

LOCAL, STATE & REGION

PORTLAND

Neighborhood groups assist homeless residents, rather than rally to eject them

BY NICOLE HAYDEN

The Oregonian

Tony Gonzales finds solace as he rests on a concrete space an arm's reach from a downtown Portland church, its steeples stretching heavenward on either side. He sleeps in a gray and green tent, neatly tucked at the edge of the sidewalk, trying to be unobtrusive to passersby. His goal: to be invisible. To just make it safely through the night.

"I don't really like it here. It's uncomfortable. My situation, it's embarrassing," he said on a recent blue-sky Sunday. "At night I can hear people yelling and it bothers me. I wish they would stop."

A lot of life squeezes into the four-square block section of downtown he now calls home. Archways of trees with springs buds. Red brick walkways.

Buildings dripping with history. Tents that are temporary homes. And housed neighbors who, as they walk down the street to the hair salon or coffee shop, sometimes advert their eyes from things they find hard to see.

But there are also those who feel moved to help their neighbors experiencing homelessness — and want them to know they aren't invisible.

"I think every neighborhood association should understand who their neighbors are," said retiree David Dickson, who co-leads volunteer homeless outreach for the Downtown Neighborhood Association.

From Lents to Sunnyside to downtown, self-governed neighborhood groups are setting their sights on a new goal of filling homeless services gaps. They have organized trash clean-ups, free showers, laundry services, food and cold weather gear distribution and weekly wellness checks.

Gonzales appreciates the kindness neighborhood volunteers have shown him.

Such actions mark a distinct change in Portland. Historically, neighborhood associations from Overlook to Laurelhurst to Mt. Scott-Arleta expressed wariness or outright hostility to shelters or other communal living spaces for people experiencing homelessness existing within their bounds.

When the Sunnyside neighborhood found itself occupied by a large homeless community centered on its public school playground last year, however, the Sunnyside Neighborhood Association responded by, among other actions, launching a free shower program.

Hannah Wallace, who leads that project, said the work started after neighborhood residents elected a new asso-



Ramona Kearns, center, hands a bottle of hand sanitizer to a person inside a tent. Kearns, Missy Voux and Robert Northman check on their homeless neighbors in downtown Portland once a week, distributing food, water, gloves, flashlights and other essentials to people who want them.

ciation board last summer, resulting in "new blood" and "an attitude change."

Dickson said the Downtown Neighborhood Association board similarly saw a changing of the guards last spring.

Volunteers who've joined the new movement hope it will catch on across all of Portland's 94 neighborhood associations. Currently, at least 15 groups are engaged in some sort of organized homelessness endeavor, according to a poll of neighborhood officials.

Bottomless need for outreach

Every Sunday at 1 p.m., downtown residents Dickson and Stephanie Hansen, who was formerly homeless, meet outside of Hansen's apartment near Southwest 10th Avenue and Main Street. They are one of 14 homeless outreach teams within the Downtown Neighborhood Association. Each has an assigned set of blocks to walk around once a week with a wagon full of granola bars, water, coffee, socks, blankets and more for people living on the street. Teams have been doing this since November.

"We provide survival items for folks, but it is equally important to build relationships and trust over time," Dickson said. "We want them to know we are there to support them and we can provide information about mental health services, shelter, and to really just listen and be a good neighbor."

Starbucks donates the coffee. The group buys half the gear with private donations. The other half is provided by the joint city and county supply warehouse.

The downtown association is the only neighborhood group that picks up supplies on a weekly basis, said Mult-

nomah County communications director Julie Sullivan-Springhetti. The city spreads \$2 million across all 94 neighborhood associations which can be used for any programming costs, including homeless outreach.

This past Sunday, Dickson and Hansen met right on schedule. The weather hinted at spring, enjoyable for a stroll around the neighborhood, but still too cold to live outside.

Dickson started walking, pulling the heavy red wagon that Hansen had packed full. Before they made it even half a block, a man gingerly stopped them and asked for water. He's not homeless, rather he lives down the street in an affordable housing complex. But he was hungry and thirsty and low on cash.

Within their few blocks, Dickson and Hansen walked past nearly 25 tents. They stopped to say hello at each. Darlene Garrett, who chairs the downtown association's homeless outreach committee, estimates about 200 people are experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the downtown area, based on a count the association conducted.

Finally, the two came upon Gonzales' tent. Dickson yelled out his scripted "knock-knock," and was initially brushed off. But Gonzales and his neighbor in the next tent over both perked up with the offer of blankets.

"Whatever you guys want to give us, we need," Gonzales said, thanking the team and asking how their day was going.

Dickson saw that Gonzales didn't have a cover over his tent like most campers. He rooted through the wagon and pulled out a blue tarp and an insu-

lation blanket. He instructed: "put this blanket between your sleeping bag and the ground."

Gonzales was thankful — he had never before seen outreach workers in his neighborhood.

"I know there are so many programs available to help us, but I really appreciate that they came to us," Gonzales, 40, said. "I am really shy and sometimes feel overwhelmed going to a resource center to ask for help. I feel embarrassed to have to ask ... I think it's really awesome that they put forth the effort to come to us."

TODAY

It's Sunday, March 28, the 87th day of 2021. There are 278 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

In 1979, America's worst commercial nuclear accident occurred with a partial meltdown inside the Unit 2 reactor at the Three Mile Island plant near Middletown, Pennsylvania.

In 1797, Nathaniel Briggs of New Hampshire received a patent for a washing machine.

In 1898, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, ruled 6-2 that Wong, who was born in the United States to Chinese immigrants, was an American citizen.

In 1935, the notorious Nazi propaganda film "Triumph des Willens" (Triumph of the Will), directed by Leni Riefenstahl, premiered in Berlin with Adolf Hitler present.

In 1941, novelist and critic Virginia Woolf, 59, drowned herself near her home in Lewes, East Sussex, England.

In 1942, during World War II, British naval forces staged a successful raid on the Nazi-occupied French port of St. Nazaire in Operation Chariot, destroying the only dry dock on the Atlantic coast capable of repairing the German battleship *Tirpitz*.

In 1969, the 34th president of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, died in Washington, D.C., at 78.

In 1977, "Rocky" won best picture at the 49th Academy Awards; Peter Finch was honored posthumously as best actor for "Network" while his co-star, Faye Dunaway, was recognized as best actress.

In 1978, in *Stump v. Sparkman*, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld, 5-3, the judicial immunity of an Indiana judge against a lawsuit brought by a young woman who'd been ordered sterilized by the judge when she was a teenager.

In 1990, President George H.W. Bush presented the Congressional Gold Medal to the widow of U.S. Olympic legend Jesse Owens.

In 1999, NATO broadened its attacks on Yugoslavia to target Serb military forces in Kosovo in the fifth straight night of airstrikes; thousands of refugees flooded into Albania and Macedonia from Kosovo.

In 2000, in a unanimous ruling, the Supreme Court, in *Florida v. J.L.*, sharply curtailed police power in relying on anonymous tips to stop and search people.

Ten years ago: Vigorously defending American attacks in Libya, President Barack Obama declared in a nationally broadcast address that the United States intervened to prevent a slaughter of civilians; he ruled out targeting Moammar Gadhafi, warning that trying to oust him militarily would be a mistake as costly as the war in Iraq.

Five years ago: The FBI said it had successfully used a mysterious technique without Apple Inc.'s help to hack into the iPhone used by a gunman in a mass shooting in California, effectively ending a pitched court battle.

One year ago: The number of confirmed coronavirus deaths in the U.S. topped 2,000, twice the number from just three days earlier; five countries had higher death tolls, including Italy with more than 10,000. New York's presidential primary was delayed from April 28 to June 23. President Donald Trump considered and then rejected ordering a quarantine for residents of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

Today's Birthdays: Author Mario Vargas Llosa is 85. Country musician Charlie McCoy is 80. Movie director Mike Newell is 79. Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte is 76. Actor Dianne Wiest is 75. Country singer Reba McEntire is 66. Olympic gold medal gymnast Bart Conner is 63. Rapper Salt (Salt-N-Pepa) is 55. Actor Tracey Needham is 54. Actor Max Perlich is 53. Country singer Rodney Atkins is 52. Actor Vince Vaughn is 51. Actor Annie Wersching is 44. Actor Julia Stiles is 40. Singer Lady Gaga is 35.

— Associated Press



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