

# Homeless for the Holidays

continued ▲ from Front

orphans, rebels and runaways, prostitutes, travelers and countless other survivors of the street.

## Under the bridge

Robert Woolf, 33, is a Portland native. Somewhat set up for a troubled life, Woolf dropped out of school in the fifth grade, and started slamming methamphetamines at age 12. Today, he can't say what his future holds.

"I'm trying to get my life together," said a hyper and twitchy Woolf, who had just shot up meth under an overpass hangout in southeast Portland. "There's no reason I can't get a job, but I've been living on the streets for so long, I don't think I can do it."

Woolf spent most of his adolescence locked up for petty theft and drug charges. He is currently off probation and parole for the first time since he was a kid.

"My life is terrible. I might die soon from drugs or someone might kill me," he said.

Woolf says he has felt more hopeless and alone since his father passed away last month.

"My people are dying," Woolf said. He has lost his mother, brother and father.

Without family to fall back on, he says his criminal record and drug addiction have kept him from getting the help he needs to change his life.

## By the grace of God

Sandy Golding had the illusion of a stable life. She worked as a waitress and owned a home with her husband in Estacada, Or. She had been raised in a Christian home by her father, a deacon and her mother, a worship leader. But for the first time in her life, Golding was in serious trouble. Her crack and heroin addiction had caught up with her.

"I was a functioning addict," she said. "At 39, I had the cops at my door."

Golding served time in jail for possession of drugs, growing marijuana and stealing electricity.

"My life had went downhill. I needed a different life," she said.

Golding is now clean and working toward a new, independent future through Union Gospel Mission's LifeChange, a

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL RUBENSTEIN/  
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER



Denise Middleton, a recruitment specialist at Union Gospel Mission, focuses on her new life after surviving a traumatic past.

includes mentoring homeless youth and rebuilding her marriage. Her husband, whom she recently reunited with after three years of separation, also enrolled in a treatment facility.

"It's kind of ironic because my goals were always to help other people and I knew I couldn't do it until I got my life straightened out," she said.

## Burning bridges, crossing barriers

Denise Middleton, a recruitment specialist at Union Gospel Mission, said she was the picture of a junkie when she came to the mission in 1996.

"I came from a family of addicts. My addiction started when I was nine years old. My parents would use alcohol to seduce me," said Middleton, 45.

Drinking gave way to opiates and the pills grew into a heroin addiction at 26 years old.

"That was my fix-all," Middleton said.

"I looked like a normal drug addict. I was in prison for manufacturing meth. I was first arrested at 18 for receiving stolen property," she said.

Middleton's son was taken away after his school reported that he was stabbed by one of his mother's needles. Middleton went to jail and her husband, a diabetic heroin user, died from his addiction.

"I'd been through a series of traumatic drug experiences up until I was 37," she said. "(Authorities) told me to get clean and I said 'What for? My son is gone, my husband is gone. I'll give you UAs but they're not going to be clean.'"

Middleton said that at her worst, she panhandled by freeways in Seattle, prostituted and stole from her family and children.

"I did whatever it took. I burned every bridge I could," she says.

But Middleton would prefer not to dwell on her past when she says today, her life is filled with hope.

"I don't want to give glory to the past because it's about the new," said Middleton, who is remarried, has a blended family of seven children and five grandchildren and has been a recovered addict for more than six years.

"Now I know I can help others and walk through the program with them. When you're out there drugging and drinking,

you don't know how to have fun, how to sit and talk, how to have a relationship," Middleton said, who is exceptionally composed.

She credits her faith and LifeChange with her success.

"You need Jesus to heal. When you learn to love yourself the way Jesus loves you, you don't need to go to the dope man on the corner for your fix. You can go to the cross for your fix," she said.

## For her daughter

Jenna was one of Oregon's estimated 20,682 homeless children before she and her Mom joined Shepherd's Door, a recovery facility for homeless women and children.

A local rise in homeless children is part of a national demographic shift in the

place.

"I got into a car accident and my daughter broke her back and almost died," said Erika. She had fallen asleep at the wheel after using heroin.

Visibly tattooed and hardened from a rough life, Erika says today she is learning about boundaries and working through her pain.

Regarding her past, Erika recalls, "It got bad. I know all drugs make you numb but heroin makes you so numb."

She says she regrets putting her daughter in dangerous situations. Jenna was often with Erika when she shoplifted food or other goods to sell for drugs. Erika and Jenna sometimes slept in their car or in the woods.

"I was scared my Mom would get beat up by the cops," said Jenna, a Parkrose

the entire I-5 corridor, from Canada to California, attractive to people experiencing homelessness, experts say. But for all the notable institutions helping to feed, shelter and comfort the homeless, according to Gray, Portland needs to access its values.

"Is it fair that working families can't keep up with the rent? Is it right that elderly and disabled folks have to move hours away from their social services so they can afford housing? Is it moral to shuffle tired, cold people on the street from one part of the city to another?" she asks. "I really think we are a city and a county with strong values and compassion. We don't like seeing people suffering but we have to be proactive if we're going to end— not just hide— what we don't like seeing."



Sandy Golding, a food service director at Union Gospel Mission, tells her painful story of addiction and homelessness before the kitchen is flooded by hungry men and women waiting outside.

faith-based, privately funded, residential program that addresses issues causing homelessness and addiction.

"What we're looking for is not just a clean UA (urine analysis). We want people to deal with the root causes of their situations," said Stacy Keon, a spokeswoman for Union Gospel Mission.

As a senior member of the LifeChange community, Golding has worked the steps by attending classes for codependence and anger management, received professional training through the mission's hunger relief component as the food service director and continues to develop skills which will set her up for a healthy future.

"The hardest part is when you have to really dig into yourself and look at your issues," Golding said. "Mine was that I was tired of the life I was living; using everyday, stealing from jobs, writing bad checks."

Golding is now building a future that



Bruce Elkington, 50, clutches a cigarette butt with his crudely-dressed, wounded hand.

homeless population.

In 2001, a survey of homelessness in 27 cities found that children under the age of 18 accounted for 25.3 percent of the urban homeless population, reported by the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

"However, in other cities and especially in rural areas, the numbers of children experiencing homelessness is much higher," said Gray.

The Urban Institute reported in 2000 that on a national level, approximately 39 percent of the homeless population is children.

Thirteen-year-old Jenna and her mom, Erika E., came to Shepherd's Door 17 months ago, to escape life on the street.

Erika says rebuilding her relationship with her daughter is one of her goals while she's at Shepherd's Door. Jenna was the reason she began recovery in the first

Middle School student.

"She has seen me use," said Erika, tearfully.

Erika has been clean from drugs for three years and she and her daughter are setting goals together.

Jenna says she looks forward to "living in a nice home and being healthy and having a health family."

Erika has pledged to make that happen for herself and her daughter.

"I'm hoping to become more healthy," Erika said. "I want to create a strong, healthy relationship with my daughter. I want to have a job where I can help women who are going through what I went through."

## A city's values on trial

Mild weather, vibrant, livable cities and efficient transportation make Portland and

Gray commends recent support Mayor Vera Katz and Commissioner Erik Sten lent to affordable housing in the city budget.

Nationally, groups such as the recently-formed Housing Alliance and the Regional Blue Ribbon Committee on Housing Resource Development are working on creative housing solutions such as offering financial incentives to encourage the development of affordable housing.

Locally, Gray says, "The Right To Sleep campaign, of which Sisters Of The Road is a part of, will continue to fight for the freedom of people currently without housing or other viable options, to sleep outside peacefully and safely without unwarranted intervention from police or other public safety officials."