

Sisters of the Road Café helps Portland homeless

Community Fund donations saved organization many times, executive director says

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

Outside of the Sisters of the Road Café at Northeast Sixth and Davis in Portland is a blue bicycle with a small tan lab leashed to the front, lying with head in paws, occasionally shivering, entirely content.

At the back is a bike trailer, and 95 percent of the conveyance is covered with clothes, personal belongings, a bulging knapsack.

It has the look of being somebody's entire belongings.

"One man's trash is another man's treasure," says Brian Thompson, 30, of Cherokee, Blackfoot, Choctaw descent.

He remembers his grandparents making dream catchers.

Thompson says he has been living in "a clean and sober building, a mentor building" for the last five months.

"We're trash to outsiders who see us," he says, "but we're a treasure to God."

Thompson is a customer of the Sisters of the Road Café.

"Sisters imagines a world where all people are treated with dignity and respect, and where all basic human needs are met and rights are honored," says the nonprofit's Vision Statement.

The mission is "to build authentic relationships and alleviate the hunger of isolation in an atmosphere of nonviolence and gentle personalism that nurtures the whole individual toward changes that will reach the root of his or her homelessness and poverty and end it forever."

Sisters of the Road programs include:

- ◆ Hot meals for \$1.25 cash, food stamps, Sisters of the Road meal coupons or in exchange for 15 minutes worth of barter work; they serve 350-400 meals daily. More than 50 percent are paid by barter work;
- ◆ Workforce development and training;
- ◆ Mail service (more than 600 people receive mail at Sisters of the Road);
- ◆ Message and phone service;
- ◆ Systemic change involving sharing power and responsibility with customers;
- ◆ Research, translating into academic papers;
- ◆ PhotoVoice: giving customers disposable cameras to document their lives and communities.

Sisters of the Road also provides solid wages for employees working 20 hours or more a week. The lowest paid get \$13 an hour plus health insurance and vacation, an amount determined in Multnomah County to be a livable wage for a single person.

Spirit Mountain Community Fund most recently contributed \$25,000 to the nonprofit's barter



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Brian Thompson checks a container of fruit punch to see if it needs refilling at the Sisters of the Road Café in Portland on Friday, Dec. 5. Thompson participates in the hot meals/barter program at the café that allows him to do odd jobs around the café in exchange for meals.

Editor's note: This is the last in a monthly series of stories in 2008 by *Smoke Signals* that showcase the real-life effects 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 \$45 million to groups in 11 western Oregon counties. These stories focus on the good work those generous Tribal dollars do within nearby communities and the effect they have on people and programs.

program. It pays for the food earned by customers with their barter jobs. Since 2002, the Community Fund has provided Sisters of the Road with \$355,000, almost all dedicated to this program.

"For awhile," says Monica Beemer, executive director, "Spirit Mountain was our largest supporter. They have saved our bottom (lines) many times."

Thompson is a customer and a volunteer, who earns the price of his meals by working barter jobs at the café.

His current job is taking care of the bathrooms, which are having a little trouble at the moment.

"The toilet flooded and went into the other bathroom," he begins, speaking from a rickety seat at a back table in the café, and then told another customer who was asking,

"Both bathrooms are out of service. You can use the staff bathroom."

The bathroom job is like any other to him. "It's not about preferences," he says. "It's having the heart to serve."

Thompson has been a customer at the café for 12 years, ever since he came to town.

The café has many barter jobs like Thompson's: bussers, drink servers, dishing up food, wait staff.

Chris, who came from Los Angeles two years ago and has been a customer of the café since arriving, shows a hand warmer that he is knitting.

It has a hole where the thumb comes out and the finger end is going to stop at the middle knuckles. The wool is thick and feels warm. The holes left open offer finger dexterity.

Chris also volunteers at the café by teaching the knitting class. He is one who has a home.

"I live with my brother," he says.

Couch surfing among friends and relatives is the first choice.

Eventually, though, everybody gets to Sisters of the Road.

Arthur Rios, 38, declined to enroll among the Navajos, his people.

"I'd rather the money go to their health and education programs," he says.

Rios is a part-time staffer, the

nonprofit's oncall floor manager, but he says he's done every job for Sisters of the Road. Unrelated to Sisters of the Road programs, he was active earlier this year leading a homeless protest against Portland City Hall policies. He is still angry that Portland Mayor Tom Potter for not fulfilling promises to the homeless.

Inside the café are photos and posters. One says: "Cherish the dream. Refuse to hate."

"It's like going to grandmother's place," says Orion (pronounced O'Ryan) Lumiere, 34, development associate for Sisters of the Road. She has worked three to four jobs there since 2000.

"All the photos and signs are made or given by customers or supporters. Every little thing in here has a meaning." She says that people come back after years and ask where their pictures are on the wall.

In 2009, the group will celebrate 30 years of service.

Sisters of the Road gives me "food and camaraderie," says Perry, 41, who has been homeless for 20 years "off and on." His wife went into labor right in this café 16 years ago.

"I like the zero tolerance," Ben says. He's in recovery from alcohol

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