



Faces of Homelessness
 Who are the real people impacted by skyrocketing housing prices, decisions about homeless shelters or plans to sweep informal camps? The Bulletin wants to offer insight by telling their stories through the series Faces of Homelessness. Every two weeks this year, Bulletin reporters will introduce readers to a different homeless person. We are here to tell their stories.

'Fishbowl' offers sense of safety

By ZACK DEMARS
 The Bulletin

BEND — For Rejena Wenciker, the "Fishbowl" at Juniper Ridge offers a sense of relative safety.

It's a little pocket of camps in part of Dirt World, the unofficial name for 1,500 acres of publicly owned juniper forest on Bend's northeast edge known officially as Juniper Ridge.

The Fishbowl is exactly what it sounds like. One of the area's informal roads dips down into the small bowl-shaped clearing, which is surrounded on three sides by rocky hillsides that offer a bit of seclusion. Around a half-dozen trailers and campers are arranged like a cul-de-sac, most with makeshift fences built around them to either keep dogs in or keep strangers out.

"It's like living regular, but with a little more struggle," said Wenciker, 44.

Wenciker's been living here for about a year, and has been homeless since she got kicked out of a family member's home in Myrtle Creek three years ago. Currently, she shares the trailer with her two daughters, ages 19 and 21, and her 2-year-old grandson.

Her grandson bounced on a small trampoline outside the family's trailer as the Shepherd's House outreach van delivered basic supplies to the family late last month. He's been living there



Rejena Wenciker, 44, left, her daughter, Katie Borden, 19, and grandson Mason, 2, at their camp in "Dirt World," north of Bend.

Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

since Wenciker's son got into a bad car accident and couldn't take care of him. The toddler is a big part of the reason Wenciker hopes to get somewhere more stable.

"I'm hoping to be in a house, to have a job and do the normal life," Wenciker said. "Because I want my grandkid out of here."

When she first became homeless, Wenciker didn't know how to survive. But when she reconnected with a friend who was also experiencing homelessness, she began figuring out how to make it without

a stable place to live.

"I didn't know anything about being homeless," Wenciker said. "She helped me out."

She spent some time homeless in Pendleton, but decided to come back to Bend because she'd lived here before. She lived in an RV off Hunnell Road for two years, and told a Bulletin reporter in March 2021 about the difficulty of basic tasks while living outdoors.

It's hard to say if Wenciker is in a better place than she was at that time, but she says she feels safe in the Fish-

bowl and hopeful for the future.

"I'm still standing here and I'm still smiling," Wenciker said. "The only thing that got me through (a hard year) is knowing that my higher power has me."

She's hoping to get a job, but that's been hard to accomplish since her car broke down earlier this year. She doesn't want to get a job but not be able to show up for it reliably, she said. A bike donated by a local nonprofit and delivered by the outreach workers might make it a bit easier to get into town, she said.

The network of nonprofits in the area give her hope that she might be able to get somewhere more stable, Wenciker said. She's on waitlists to get into housing through a few of them, and she says her primary goal is to get her children and grandchild into a safer place.

"This is not where I want my kids to live," she said, gesturing to the dusty basin around her.

The juniper forest poses unique challenges, according to Colleen Thomas, Deschutes County's homeless outreach supervisor. As with anyone living outside, people on Juniper Ridge are uniquely exposed to poor air quality and extreme temperatures, and the property's location makes water much less accessible. An array of nonprofits collaborate on bringing water, trash bags and other supplies to those living there.

"One of the concerns I always have with Juniper Ridge is the terrain," Thomas said. "The dirt that's out there, in the middle of summer when it's hot and dusty, makes it really hard to maneuver any vehicle out there."

For Wenciker, the kids are what keep her optimistic despite those challenges, she said.

"That's what I want them to see, is that they can handle anything, because they know what mom's been through and they can do it," Wenciker said.

More than 200 unhoused people living at Juniper Ridge

By ZACK DEMARS
 The Bulletin

BEND — Dirt World used to be relatively quiet when Krista Bahr first started living there with her boyfriend around six years ago.

Along with a handful of other camps further south on the property — a dusty, undeveloped 1,500 acres in northeast Bend, owned in large part by the city, and known in official parlance as Juniper Ridge — their site was one of the few.

"When we came out here, there was nobody around here," Bahr, 42, said. "If you ran into somebody, it was because they were lost."

Bahr, who's lived in Central Oregon since age 15, had been living for about a year at the hotel she worked at, but ended up back at Dirt World this summer after she lost the job.

"I just happened to lose my job (and) my vehicle with everything I owned in it all in one day," she recalled.

Her return to Juniper Ridge brought her to an area that was much different than it had been the first time. Now, a maze of bumpy, unofficial roads weaves across the property between junipers, campers, tents, trailers with makeshift fences and built-up structures resembling ad-hoc houses.

Between 200 and 250 people now



Krista Bahr, 42, inside of her makeshift structure in "Dirt World" north of Bend.

Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

live in the juniper-dotted forest, a patchwork of city, county and federal lands, according to Colleen Thomas, Deschutes County's homeless outreach supervisor. That's grown in the last several years — city officials estimated that between 150 and 200 lived on the property in 2020.

The population there decreased as the city completed a sewer project on the property's south end in 2020, but began increasing again as the Oregon Department of Transportation cleared camps from its properties and people living on Hunnell Road received negative attention, Thomas said.

"We have definitely seen it increase over the past six months,

plus," Thomas said. "At least amongst the junipers they have a little more privacy."

Bahr has noticed the growth. "It's been crazy. It's definitely different from there not being anybody out here," Bahr said. "There's a lot more problems."

Despite those problems, Bahr typically feels safe at Dirt World. Her camp is in a relatively secluded part of the property and includes some of the things one could need: Various materials make up the sturdy walls of her living structure, which has insulation, a camping stove on a table, a few pieces of furniture and a wood stove.

Bahr's boyfriend, who works as a

HOW TO HELP

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

painter in town during the day, built much of the structure. The newest additions include a makeshift shower outside the front door, and Titan, the couple's 3-month-old pit bull and bull mastiff mix.

Still, life in the woods isn't easy, Bahr said.

"It's awful living out here and making it the best that you can, living as best as you can," Bahr said.

Wildfire is a constant concern, too. Bahr described the sound of popping propane tanks from a motor home that was burned on Sept. 24. The Deschutes County Sheriff's Office confirmed that a 40-foot motorhome had been set on fire that day and was considered a total loss, and that a 39-year-old man was arrested on arson charges.

She also recalls evacuating the area when the 2020 Juniper Ridge fire tore through 39 acres nearby. As it came close to her structure, she loaded her cats in their carriers and hurried to the highway, waiting hours before she could return to her camp to find that

her belongings had been spared. "That was scary, really scary," Bahr said.

After that fire, city officials told The Bulletin they were keeping a detailed map of where individuals were living throughout the property and developing an emergency management plan for the area. Much of that work is now done by the Sheriff's Office, according to Shelley Smith, a city management analyst. The city coordinates with a handful of local nonprofits that connect directly with residents, as well as county and federal agencies to do wildfire prevention projects in the area, Smith said.

"What we're facing right now as a region with houselessness, lack of housing and shelter, we're trying to balance the needs of humans that we see out there with what our responsibility as a city is about managing public lands," Smith said, noting that the city doesn't have imminent construction plans on much of its portions of the property.

Transportation out of Dirt World is Bahr's current challenge. She hasn't gotten a job since her car broke down, but she's hoping a donated bike will make it easier to get to a new one.

"This bike'll help out quite a lot," she said after chiding Titan for teething on the new bike's tires.

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