



BRENTON GICKER
PHOTO BY ROB SYDOR

Alvarez is standing in front of a large vertical box, wrought with chains, bars and iron locks. “This is the most defeated needle box in town,” he says. The Eugene-based HIV Alliance maintains several needle drop-boxes in the city. The purpose of these containers is to provide a place where intravenous drug users or volunteer clean-up teams can safely dispose of used syringes, thereby reducing the risk of HIV, hepatitis C or some other blood-borne disease. Recently CAHOOTS was called in to remove a dirty rig from a red *Eugene Weekly* distribution box near a frequented restaurant on River Road — perhaps someone thought we at the paper provide a needle clean-up service as well. According to HIV Alliance’s 2010 annual report, 50 percent of people who inject drugs tested positive for hepatitis C in Lane County.

Alvarez tells me that six years ago about 3,000 needles were found in the Whiteaker neighborhood’s Scobert Park during a single clean-up. The problem has gotten worse, he says.

Though the drop boxes sound like a great idea, they do pose a particular problem. Alvarez recounts a time he came outside to find the very box he is now showing me smashed and broken into. A woman had extracted a used needle and was attempting to shoot up what little residue was left in the rig. Alvarez ran to stop her but was unable to do so. The drop box outside White Bird has been broken into three times for the same purpose. That box is emptied weekly by HIV Alliance, and despite this it is always full. “This (intravenous drug use) is one of the real problems I see on my beat, all the time.” Alvarez says, “Heroin use here is serious.”

Later in the day, Alvarez and Stuart-Pope encounter a man who overdosed on heroin in the bathroom stall of a

church. The team describes the man’s skin as blue-colored. They busted into the stall with uncompromising immediacy. Through the use of emergency medical procedures and a burly, *Pulp Fiction*-esque opioid antagonist “Narcan” needle, Stuart-Pope saved the man’s life.

HAND-OUTS

After this seemingly routine event, Stuart-Pope has stayed on to complete what will be an entire 12-hour shift, which is not unusual for her. Alvarez has clocked out and political activist, former prizefighter and CAHOOTS team member Gicker clocks in. Gicker is driving.

Evening approaches. The van pulls up to the Bermuda Triangle, (aka West Broadway and Olive Street) and groups of haggard men and women descend upon the vehicle. It is as if they’d suddenly materialized the moment we hit the intersection, like videogame characters cued to spawn and interact once the player has crossed a certain game threshold. The street was full in an instant. They swarmed, almost blocking the van’s passage.

Gicker motions for the congregation to meet him up ahead past the stop signs. He pulls forward. “Reach back and open that box right there,” Gicker preps me as the throng of (perhaps) homeless people comes to the front windows of the van. I open the large plastic tub of neatly packed supplies.

Condoms, socks, toothbrushes — these are what the people ask for and this is what they are handed by the CAHOOTS team. “Do you have any shoes?” one of them asks. A team member scrambles about in the back of the van, but comes up empty. No extra shoes. Somewhere from

the distance a hoarse voice calls out, “You’re doing a great job CAHOOTS! Keep it up!”

The group vanishes as quickly as it descended upon the van. The team receives a call to pick up a man and ferry him to the Buckley House detox center, and they’re off again, driving in silence, the radio chirping. “We’re not trying to be anyone’s savior or something,” Gicker says, breaking the silence while Stuart-Pope nods in agreement. I think to myself that this woman has already saved a life today. “But this is the most fulfilling job I’ve ever had, and I’ve had a lot of jobs,” her partner adds.


The man we pick up is quite happy to be heading to detox. He is poppin’ and lockin’, showing off his slick Michael Jackson-style moves in the back of the van. He then insists on showing us and the Buckley House staff more dance steps as he stands in the lobby, waiting to be processed.

FACES & DEATH

Conscious of the fact that I (luckily?) came along on two rather tame CAHOOTS shifts, I asked both teams if there were ever moments or things they encountered that were too much — or rather, calls they went on that haunted them. All of them mentioned that the death notifications were the hardest to put out of their minds.

Let’s say someone hasn’t shown up to work in days, no one has heard from her, mail is stacking up at the house. It starts to smell funny. CAHOOTS is dispatched to check on things and find the body. CAHOOTS declares the death





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