

Saturday Silence

The ongoing saga of speech unplugged.

Thirteen Saturdays after the electricity was first disconnected at the Wayne Morse Free Speech Plaza, Iana Matthews-Harris, 18, and Ishi Woods, 22, are still lugging their battery-powered speaker downtown each week to amplify the voices of Eugene's outspoken citizens. The two are co-managers of the 14-year-old Wayne Morse Youth Project, a grassroots organization led by youth and founded by the beloved congressman to encourage young people to get involved in community issues and politics.

"They're getting quite a civics lesson, but not in a way we wanted," remarked WMYP board chair Victor Stathakis, referring to the ongoing frustration Matthews-Harris and Woods have experienced since the plug was pulled on their first speak-out of the year, planned for April 1. "They went to the Human Rights Commission. They went to mediation and they've gotten zero results. They got to meet their accusers, but the only answer they're getting is, 'We'll see.'"

The accusers in this case are the county commissioners who support a decision made by county employee David Suchart. Citing complaints of drug use and vandalism, Suchart discontinued the use of electricity at the Free Speech Plaza during non-business hours. He declined to comment on this decision.

"Monday through Friday, 9 to 5? That means it isn't there for anybody who goes to work, anybody who goes to school. It cuts off our whole program," Matthews-Harris pointed out.

"Free speech encompasses a lot of differ-

ent things," Woods added. "It's not just speaking into a mic; it's performance, music, drumming. We were creating a comfortable, positive scene, attempting to overpower the drug scene. Without electricity, they've taken away our power to do that."

On May 10, Stathakis, Woods and Matthews-Harris went to mediation with Suchart, representatives from the county commissioners' office and Saturday Market administrators in an attempt to gain an explanation. For them, denying electricity as a solution to drug crimes and loitering made no sense. With the help of Community Mediation Services, they made their position known to all parties, but no result has been forthcoming and no second mediation has been scheduled.

"We never received a complaint. Not one," Stathakis said. "Those young people did a great job. If someone was timid, they turned the mic up. If someone was profane, they turned it down. They were building civic discourse. And who is standing up for them? This is not in the spirit of Wayne Morse."

Woods and Matthews-Harris have started fundraising for a solar-powered sound system and hope to continue building a culture of empowerment and expression around the Free Speech Plaza. Despite their continued efforts, they admit it has been hard to watch the weeks go by with no resolution.

"We're doing what Wayne Morse wanted: Educating people about him, working within the system, but keeping it grassroots," Matthews-Harris said. "They keep saying they're not taking away our right to free speech, but without electricity, who can hear it?" **EW**



Ishi Woods and Iana Matthews-Harris



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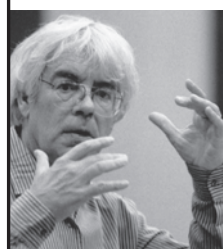
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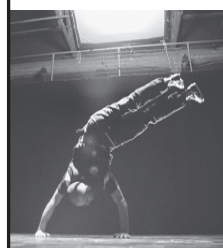
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