, bowls of fruit from visiting neighbors and orange-iced Halloween cookies.

Soon a steady stream of women begin arriving. It's Friday night at Rahab's Sisters. Time for some "radical hospitality."

Rahab's Sisters takes its name from the biblical story of Rahab, a prostitute from Jericho, the Promised Land. Her beauty, generosity and kindness were legendary. When she aided the Israelites in the fall of Jericho, she went from harlot to heroine. And in the eyes of the volunteers at Rahab's Sisters, all the women who come through their doors are heroines.

Rahab's Sisters began 15 years ago when the female clergy at Saints Peter and Paul Episcopal Church, on Southeast 82nd Avenue just off Burnside, began reaching out to women working in the sex trade up and down the

avenue, offering them cups of hot coffee on cold nights. They began placing lights in the windows when there was a meal available inside. Soon, a weekly dinner evolved. There was no outreach: News of the hot meal spread from woman to woman. And there was no judgment, no sermonizing, no attempt to convert or rehabilitate. Just simple, radical hospitality.

Fifteen years later, Rahab's Sisters is still going strong.

Rahab's gives sanctuary to women who are housed and unhoused, some are mentally ill, some are living in cars or tents in nearby parks. There are women who are past or present victims of abuse and assault. Some arrive on the bus or train from downtown shelters across the river. There are women who suffer from substance abuse disorder and others who work in the sex trade. Some are elderly, some are young. Some are in recovery, some are not.

"It is the most grass-roots gender justice work I've ever seen," Director Anneliese Davis said. Davis was hired last year as the first-ever staff member. Rahab's existed on the strength of volunteers alone for 14 years.

Davis values Rahab's as "a way of being present to women however they are coming in, without this agenda of, well let's check these boxes and get you taken care of, move you on

down the path to something else," she said. "It is purely this presence and love and this space where women can be vulnerable and let go of some of the stuff they are carrying without any expectation that anyone is able to fix it. If I had superpowers, I couldn't fix what has happened to some of our guests, but I can hear it and I can say you did not deserve that, and you are an incredibly strong person for coming through that and I'm so glad you are here."

In addition to providing a sit-down dinner, Rahab's also provides craft workshops, foot bath clinics, hygiene items and clothing.

Tonight there are 100 pounds of fleece blankets and quilts to distribute, and Reed Scott-Schwallbach, a teacher from Centennial High School, has brought in a large bag of donated clothing collected by her students.

"I really appreciate that Rahab's is part of our community," Scott-Schwallbach said. "I have students who are concerned about human trafficking, so we've been working here now for three or four years. It's just the girls who can come, but the boys can gather the donations too."

Only those who identify as women are allowed at Rahab's Sisters. A security guard

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