



ALONE OUT THERE

MENTAL ILLNESS ON OUR STREETS STORY BY RICK LEVIN • PHOTOS BY TRASK BEDORTHA

Few things are as starkly inconvenient to our collective perception of well-being than the ongoing existence of homelessness and mental illness. They baffle our understanding.

And so, when these two uncomfortable facts collide in a very public way — say, in the form of a ragged man screaming at ghosts in Kesey Square — we reach a level of collective dismay that approaches hysteria. Hysteria, which is just fear, drives us to extremes: anger, pity, denial, paralysis.

Eugene, as a city and, more importantly, as a community, is being torn apart, divided politically and socially, not by homelessness and mental illness but by the way we talk about and deal with these issues. Like the rest of the country, we are drawing ever-sharper battle lines separating the haves and the have-nots, the dos and the do-nothings, the bleeding hearts and the rugged individualists. We remain gridlocked, spinning our wheels. The problem persists.

But life is funny: If you don't deal with reality, reality will deal with you. Let's look at the reality, then: Of 1,751 folks counted during Lane County's 2013 One Night Homeless Count, 415 were chronically homeless with a disabling condition, and 202 of them were deemed "severely mentally ill." Many, like Eugene resident Celine Ecker, are caught in a cycle of mental illness, substance abuse and homelessness as they struggle to survive on our city's streets.

A ShelterCare report notes that "as many as 500 individuals with mental illness are homeless in Lane County," and among the 6,000 adults with severe psychiatric disabilities in the region, "about 2,000 are not currently receiving supported housing services."

White Bird volunteer coordinator Ben Brubaker

suggests that these numbers are too low. Most national studies put the rate of mental illness among the homeless at between 25 percent and one-third, yet Brubaker guesses up to 60 percent of Lane County's homeless population has "significant mental health issues," and that our homeless population as a whole might be pushing 11,000 individuals.

Lauren Regan, executive director of Eugene's Civil Liberties Defense Center, says that "even using the government's numbers, we still have a huge problem" when it comes to our growing population of homeless individuals suffering from untreated mental illness. "These are humans who have just completely fallen through the cracks," Regan says. "We have an open-air institution. Nobody chooses to live on the streets who are in their right minds."

St. Vincent de Paul Society of Lane County Executive Director Terry McDonald says the intersection of homelessness and mental illness can be traced in large part to the emptying out of mental hospitals without implementing any ground-level support. "Historically, the connection between de-institutionalization and mental illness on the street is quite clear," he says. "We downsized mental facilities in the '80s and '90s, and with that the number of persons on the street with mental illness rose."

McDonald says that "as a society, we simply don't put enough resources into treatment and support services for any of our mentally ill. A society that does not deal with its most vulnerable citizens in a compassionate manner is doomed."

A VICIOUS CYCLE

For the past two decades or so, and with heartbreaking regularity, Celine Ecker has been crashing back and forth through a portal separating two very different realities. Most

of us, with minor variations, would recognize what lies this side of the portal: home, school, work, relationships, meaning, etc. Most of us, with little argument, call this the real world.

It's the other side of the portal Ecker occasionally falls through that concerns us here. On this other side is a kaleidoscope world that has been intimately written about and elaborately described but rarely understood. What defines this alternate reality is its complete lack of solid foundation: It's a place where each resident, like Ecker, speaks a private language with little human communion, and it resembles the so-called real world only in its physical appearances and its savage demands of survival.

This, then, is one more faltering description of the reality experienced by the unsheltered mentally ill. Residents of this world, Ecker included, are treated by many of us as either victims or pariahs, often at the same time, and the paralyzed sympathy they receive is rivaled only by the indifference or outright abuse they suffer. Too often, they baffle our powers of comprehension or empathy.

Ecker says she's been on a cycle of homelessness, substance abuse and severe mental illness since she was 22, when she experienced her first episode of schizo-affective disorder after a "bad acid trip." Now 40, Ecker was just released from the Johnson Unit at Eugene's PeaceHealth Hospital, where she checked herself in to undergo a regimen of stabilizing medication and 24/7 psychiatric observation.

Before that, from Oct. 17 until Dec. 13 of this past year, Ecker survived alone on the streets of Eugene — technically speaking, of course, because while she struggled to stay alive during the cold snap that gripped the region, she was visible but somehow unreachable, among us but not of us.

"I thought I saw a spaceship," Ecker tells me over a cup of coffee downtown. "I thought that the buildings were Babylon and I was going to stop the spaceships from