BY KENNY JACOBY

ROD ADAMS IN THE BOTTOM LEFT HOLDS A SIGN TO COMMEMORATE THE DEATH OF MICHAEL BRIGGS

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

# 44 COUNTS OF HOMELESSNESS

*Rod Adams will use the necessity defense*

Three times last February, Eugene police officers found Rod Adams, a 60-year-old homeless man, lying in a sleeping bag downtown in the middle of the night. They arrested, handcuffed and took him to Lane County Jail each time, where he stayed for three total days on trespassing charges.

Since Adams moved to Eugene nine years ago, police have arrested him 40 times on 44 counts of being homeless: trespassing, prohibited camping and violating park rules lead the laundry list of minor crimes, plus warrant arrests for missing scheduled court dates. Adams received 10 tickets last year, putting him in the top one percent of all people cited last year.

Never has Adams been charged with a felony or violent crime, but he's been booked 15 times in Lane County Jail, where he's spent 32 nights, jail records show.

"And that's only the ones they document," Adams says. "Every fucking day they're in my face."

Once a middle-class citizen, a disgruntled Adams left his job in corporate America at a tech company and stopped making payments on his home, which was repossessed. He now spends his time documenting the "class war" happening on the streets of Eugene. He's become infamous for videotaping police interactions with homeless people downtown.

Adams intervenes when he sees the unhoused being harassed and often spews vitriol at officers. He's posted dozens of videos to his Facebook group, RE-volt, over the past year, sometimes documenting officers ticketing sleeping homeless people late at night and others times calling the cops fascists.

Now, fed up with a justice system that penalizes being poor, Adams is taking his three recent criminal trespass cases to jury trials, where he will invoke the "necessity defense," arguing he had no choice but to commit the crimes because the city offered him no viable alternative.

It's a rarely used — and rarely won — defense, and Adams does not necessarily expect to win. But he says the trials are "necessary work that has to be done" and only a prelude to greater efforts to end criminalization of homelessness. He hopes it will encourage other homeless people to do the same.

## THE 'SOFTKILL'

Adams is thin, about 5-foot-9 with blue eyes and an untrimmed white ponytail and a beard. He wears a camo hat and black combat boots and lives off his military pension — *Eugene Weekly* confirmed his veteran status — but can no longer afford rent, healthcare and other basic needs. Many of his possessions have been stolen, but he's managed to hang on to an Acer laptop and out-of-service LG smartphone. Those, he says, will be stolen one day, too.

Adams maintains a list of all the homeless people who've died in Eugene and often invokes their names when yelling at the cops. He counted 25 deaths in 2016 alone. Some he's heard about from friends, others he's seen for himself — lifeless bodies under the bridges. One of these days, he says, that's going to be him.

"Many people are upset with me because I do yell at the cops," he says. "I say nasty, foul things to them. But they take no responsibility for what they do to those people out there, and those people wind up dead. So I absolutely will never apologize for verbally abusing them."

Adams plans to subpoena Eugene police chief Pete Kerns in his upcoming trials to talk about compliance training. He says police are trained to subject homeless people — and all marginalized communities — to character assassination, dispossession and the psychological inferiority. Adams calls it the "softkill."

Ken Neubeck, a longtime local homeless advocate, described Adams as "principled" and "fearless" — passionate about his beliefs, but frustrated at the slow rate of change. Neubeck thinks a lot of Adams' toughness and prickliness toward the police is a product of his experience on the streets.

"If you give him a chance, his whole voice changes," Neubeck says. "He'll be sitting beside me in the car as a passenger, and all the sudden he's much more relaxed, and he's friendly. He's talkative and respectful. I don't think there's really a mean bone in his body, from what I've been able to see."

Wayne Martin, a retired pastor who housed Adams in his basement for a week in 2013, says he has "great loyalty to" Adams. He described him as a "poet," giving eloquent homilies about corporate demons and his belief in a sort of agrarian democracy. He says he sees a fire light up in Adams' eyes when he "gets on a roll" while delivering a speech.

"Rod has had to have strong legs to keep standing," Martin says. "He's a whimsical guy and I think that helps. I think he's been really insulted a lot, both his intelligence and his person. He's in serious disregard about a system that treated him badly."

When police officers interact with Adams, he asks them for their business cards. If they comply, he emails them "The Package," which consists of excerpts from three philosophical texts that he says are the "minimum comprehensions necessary to address the failing state." One text asserts the main difference between the unhoused in America and those in other countries is the public's attitude toward them.

Adams says no police officer has ever responded to Adams' emails and lately they've stopped giving him their cards.

Neubeck uses the term "structural classism" to describe the systemic criminalization policies that Adams deems the "softkill."

In 2008, for example, the city established a downtown public safety zone from which it could legally exclude people convicted of certain crimes. But according to a 2010 police activity report, almost 60 percent of the people excluded were homeless. Neubeck says laws like Eugene's camping ban may not appear discriminatory — it prevents everyone from camping in the parks, not just the homeless — but that they "have a disproportionate negative impact on people who don't have anywhere else to go."

"I think that's what Rod is principally upset about," Neubeck says. "Not only does the city not offer enough help to house people and provide them emergency shelter,