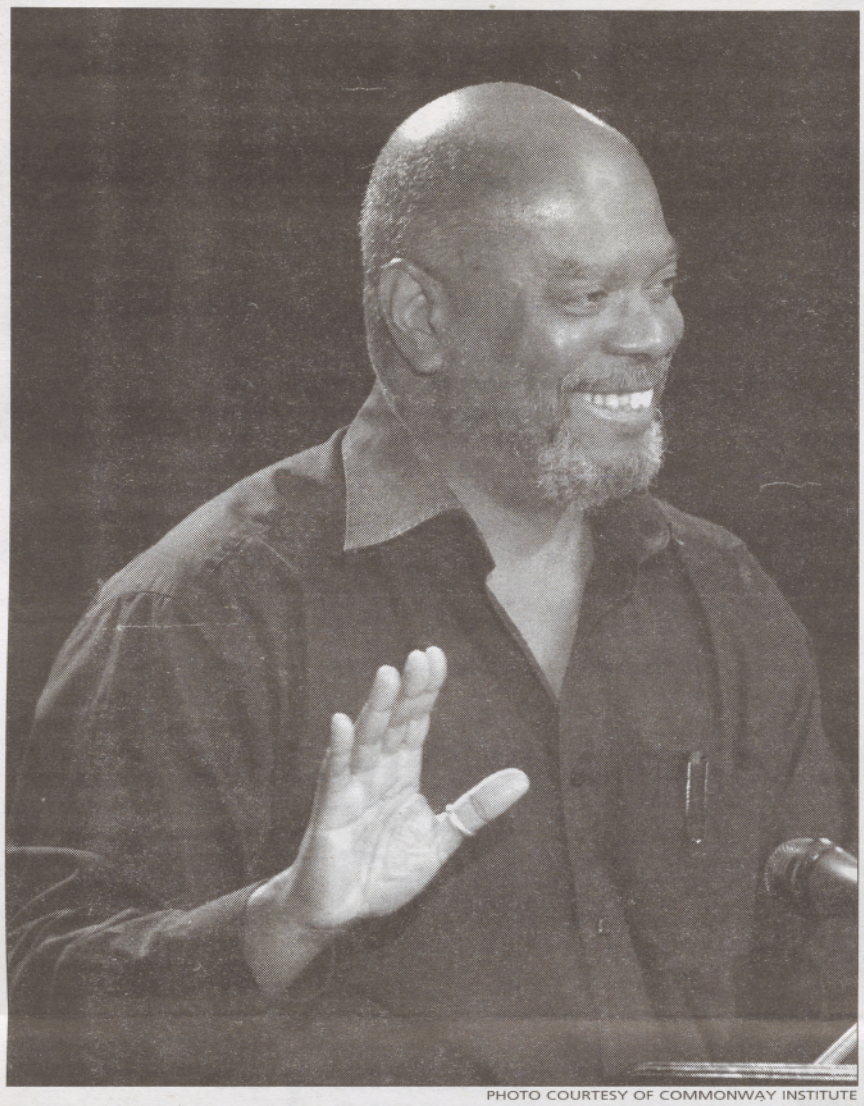

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Shariff Abdullah

The Commonway Institute director talks about the intersection between homelessness and waste management

BY JARED PABEN
STAFF WRITER

Shariff Abdullah asked the crowd if they'd ever heard the expression "poor white trash." Hands raised throughout the hotel ballroom.

"What you are talking about is a human being," he said. "What you're talking about is as much a spark of the divine as you are. The only difference is money."

Society doesn't just think of discarded materials as trash, it allows people to be labeled as such, according to Abdullah. Addressing the issues of both homelessness and waste requires a change in our consciousness, as well as the culture and behaviors that underlie that consciousness, he said.

Abdullah was presenting to a crowd of public and private garbage and recycling industry professionals at an event organized by the Association of Oregon Recyclers. Abdullah, director of Portland nonprofit Commonway Institute, was the keynote speaker for the Nov. 13 gathering at the Sheraton Portland Airport Hotel. Focused on the intersection of homelessness and solid waste, the event drew local experts from the public, nonprofit and for-profit sectors to discuss programs that provide housing, medical services, needle exchanges, garbage cleanups, environmental remediation services and more.

Data presented at the gathering help point to the scale of the problem. The city of Portland's Homelessness/Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program coordinated 3,122 clean-ups during the 2017-18 fiscal year, removing more than 1,300 tons of garbage. Metro's Regional Illegal Dumping (RID) Patrol, which fills the gaps in the three-county region's clean-up services, has cleared 391 tons of solid waste from more than 3,460 dump sites so far this year. An estimated 27 percent are caused by unhoused people, and the rest are attributed to dumping by businesses and housed residents.

In his speech, Abdullah, a consultant, speaker, author and advocate for societal transformation, pointed out that we're all aware of the problem: piles on the sidewalks, streets and other rights of way. We also know refuse collection costs money. "The system is built for people who have money," he said. "We don't think about anybody else."

But there's a deeper problem, he noted. Especially in Portland, it's easy for people to get caught up in the belief that "my bleeding heart is bleeding the way it should be bleeding" and fail to recognize the fact that varied populations are living on the streets, some of whom exhibit asocial or anti-social behaviors, he said. Some want to be responsible with their refuse disposal but can't afford it, and some "don't give a rip about your system and don't give a rip about where that trash winds up."

As a result, there are no one-size-fits-all solutions to the issue. "If you're thinking in your mind about X person, you also have to think about Y and Z," Abdullah said.

He returned a number of times to the concept of changing our collective consciousness about garbage generation and human poverty.

Abdullah has visited dozens of countries, and he sprinkled anecdotes from his travels throughout his speech. In one, he recalled working in cliffside slums outside of Rio de Janeiro to help provide sanitation facilities. Because residents lacked toilets, they'd defecate in plastic bags and throw them – "they call these 'flying toilets'," he said – and the bags would end up on hillsides or in streams.

The organization he worked with provided latrines that relied on a series of lagoons to purify the wastewater. The residents used the lagoons and natural fertilizer to grow bananas and harvest duck eggs and fish for sale. "Instead of looking at the problem as a problem, what happens if you choose to look at the problem as a solution?" Abdullah asked.

He also called for a reframing of society's view of what 'poor' means. A resident of Portland for the past three decades, Abdullah, 67, grew up in a "proverbial broken home" in the worst parts of Camden, N.J., living in public housing supported by welfare. Despite scoring in the 95th-percentile range on standardized tests, he was told by a guidance counselor in ninth grade he had no aptitude for college and his options were to work as an auto mechanic or in food service.

"He couldn't even look at the numbers that were sitting in front of him. His view of me was colored by these glasses he had on, and the glasses said 'poor black kid, not going to college,'" Abdullah said.

In eleventh grade, he saw a different counselor, who looked at his file and asked where he was applying to college. After he told her he had no aptitude for college, she uttered a one-word expletive that changed his life: bullshit! The first counselor was black and the second was white, said Abdullah, who went on to earn a law degree from Boston University.

"I don't think color has anything to do with it," he said. "I think people who are adjusted to seeing poverty will see it across the board."

When it comes to developing local solutions to homelessness and dumped garbage, he urged forum attendees to convene a broad group of interested parties.

"The more stakeholders you get in the room, the deeper your solution is going to be, the juicier your solution is going to be, the more connected your solution is going to be," he said. "You'll have to constantly ask the question, 'Is everybody here? Is everybody here?' And, hopefully, you'll never get to answer, 'Yeah, everybody's here.'"

Untitled

by J. Juno

If I was my own maker,
I don't know what I would say.
Maybe I would ask
why you gave me the ability
to recognize apathy
or evil in another person,
but without any real power
to instigate change
And why give me the ability
to draw, paint, or write
but not grant any opportunities
where my abilities could be used?
Why give me so much potential
that goes unused?

Gravity

by Aaron Chandler

Life arranges complexity with
Bonds of electricity,
hydrogen bonds, atomic bonds.
Death disorients.
Destroys us to build again.
The cycles of pain and relief
create an enjoyable contrast,
That can be unendurable
throughout the troughs.
But if you make it through,
the rewards that your body grants
are a relative
Paradise.
The city is toxic,
but its rewards are knowledge.
Loneliness can be tragic
and then death waits
And apparently the universe
will end in absolute entropy.
A mere hint of temperatures
increase across the entire universe,
But we will never see this.
For now we play, work and eat.
We think.
We do as much as we want
and then are not.