

# news Briefs

## O.U.R. STILL IN BUSINESS

The future of O.U.R. Federal Credit Union in Eugene's Whiteaker neighborhood is yet to be determined since the National Credit Union Administration (NCUA) took over operations in late June. But even if the credit union eventually folds, NEDCO, the nonprofit Neighborhood Economic Development Corporation, is talking about providing similar services by forming a Community Development Financial Institution, according to NEDCO Executive Director Claire Seguin.

"We were working behind the scenes (with O.U.R.) to try to figure something out," says Seguin, "but it was too big a can of worms ... hopefully something good

will come out of the discussion with the federal agency."

O.U.R. (an acronym for Oregon, Urban and Rural) has provided basic financial services to thousands of low-income people in Lane County since 1975 (see story in *EW* archives 7/12/07). The nonprofit has provided savings accounts and short- and long-term loans for everything from bicycles to business start-ups. Many Saturday Market businesses, for example, got their initial funding through O.U.R., along with better-known enterprises such as Burley Design, which now sells bicycle gear worldwide. The credit union also offered bilingual counseling and training in basic household finance.

The NCUA has appointed itself conservator of the institution and has replaced managers with its own team in order "to continue regular operations with expert management in place, correcting previous service and operational weaknesses," according to a statement from NCUA.

What were the "service and operational weaknesses"? The NCUA regional director did not return a phone call by press time, but local board and committee members say the credit union has suffered from an embezzlement in the past, "management



problems" in the past year or so, and a high rate of loan defaults by members due to the recession and job losses.

When asked to speculate about the future of the institution, longtime board member Larry Abel would only say, "I can't really tell you anything more than what's in the NCUA press release."

Bob Cassidy served on the credit union's Supervisory Committee for years and worked with credit unions for decades before retiring. He says there's plenty of

blame to go around, but declined to fault any specific manager or board member. "This credit union is an old favorite of mine," he says. "I had wished that NEDCO could have taken it over. Now I wish NEDCO would form their own credit union and then the remnants of O.U.R. could be merged into it. It looks like no credit union in the area is interested in taking it in."

Cassidy says he doubts that NCUA "wants to run it to get it back in shape. If they did, it would be difficult to get a

## REALITY KITCHEN: WHITEAKER BE UP!

Not many buildings have a black and white checkerboard exterior. Fewer still are the headquarters for a nonprofit autism support program for individuals 21 years and over. And only one of them has Jim Evangelista, the man who took his dream and made it a reality.

"Working with special education children, I saw this great need for services for people 21 and over," he said. "Being able to support this population of 21 and over is so important, and it's not being done."

About a year ago, Evangelista started Reality Kitchen — part community center, part autism support program and part (soon-to-be) organic salad bar and kitchen. Tucked away on Van Buren Street across from Ninkasi Brewery, Evangelista and about 20 other volunteers provide social and academic services and living help to 13 adults with mental disabilities in their Transition Graduate Program.

The idea is to provide students with real world skills such as budgeting, food preparation, meal planning, nutrition, workplace safety, etc., as well as providing constant support for program students. This, according to Evangelista, is what makes Reality Kitchen different from other support programs.

He said although there are organizations that provide assistance to those 21 and over with special needs, it



isn't ongoing and generally ends when the person finds a job. "What they do is to help job opportunities to come around."

"Hopefully what we'll be doing is providing more unique and ongoing support," he said. "We want to get people who are in that transition time, and give them critical focusing skills."

Evangelista has worn many different hats over the years, alternatively being a muralist (check out "Tuscany," a mural he did at 12th and High), theater set painter, restaurant owner, anti-war activist in Nicaragua

and managing the free library at the Oregon Country Fair. The name Reality Kitchen, the black and white checkerboard pattern and the somewhat ambiguous tagline "Whiteaker Be Up!" are a throwback to the days when he owned a 24/7 restaurant in Gainesville, Fla., also called Reality Kitchen.

He graduated with a bachelor of fine arts from the UO and earned his master's in special education from UO as well. He is currently working on getting his art therapy license.

"I've been blessed; people have been kind, people have been patient," he said. "This is many things for me; it's kind of going back to the past, of moving into the future."

Reality Kitchen is networking with several other organizations that provide services to the mentally disabled, including KindTree — Autism Rocks, Specialized Employment Services and Lane ESD, among others.

"We're still in the beginning process," said Eileen Brixey, a volunteer with Reality Kitchen and a member of Autism Rocks. "We're still trying to figure out who we are. If anybody is interested we recommend they contact us."

"What I want to do is invite the community here to participate with us," said Evangelista. "It's about all of us. We all have unique and special needs. Here we're very open and very welcoming."

You can visit Reality Kitchen at 245 Van Buren, or email [realitykitchen@gmail.com](mailto:realitykitchen@gmail.com) — *Nils Holst*

# COWFISH

## 7 NIGHTS OF DANCING! YES!!

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