

# Matthew 25



June 2023

A journal on ministry and service to the margins in western Oregon

Catholic Charities

## Making culinary relational music

***Volunteer, an Army veteran, stands out because of stalwart dedication***

Rock stars normally earn fame with sharp vocals or shredding on an electric guitar so loudly that it peels the paint off houses.

Renatta Robertson is a rock star volunteer at Catholic Charities whose tools include sharp knives, graters and peelers for vegetables. But her main implement is passion for service and feeding the community.

“She is reliable and has consistently shown up every week for the past nine months to work alongside our chefs and help in whatever way was needed,” says Kelsey Allan, director of a program that provided culinary training for people with intellectual disabilities. “We could not do the work we do without volunteers like her,” Allan explained.

It was Allan who gave Roberts the moniker “rock star.”

In addition to training people for jobs in food service, Catholic Charities until recently provided meals to local shelters. There was a lot to do.

For her part, Robertson, 36, feels alive during her volunteer gig.

“The staff and students are the reasons I keep coming back,” she said. “I feel like I have friends for life.”

After completing culinary school, Robertson joined the Army with hopes of becoming a military cook. Instead, she was assigned to a unit that responds to battlefield chemical hazards.

But she continued to care for her squad in the way she knew best: rustling up good meals for them in the barracks.

After retiring from the military and moving to Portland, she found temporary housing in a Transition Projects veterans’ motel where she received hot meals prepared and delivered by Catholic Charities. After learning more about the culinary and hot meal programs, she felt excited to get involved.

Robertson aims to help students build confidence



Renatta Robertson, an Army veteran, emerged as a stand-out volunteer at Catholic Charities. (Angela Carvallo/Catholic Charities)

and the ability to communicate.

“Renatta’s positivity, commitment, and dedication to feeding the community is admirable and has been a welcome addition to our kitchen,” said Allan.

One story illustrates Robertson’s experience. She recalled teaching knife skills to enthusiastic beginners with developmental disabilities.

“It’s always rocky to start,” she said with an affectionate laugh.

Of particular concern was onion day, when students attempt the difficult and sometimes perilous act of dicing the slippery round vegetables. Watery eyes add whole new challenge.

“I said to myself, ‘There is going to be a lot of drama today,’” Robertson said.

And then there was no drama. Everyone handled knives and tears professionally.

“They were fine,” Robertson said. “I had put that limitation on them. But there were no limitations.”



Gavin Bjork's bicycle, one of many items he left to Catholic Charities.

## Math professor leaves his all

You never know who has the good of the poor at heart.

As far as anyone knows, Gavin Bjork had not been a donor to Catholic Charities, which serves houseless people, low-income Oregonians and refugees, among others. But upon his death a year ago at age 86, the retired Portland State University math professor left his entire estate to the agency.

The bachelor don, born and raised in Montana, came to Portland in 1966 to teach mathematics at Portland State University. He said it was his good fortune to have had the fulfilling job of helping students learn.

Professor Bjork lived alone, and asked that there be no services upon his death.

His estate included a Portland condominium full of paintings, pottery and a bicycle.

"I sincerely wish we had an opportunity to thank him for his support of our mission while he was with us," said Wendy Marsh, chief development officer for Catholic Charities of Oregon. "We look forward to putting these funds to great use. These past two years have seen a significant increase in the number of Catholic Charities donors who have called wanting to include us in their estate plans."

Those who want to join the Catholic Charities Legacy Society can contact Laura Foley at [lfoley@ccoregon.org](mailto:lfoley@ccoregon.org).

# Federal leader praises village

PORTLAND -- A federal delegation visited Catholic Charities' Kenton Women's Village in North Portland March 21, learning how the innovative tiny house model might be applicable nationwide.

Jeff Olivet, executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, said the council aims to end homelessness in the country. Places like Kenton Women's Village can play an important role, Olivet said. He praised Kenton's on-site access to case management, mental health counseling and other services designed to help people remain housed.

Catholic Charities is a significant provider of transitional housing with services, including Kenton Women's Village, which has 20 pods, and Chiles House, a 27-unit apartment building next door to Catholic Charities headquarters.

Leading the tour was Courtney Hamilton, homeless services man-



Lindsay Kendall, Kenton Women's Village manager, explains how the village operates. Listening March 21 are Asiah Sawyers Burroughs, also a manager, and Cherie Hadley, program coordinator at Kenton. At right is Jeff Olivet, executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness.

ager for Catholic Charities.

"We are really trying to prepare them to get into housing," Hamilton said, explaining that years on the streets may leave people out of practice for living indoors.

Lindsay Kendall, Kenton Women's Village manager, told the delegation that villagers stay occupied with chores and meetings with case managers.

## UP PROFESSOR:

## Philanthropy should be a relationship

Catholic Charities of Oregon came up in an April 13 evening lecture by Jordan Skornik, an adjunct professor of theology at the University of Portland.

In a talk exploring wealth, philanthropy and the Gospel, Skornik cited the 90-year-old charitable organization as a key result of the church tradition that gave birth to contemporary not-for-profit organizations.

"It's said that the Catholic Church is the godmother of modern non-profits," said Skornik, who told an audience of 40 that organizations like Catholic Charities can do so much because religion is an important motivator for philanthropy.

It's good, he explained, to look at philanthropy as a joyful connection between the giver and receiver as

opposed to one party saving the other.

Skornik suggested that more work needs to be done to accentuate human justice, a part of Catholic social teaching. Straight charity can neglect the need to work for just systems, he noted. "It is very satisfying to watch a video of a kid's rags to riches story. It is harder to ask why he was in rags in the first place."



Have a story about Catholics reaching out to those on the margins? Contact Ed Langlois, Catholic Charities communications director, [elanglois@ccoregon.org](mailto:elanglois@ccoregon.org) or 503.935.6187.



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