

Studying in the Dark

EUGENE'S HOMELESS STUDENTS STRUGGLE TO BALANCE HOMEWORK AND BASIC NEEDS by Ben Stone

In the days before the snowstorm last December, Cory*, a Lane Community College student, was having trouble getting words down on the page.

"I've always been a troubled writer," Cory says. "Just too meticulous and apprehensive, I guess." He wasn't accustomed to using a computer and spent days writing out paragraphs of his classwork by hand. For one class, though, it was never good enough. Intimidated by his classmates' "beautiful" work, Cory chose not to turn in his final project, and he failed the class. That weekend, the Willamette Valley froze and filled with snow. At that point, failing wasn't his biggest problem. Cory was, and is, homeless.

There were several shelters operating during the freeze, but Cory stayed outside with his old tarp and sleeping bag. Because of the dangerously low temperatures, his routine became inverted — he spent the daylight hours in his sleeping bag and the frigid nights wandering the streets, often in tears. "I didn't have it in me to go around people at the time," Cory says. "I was so upset over relationship issues and my lack of success in my classes and my perceived future to fail to succeed in life. Walking was a good idea."

In 2012, 10,875 homeless people were served in Lane County, according to the city of Eugene website. That same year, 35,931 students were enrolled full-time at the University of Oregon and LCC combined. The exact population of homeless students in our community is unknown, due in part to the heavy stigma surrounding homelessness and the ambiguity of the term, but community members are trying to understand and support them in their effort to shape their futures.

For Michael Weed, incoming LCC student body president and former homeless student, homelessness has been both a default way of life and a liberating choice. After being practically abandoned by his family in Indiana at 17, Weed began a life of travel and sleeping on hard surfaces. He earned what little money he needed from intermittent jobs, random labor, making jewelry or playing the harmonica.

After having traveled to Eugene in the late aughts, Weed was weary and unsatisfied with his transient lifestyle. "I was tired of being homeless — it comes back to having a little bit of pride," he says. "I'm not going to be happy unless I'm doing something to change the world."

Weed knew he had two choices: Get a job, or go back to school. After finding that LCC did not discriminate against those with no address of their own, his choice became easier, and in 2012 he enrolled in the sustainability coordinator program at LCC. Weed devoted himself to his schoolwork, typing his assignments on a Bluetooth keyboard connected to his cell phone. To maintain his appearance for his classmates and teachers, he saved up for new clothes and showered quickly in the gym locker room to avoid contact with others.

To shorten his commute to school, Weed built a camp deep in the woods behind LCC, where he fashioned multiple tarps to channel water away from his sleeping area. Though he knew other homeless students had been hassled for sleeping near the school, Weed was experienced at unauthorized camping ("I'm like, ninja," he says).

In 2013, Weed began working as sustainability coordinator for LCC.

In a school where 68 percent of LCC students reported income at or below the poverty level, Weed saw an opportunity to address students on the edge in a very basic way. With funds from LCC, he and other members of student government organized a huge room on campus that was stocked with food from donations and FOOD for Lane County, operating two days a week, every week since last Thanksgiving and serving around 50 students a day.

After establishing the pantry at LCC, Weed and others developed an idea to bring tiny Conestoga homes — like the ones used in Eugene's Opportunity Village — to campus to house students in need. This year, the LCC chapter of OSPIRG is hoping to make the idea a reality. Anthony

Molinari, a representative of OSPIRG's Hunger and Homeless campaign, says that this fall term OSPIRG will be collecting data about homelessness on campus and looking for space to park up to five Conestogas.

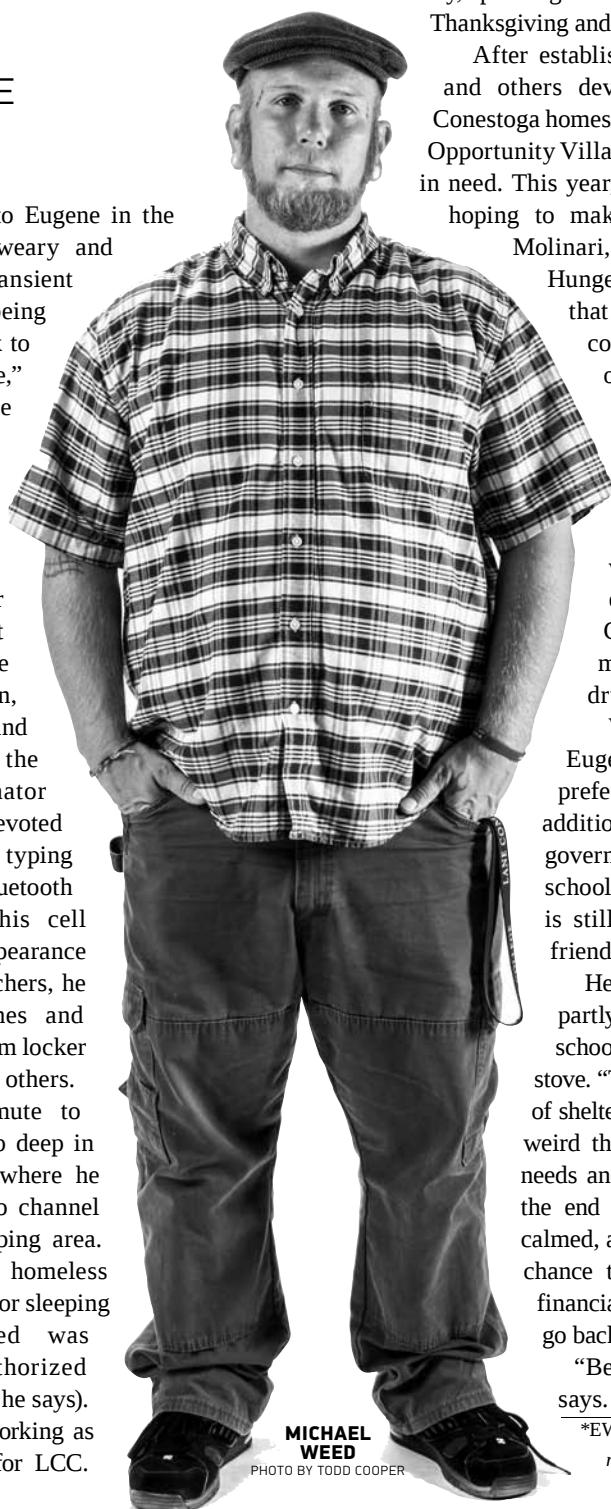
It's a proposition that may take work to gain acceptance, and Molinari and Weed agree that some common worries will have to be addressed. For example, residents of the Conestogas may have to be monitored to a degree to prevent drug and alcohol abuse.

Weed now lives in a house in Eugene, though he says he still prefers to sleep on the floor, and in addition to his work for LCC student government he hopes to go to graduate school at OSU for bioremediation. Cory is still an LCC student and sleeps in friends' houses and in the forest.

He survived the freeze last December partly because an acquaintance from school gave him a tent and a burner stove. "That was a relief to have some sort of shelter," he says. "The brain does some weird things when it's deprived of basic needs and securities." His emotions about the end of the previous term eventually calmed, and he knew that he had one more chance to do well in school before his financial aid disappeared. He decided to go back to school.

"Because it wasn't over yet," Cory says. ■

**EW protects the anonymity of those who might fear repercussions.*



MICHAEL WEED

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