

NEVER A KINDNESS TOO SMALL

Keegan Keppner brings food and attention to Eugene homeless

Keegan Keppner sits in a green plastic lawn chair with “Whoville” scrawled on it in Sharpie, the O written as a peace sign and surrounded by hearts and asterisks as if it was decorated by an adoring fan. Keegan’s knees are jammed up in his black sweatshirt and he shifts around to evade the chilliness of the spring evening. Cars roar past the temporary encampment on 8th and Mill.

Aside from his fidgeting, very little about his attitude or comments reveals Keegan as the 10-year-old child that he is. Keegan, who has terminal brain cancer, took up the issue of homelessness in Eugene in December, and since then has been supporting the unhoused through supplies and advocacy.

The “Whos” around him talk about where they’ll set up camp next. A cluster of tents and chairs is all that is left of the homeless community named Whoville that lasted for months near the University of Oregon campus. Whoville was closed by the city in April, and the Whos have been searching for a new permanent location, since the city did not offer a place for the Whos to relocate to.

Some in the camp get aggravated at the discussion and leave; others stay and vent their opinion. And when Keegan pipes up, they listen.

“If it wasn’t a school night, I’d stay out here tonight,” Keegan declares to the group. They nod and murmur knowingly. The number of times that Keegan has stood by them, individually and as a group, has made him true to his word in their book. But, as Keegan’s father Steve Magray points out, for Keegan there is homework to be done.

“The thing about that is when you guys get home, the homework will still be there,” one of the Whos says. “We may not be!” They all give a tense laugh. It was at the original Whoville encampment on Franklin that Keegan first brought the Whos food (chili, one of his personal favorites) because, while watching TV at his home in Junction City, he saw a homeless man in a wheelchair in Whoville crying. After seeing the encampment for himself and asking his parents why they were there, he decided he wanted to help. His father was, at one point in his life, homeless.

Since then he’s not only helped, he’s taken up the cause. Keegan started an online fundraiser and brought the Whos chili, sandwiches, pizza and snacks to keep them going. During one trip to the camp, he handed out care packages

with first-aid kits and “Click, click... BOOM! You’re infected by Keegan’s kindness” handwritten on each bag.

In an attempt to publicize the issue and help people understand the Whos’ day-to-day struggles, he’s talked with Congressman Peter DeFazio about the homelessness issue and walked from Whoville to Salem with his dad and others to talk to Gov. John Kitzhaber. Although Keegan wasn’t able to walk the entirety of the 66-mile journey, he walked the first 15 and the last 10 into the capital. His many exploits are documented on his “Keegan’s Kindness” Facebook page.

More recently, Keegan challenged Eugene City Manager John Ruiz to spend a night on the streets with him to see what it feels like. Ruiz did not take up the challenge, but Keegan kept his word and spent the weekend on the streets with his dad and the Whos.

These events have garnered local and national news attention from Oregon to New York, not only because Keegan is young, but also because of his terminal cancer. Kim Magray, Keegan’s mother, describes Keegan’s condition as “the worst but the best,” because, while it is terminal, it is an extremely slow-growing tumor, but also more difficult to treat than the other, faster-growing type of tumor.

Keegan was first diagnosed when he was 22 months old, and went through chemotherapy up until he was 6. Kim Magray would explain the tiresome MRIs by telling him he had an “owie” in his brain that they needed to look at. “It’s shaped like a high-five!” Keegan says.

Keegan hasn’t needed any treatments for four years and has regained much of his sense of taste lost during chemotherapy. For years Keegan would only eat hot dogs and chicken nuggets because it was all he could taste. He happily reports that he now loves chili and pizza, his food of choice for the Whos.

Although the news coverage of Keegan’s activism has put a large emphasis on his cancer, his illness isn’t what drives his work with the Whos, nor is it a major everyday issue. “He knows he has cancer, and he’s open to talk to people about it,” Kim Magray says. “But he acts like a normal kid and wants to be treated like a normal kid.”

Like other fourth graders at Laurel Elementary, Keegan plays video games, has his troupe of friends over for pizza nights and wants to travel when he’s older (specifically to New York City, because it’s huge, and Mexico, because he’s half Mexican). He’s been trying to recruit some friends on the sly to come help with the Whos, with their parents’ permission. Eventually, he says, they may try to do a small food drive to help the Whos.

In general, it’s Keegan who fuels the actions, and his parents who give him the go-ahead and support. “Sometimes it’s me and sometimes it’s me and dad. I speak of little ideas and then dad thinks about it for a little bit and says a yes or a no to it,” Keegan explains.

Steve Magray says they’ve gotten some backlash from people online via comment sections and Facebook, saying the family is a PR media scam or that they shouldn’t let Keegan spend so much time on the issue, such as when he took time off of school with his teacher’s blessing for the walk to Salem.

“It’s hard for a parent to tell a kid no with such high ambitions,” Steve Magray says. “He’s got to learn to have a voice. He has compassion for the world around him. What kind of father would I be to not support him in this?”

For the time being, Keegan isn’t sure what he’ll do next, though he says if he had the money he’d get all the Whos apartments, just so they could have some respite from exposure to the weather. In the meantime, he hopes to keep bringing attention to the issue. “[People] mostly aren’t going out and seeing what it’s like. They make their opinions and they don’t even go and see what it’s like,” Keegan says. “There’s still a lot to do.”

Whoville is still searching for a home. On Saturday, June 7, from 11 am to 6 pm a Music in the Meadow event will take place at 22nd and Madison to raise money for Nightingale Health Sanctuary featuring John Shipe, The Sugar Beets, Halie and the Moon and the students and friends of Scotty Perey. For more info, search Nightingale Health Sanctuary on Facebook. ■

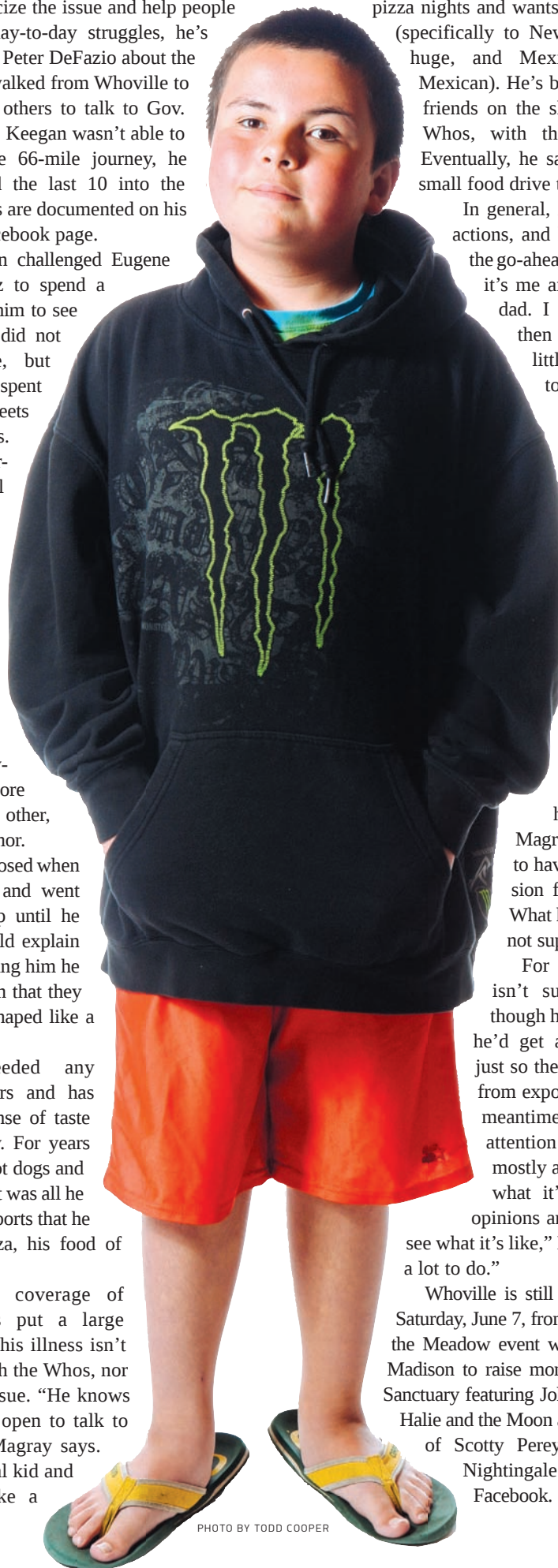


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