

Pictures from the homeless

Community Fund-supported nonprofits create a bridge between the streets to a decent home, job

Editor's note: This is the first of a monthly series of stories by Smoke Signals in 2008 that will showcase the real-life effect of Spirit Mountain Community Fund donations. Since its inception in 1997, the Community Fund, the philanthropic arm of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, has donated more than \$40 million to groups in 11 western Oregon counties. These stories will focus on the good work those generous Grand Ronde dollars are doing within nearby communities and the effect they have on people and programs.

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

First picture: Starting at age 13 or so, a young girl is locked out of her house on the back porch, sitting with her arms crossed and holding herself against the cold. It is too cold to stretch out and she is too scared to sleep.

"When the sun came out, I would lay in it and take in the warmth," she said. "Then, I got sad when night came."

That young girl is now Jennifur Johnson, 22, who was brought up in an abusive family "before I could remember.

"I remember age 5. My mother would take away my coat for punishment." Other times, she would lock Jennifur in the basement and Jennifer would stop eating. "It got so I didn't use the restroom for two weeks at a time because I wasn't eating anything," she recalls.

Second picture: Her first night on the streets came when she was 18, following years of mostly unsuccessful foster homes. She had spent five days on the street when she was 15, but this time she took off for good with her friend, now of six years, Richard Knutson, who at that moment also became homeless.

They found a park but did not sleep out under the bows of a spreading chestnut tree. They parked themselves on the concrete ground outside of the public restroom.

"We had a sleeping bag. I was closest to the door and Richard was on the outside, sort of protecting me," she said.

Richard kept falling asleep. Jennifur would hit him and say, "How can you sleep?" And he'd say, "You're safe now." And she'd say, "No, I'm not. I'm not!"

That first time being homeless involved spending five or so days literally on the streets. For a year and seven months after that she found programs to put her up for the night, leaving her on her own or to other nonprofits during the day.

A range of community nonprofits filled in the picture. Groups like Kinship House, New Avenues for Youth, Southeast Works and Outside In — all supported by the Spirit Mountain Community Fund — came to her aid again and again.

"We all know that children and families in Oregon are suffering," said Community Fund Director Shelley Hanson. "Children separated from their families suffer the worst trauma. Programs like Kinship House and Outside In offer



Graphic created by George Valdez

support to those youth and children to overcome their challenges and rebuild their lives.

"Oregonians benefit as we nurture the futures from these children. As a Tribe, it's an honor to support programs that help build productive, healthy lives for traumatized children and youth."

Jennifur wants more than anything to say thanks to the folks at another nonprofit: White Shield.

"I wish I could meet the people who helped me," she said. "I was such a mess then, and I want them to see how far I've come and how much their help has meant to me." However, confidentiality rules prevent her from contacting them, she said.

"White Shield helped teach me and guided me during the most critical time of my life, and gave me a safe place when foster care didn't work," she said. "We're in one of the most fortunate states to be homeless."

Many Washington state youth also end up on the streets of Portland because the facilities here are so comprehensive, Jennifur said.

Portland-based Kinship House provides mental health counseling, training and advocacy for children and families in foster care and adoption.

Portland-based New Directions for Youth aims "to help every youth reach their fullest potential by offering a continuum of outcome-based services that empower homeless youth to exit street life and prevent other youth from becoming homeless," according to the organization's mission statement supplied to the Community Fund.

The Community Fund has provided \$125,000 to the group in two grants, one in 2005 and another last year.

Portland-based Outside In addresses "the changing needs of homeless youth and other low-income and marginalized people as they work toward self-sufficiency and improved health by providing them innovative social, medical and mental health services and



Photo by Ron Karten

Jennifur Johnson

material resources."

The Community Fund has provided the group with \$15,000 from the 2006 grant year.

Portland-based SE Works aims "to strengthen the economic health and well-being of our diverse southeast Portland community by facilitating successful connections between job seekers and employers."

The Community Fund has provided the group with \$90,000 in three grants, one each in 2002, 2004 and 2006.

Money in the bank and words on a brochure, however hopeful, are not always enough for youths in abusive homes or on the streets. For these youths, the dangers are everywhere, from drugs to drinking to gangs to just plain bad advice, even from well-meaning folks.

"When you're taught the wrong way," she said, "it's very hard to learn," though she somehow knew enough to avoid drinking, drugs and gangs on the street. "Some just don't have the drive," she said.

Still, these and many other nonprofits supported by the Tribe have made a huge difference in Jennifur's life. She earned her GED through New Avenues for Youth.

"Outside In provided me with medical services and a place to go on Sundays," she said. "Kinship House provided me with (former staff member) Kelly DeLany, who continued to see me even after they lost funding from the state to support me. SE Works provided me with job readiness classes while in foster care and a business fair. They provided clothes for school and help with job interviews."

Today, Jennifur works full-time in the Accounting Department at Portland State University.

She did not even apply for the job. When the Job Corps gave Portland State her name and they first called her about the job, she didn't answer the call because she didn't think she could possibly be ready for a job like this.

Her work focuses on the Fa-

cilities and Planning Department. "They're the guys that keep this whole place running," she now says, noting that the department includes mail and shipping, electrical, carpentry, and plumbing and air conditioning systems.

She has health insurance, her own apartment and a future she looks forward to. Her dream is to do animation and she even knows the company: Pixar Animation.

"When I got my first check, it was so big," she said. "I thought, wow!"

Now, she has a little bit deducted from her check every month to be given to Kinship House.

It's hard to say how long she has been sailing forward on this kind of cloud of self-knowledge and optimism, but she was hired at Portland State as a temp in 2006, renewed a few times because of her knowledge, interest and work skills, and just before Christmas last year her boss came to her and said she wanted her to work full-time on a permanent basis.

She is a roll-up-her-sleeves-and-get-the-job-done kind of girl. Though her title is account technician, she pitches in to update the department's Web site. She processes a lot of time cards. She monitors the utilities used by each college building.

As for her family, she is still in touch with her father and four sisters, and still cares for all of them, but sees in her mother a kind of mental illness that manifests itself as abuse.

"Until she heals, I can't heal," she said. "I can't give forgiveness to one who doesn't think she needs it."

At the same time, she said, "I've come to terms with everything that's happened to me. I've had a hard time, but I'm proud of it. It's my life."

Third Picture: Jennifur and Richard's first kiss came on a Valentine's Day weekend. "He's been so supportive of me," she said. "He's been my rock." ■