

faces of homelessness

Meet Central Oregon's houseless community

The Bulletin

HOWTO HELP

For suggestions on how to help the region's residents experiencing homelessness, contact the Homeless Leadership Coalition by email at info@cohomeless.org.

Homelessness in Central Oregon was scarcely noticeable as recently as five years ago. Today, no one can ignore that there are hundreds of people without a house to call their home. Below

are three stories from a new, yearlong reporting project by The Bulletin newspaper that attempts to put a face on the issue by taking a close look at some of the individuals experiencing homelessness in the region.

Redmond woman forced to unlearn bias

By ZACK DEMARS The Bulletin

REDMOND — Heather Fluke used to tell homeless people to move along as part of her job.

Working for the city of Salem's parks department at the time, Fluke, now 47, wondered why the people she cleared out of parks until 2016 didn't just go get jobs.

She's had a change of heart since then. Now homeless herself after suffering injuries, lost jobs and scuttled plans, Fluke has come "full circle," spending most nights this winter at Redmond's Winter Shelter after returning to Central Oregon this fall.

"You just don't understand until you're in it, and I didn't," Fluke told The Bulletin last week as evening temperatures approached freezing. "I don't know if I can put it into words yet because I'm just in the middle of it. It's humbling."

Fluke is from Salem, but this year isn't her first in Redmond. She lived in the city two decades ago for a few years, she said.

Prior to becoming homeless, Fluke had a job, a house and a plan — but over time, those things fell away one



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

Heather Fluke, 47, organizes her belongings at the Redmond warming shelter at Mountain View Fellowship Church on Thursday, Jan. 20, 2022.

by one.

After she worked for the city of Salem and just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Fluke had a job in merchandising for Home Depot. It was a good job: She traveled for work, and she could afford a new truck and to rent a house.

But when a novel coronavirus turned the world upside down, it touched her

life, too. Travelling to Home Depots across the region was suddenly much more difficult and retail sales were suddenly much less common.

"I didn't know what was going to happen, and I ended up losing a good job," Fluke remembered. "Merchandising was not important after that because of COVID, and they wouldn't travel and everything was shut down."

Fluke had a lot of physical issues she wanted to heal, so she took time away from working for much of 2021 with the help of expanded unemployment benefits.

When those expired in September, she made a new plan, this time to take her talents and abilities to Arizona with a friend.

But once again, her plans changed when the friend she planned to go with "flipped a switch," and the move was off.

So, Fluke took to the road. She spent days and nights "wrestling" with herself at a rest area on U.S. Highway 97 overlooking the Crooked River, trying to figure out how to keep trying. She wanted to be a "giver," but it felt like every door she tested — jobs, family, friends — closed.

Then, the cold came.

In early November, she drove to Redmond, reading about the warming shelter online and making it her temporary respite.

"I just know that I'm supposed to be here, even if I don't know where I'm going," Fluke said. "As far as I'm concerned, it's better than I could do on my own right now."

Now, she goes to the shelter early

each night, offering to sweep or otherwise help prepare for the two dozen guests that sleep there each night.

Fluke wants to work — she did another short spell at Home Depot, but a prior meniscus injury she didn't get physical therapy for made it a challenge to stand for hours at a time.

"My knee wasn't ready for me to be on my legs for four hours. So I switched gears just to focus on getting healthy and building up my legs so that I can do something — what, I'm not sure," Fluke said. "I have goals of doing some thing, but I go to therapy three days a week right now, until I can feel like I can keep up a job, especially because a lot of jobs here are on your feet."

Wanting to hold a job while being homeless forced Fluke to overcome the common misconception that those experiencing homelessness don't have a desire to work. She's also learned about the invisible struggles many face and the mental health services needed to overcome them.

"When you're working and you have everything you need, you don't realize how much of this is people are fighting their demons on a daily basis," Fluke said. "You can't just give them a tent and a blanket and say, 'go there.'"

Priced out of housing in Sisters

By BRENNIA VISSER The Bulletin

SISTERS — Adrian Palmer hates the word homeless.

Until last Thanksgiving, the word had not entered her orbit — she and her three children were living in her boyfriend's Redmond home.

That changed when her boyfriend, Buddy Blair, let the house go in a divorce settlement. Since Palmer works as the kitchen manager at the Sno Cap Drive In in Sisters, she and her boyfriend tried to find a rental they could afford there.

They couldn't find one before they had to leave Redmond. That's when the 38-year-old and her three kids — 19, 17 and 4 — had to come to terms with the word homeless.

Palmer, her three children and her boyfriend now live in a trailer in the woods outside of Sisters.

"It's rough being out there," Palmer said. "I can't (afford to) live in the Sisters area, but that's where I work, that's where my kids go to school, that's where my youngest goes to daycare."

Palmer was born in Bend and has lived the majority of her life in Central Oregon. She has worked making the ice cream for the Sister's icon for two and a half years, she said.

Palmer said she feels financially stable in



Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

Adrian Palmer lives in the forest near Sisters.

her job, but still encounters barriers to finding housing. Palmer and her boyfriend each have poor credit that makes renting or buying a home difficult, she said.

And finding a three-bedroom rental for a family of five in the area on her budget, which she says is between \$1,500 and \$1,750 a month, seems impossible in the Sisters area.

"The pricing of rentals is freaking crazy," she said.

The average rent, according to the housing site Zumper.com, is about \$1,195 a month.

Rent in Sisters can vary wildly, from \$800 to more than \$2,200 a month, said Judy Trego, the executive director of Sisters Area Chamber of Commerce. The problem is there is very little actually for rent in Sis-

ters, she said.

"I think realistically it's more like \$2,500 to rent a place in Sisters all the way up to over \$3,000," Trego said. "So yes, it's been very difficult for families in the community to piece that together."

Palmer also finds herself in a frustrating predicament: Not making enough money at her job to afford local rentals, but making too much to qualify for social service programs that are geared toward housing low-income families, she said.

"What do you call low income? What do you call regular income?" Palmer said. "Because even with both me and my boyfriend both having jobs, we can't afford a \$3,000 a month payment."

One thing people who have not been homeless may not understand is how being homeless costs money, too, Palmer said. She still has to pay bills, like car payments, and other costs like propane for cooking and gas for the generator for their trailer, Palmer said.

"It's not as easy as what some people would think it is," she said.

Palmer said looking toward the future she hopes to fix up her bad credit in a bid to have a better shot at getting into housing, but for now, she feels stuck.

"I'd love to be able to have a two-income household with six figures," she said. "But that's not realistic in everyone's circumstances."

Rent hike puts family on street

By ZACK DEMARS The Bulletin

REDMOND — The Redmond apartment John Breen shared with his wife and son fit the family's budget. Then the landlord raised the rent and their home went from affordable to unaffordable. An increase from \$965 a month to \$1,050 a month was all it took for the 79-year-old and his family to be homeless for the first time.

"We lost our apartment because it got to be too high for us — it's supposed to be low-income housing, but it's not," Breen said. That was five months ago. They've been trying to find a new place to live ever since.

"Me and my wife have been together 28 years and this is the first time we've ever been homeless," Breen said.

Breen is a retired Walmart employee, and his wife worked for an area motel until she got injured. When the rent went up

at their apartment, they tried to find rent assistance. The non-profit they contacted for help told the family they made too much to qualify.

"How much is too much? By the time you cover the rent and the electricity and all the other stuff, you've pretty much used up your money," Breen said.

When that didn't work, the family moved their belongings into a Bend storage unit and started living out of the family's station wagon.

"(We) went from a big place to a little car," Breen said.

When the weather got colder, they found their way to the Redmond Winter Shelter, where they've been staying. They're hoping to find new housing in the next few weeks — but they aren't having an easy time.

"We're looking around right now. The cheapest one we found was \$1,800 a month and there's no way we can afford that," Breen said. "That's a robbery."

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