

Originally started by Charles Smith, known in the community as Brother Charlie, the Eugene Catholic Worker began in 2013 by giving away oatmeal and coffee once or twice a week at Fifth and Washington.

“When I moved to Eugene, I was just planning on volunteering here and there,” Brother Charlie says. “But I saw a need for outreach, especially on the streets.”

Soon after Catholic Worker’s food delivery inception, Brother Charlie collaborated with Zoll and started serving hot meals in addition to coffee and oatmeal four to five times a week. After Brother Charlie retired in 2022 due to health reasons, the breakfast group affiliated with a separate group feeding the unhoused, the Burrito Brigade, taking on the name Breakfast Brigade.

According to Levsen, Breakfast Brigade serves around 917 hot meals and 649 lunches per month. Many of the people who come through Levsen’s line tell her that the Breakfast Brigade is their main source of food throughout the week.

“I love these people,” says a regular attendee, Josh, who did not give his last name out of fear of police retaliation. “These people make my week.”

Brother Charlie says about five years into the operation, the city started taking issue with the group. The police told them to move to a less visible area in Washington Jefferson Park, so in 2018 the group relocated to the north end of the park near the WJ Skatepark on First and Washington. After the pandemic, resistance from the city only increased.

Levsen says the list of demands from the city, especially after the pandemic, got longer. “We were told to stop using the trash cans in the park, so we placed cardboard over the trash cans to pack in and out. We were told to not park in the grass so we parked on the street. We were told we can’t be under the overpass anymore because it’s parks property, so we moved to the sidewalk,” Levsen says.

The group continued to comply with the city’s demands until October 2022, when the Parks and Open Space division said a valid permit was needed in order to serve meals at Washington Jefferson Park. When the Break-

fast Brigade members asked the city how to apply for a permit, they were told no such permit exists.

Kelly Shadwick, outreach manager for Parks and Open Space wrote in a Feb. 10 email to Levsen, “The City does not provide permits for any activities in Washington Jefferson Park at this time.”

“It’s hard enough as a volunteer to do what we do, but then to have to negotiate with the city just to let us help people – it’s exhausting,” Levsen says.

The group had a permit from January 2021 to June 2022, but that was before the city spent \$1.2 million dollars on reconstruction for the park after it was used as a temporary stay in place shelter for people experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. The park re-opened in June.

After numerous emails back and forth between the Breakfast Brigade and Shadwick, Parks and Open Space offered the Breakfast Brigade a space at the Eugene Municipal Court at 11th and Lincoln. But in early December 2022, the court said that wouldn’t work due to a lack of “space and resources,” according to court administrator Sarah Callegeri.

In the Feb. 10 email exchange, Shadwick wrote to Levsen, “While we are supportive overall of your mission and tremendous work, we are once again in a position of needing to let you know that food distribution is not a permitted activity in Washington Jefferson Park.”

Shadwick later said the city is concerned with liability issues around safety as well as turf and landscaped areas being damaged, and that the city does not provide permits for any activities in Washington Jefferson Park.

“We don’t want to relocate,” Levsen says. “We want to serve the people we have been serving for the past 10 years.”

McIver says the decision to not let Breakfast Brigade remain at the park is complaint driven. “We get feedback from people saying they would rather not use the park because they don’t feel welcome or that they can only be there if they are there for the food giveaway,” he says.

After the most recent encounter with Neighborhood

Service Officers, the Breakfast Brigade is trying to either get a permit that allows them to be at Washington Jefferson or find a space near the park that lets them serve.

McIver says the city has had trouble helping the group find a place for them to serve because, “We’re waiting for the right people to be here at the right time to sit down and find a solution because, as of right now, serving at the park is not an allowable activity.”

This wouldn’t be the first time a city has tried to stop an organization from feeding the homeless. Across the country, city governments have cracked down on where and when groups can provide such meals. In May, the religious group Micah’s Way sued the city of Santa Ana, California, under the federal Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000 to continue feeding the hungry. RLUIPA protects religious groups and individuals from zoning and landmark laws that would otherwise prohibit them from gathering.

After EW spoke with McIver, he reached out to Levsen to let her know that while serving food in the park is not allowed, “Burrito Brigade” will not be cited or arrested. “City staff may continue to ask the group to modify activities as necessary for safety, access or sanitation concerns in the area,” he adds.

Levsen says she was dissatisfied by this response not only because she fears that city staff will continue policing them, but also because McIver misidentified the group as “Burrito Brigade.”

Levsen and other members of the Breakfast Brigade say they will continue to feed the homeless in the park and plan to speak at the July 24 Eugene City Council meeting.

Brother Charlie says he remains optimistic that the Breakfast Brigade will persist. “It’s our obligation to take care of our brothers and sisters no matter the consequences,” he says. “We will be persecuted, as demonstrated across the country, but I do believe the law is on our side.” ■

For more on the work of Breakfast Brigade, find them on Facebook. Burrito Brigade can be reached at [BurritoBrigade.org](https://www.burritobrigade.org).

HAPPENING PEOPLE

BY PAUL NEEVEL

Kiasia Baggenstos

In June, following her freshman year in the University of Oregon’s School of Journalism and Communication, Portland native Kiasia Baggenstos was named the first-ever winner of the Avel Louise Gordly Scholarship for Oregon Black Women. Avel Gordly is a community activist in Portland and was the first Black woman elected to the Oregon State Senate. Baggenstos got the scholarship when she “rose to the top for her outstanding commitment to positive change as well as for her top academic performance,” according to *The Skanner* news. Baggenstos’s own childhood was chaotic. “My biological father and mother have been in my life only part-time,” she relates. “I’ve lived in over 20 different homes. Mom is a drug addict and dad had a wife and children in Klamath Falls. They were never together after I was born.” Her twin aunts Shaila and Kaila Mayes, who were just six years older and lived with her grandfather, took over the mother role for Kiasia when they were in middle school and high school. She eventually settled in with her mom’s brother Joshua Baggenstos and his wife Jennifer Bischoff in Portland. “Mom was in prison for identity theft and robbery when I was 11 or 12,” she recalls. “She went in pregnant with twins. All of her baby-daddies were

crackheads, except for my dad.” Kiasia was in middle school when she moved in to live with her mom, who was just out of prison and staying with a friend, along with the twins. “Mom was sober for a while,” she says, “But she had a guy friend in prison. When he got out and came over every day, she would doze off on drugs.” When her mom suddenly departed, Kiasia and the twins were left behind. “I dropped out of eighth grade to take care of the twins and the apartment,” she says. Uncle Josh and Aunt Jenny came to the rescue, taking in and adopting the twins. They later adopted three more children abandoned by Kiasia’s mom, and adopted Kiasia herself when she agreed to it at age 17. Although she never formally completed eighth grade, Baggenstos excelled at Parkrose High School, earning a 4.0 grade point average. On Friday, June 23, she was the only undergrad among 12 UO journalism students who flew to Ghana, West Africa, for a six-week internship program. “I’ll be their social media manager,” she explains. “I’ll also be interning in Ghana at the Daily Guide newspaper.”

Know a Happening Person? Email suggestions to Editor@EugeneWeekly.com.

