

Matthew 25



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

Catholic Charities

Anchored in community

Bobbie, 75, wouldn't dream of leaving Catholic Charities senior housing

Bobbie is a human anchor at one Catholic Charities of Oregon senior housing site.

The 75-year-old Navy veteran, amiable and centered, has lived in the Portland building since 2009. She's become a popular resident who navigates trips to concerts and festivals, using free bus tickets she obtains from Tri Met.

"I really like it here," Bobbie says, fondly looking around the community room as residents chat, make puzzles and sometimes laugh uproariously.

She explains that if she weren't living here, she would miss friendships and togetherness.

"If I were living alone in a house, I wouldn't know so many people. Here I know a lot of people," she says with a laugh. "I like people."

She spent her early childhood in Iowa but moved to Oregon as a teen in 1964 with her family. Her father was a lithographer and her mother a housewife who also did odd jobs.

Bobbie served in the U.S. Navy 1966-1970, stationed at Moffett Field in California. Her job was keeping track of parts for hundreds of airplanes. Her department had a computer that filled a room, required punch cards and needed to be air conditioned.

Her service earned her a free college education, which she took advantage of, completing a business degree at Portland State University.

She then worked in accounting at the Portland School District and later became a payroll and human resources officer at a lumber mill in Clackamas

County. She stayed for 24 years. "I really liked that job," she says.

Her marriage went sideways, but she has a beloved daughter who lives nearby and visits often. Bobbie has three grandchildren, including a Girl Scout granddaughter who has uncommon luck selling cookies at Bobbie's building.

Bobbie was living in a house in Gresham when she decided she wanted to live closer to her daughter and downsize.

"I liked the location," she says of her building. "It's a nice place to live. You are safe. . . . And Catholic Charities is a good advantage here. They help us a lot with different things. We are all low income here; we need the help."

As an example, Bobbie reports that Ema Erikson, the building's resident services coordinator, is helping people find assistance to pay for good internet. "Ema bends over backwards to help. She is very very good at her job."

Erikson leads a weekly bingo game in the community room. "Everybody is all happy and having a good time and Ema says the funniest things," says Bobbie.

"We can come down here and visit and get to know each other," Bobbie says. "If we had no place to go we would be sitting in our apartments with no place to visit. That's not good for us."

Bobbie appreciated a recent health fair run by Catholic Charities staff and a team from Providence.

"A lot of people can't get out to get



Bobbie, a resident of Catholic Charities senior housing, says communal living is key to her wellness.



Bobbie as a teen, about the time her family moved to Portland.

vaccinations," she said. "It was nice they came here to do it."

Bobbie recalls a recent birthday party for a resident who was turning 94. "She was so happy and she wore her funny hat with all kinds of things on it," Bobbie says, beaming at the memory. "It's nice to have community where everybody gets together, and we can visit."

Bobbie sums up her feelings about her building and its people this way: "I don't plan on moving."

SEE THE VIDEO:



'To show care'

Catholic Charities outreach to homeless campers saves lives, builds relationships and can offer a path to housing

Splayed on cold damp cement, the man had a face that was quickly turning the color of a raincloud. A woman's screams for help echoed off the brick buildings of Portland's Old Town.

Honor Hehn and Kathryn Swanson, Catholic Charities outreach workers, heard the otherworldly pleas and rushed to their vehicle, where they had Narcan doses. The pair held the unconscious man's head and shot a dose or two up his nose. He sputtered to consciousness and now has a chance to make better choices for his life.

Resuscitation is not an everyday event for Catholic Charities workers. But just a few months prior, Hehn and Swanson had saved a homeless man who was suffering in his tent with an acute intestinal illness. That time, feces was profuse and death could have followed.

Catholic Charities workers don't lounge around their offices waiting for people in need to come. Trained teams go regularly into the streets of Portland to offer water, food, tents, sleeping bags, first aid supplies and toiletries along with invitations to begin the move toward shelter and housing.

"People really appreciate the lunch sacks," said Hehn. There are few meal sites on Portland's east side. The workers also hand out what they call "life kits": wipes, a flashlight, garbage bags, snacks and a resource list.

As important as the supplies and social services, Catholic Charities outreach workers provide people who are homeless a chance at a steady human connection. On the streets, isolation can be deadly.

"We build relationships with people," says Victoria Waldrep, program manager for Catholic Charities' Homeless and Transitional Housing Services. "I've had people call out of their tents and say, 'Is that you, Victoria?' Then they come out and throw their arms around me."

Waldrep says that being regular when it comes to visiting is vital. For years, Catholic Charities teams have kept to a firm schedule.

Catholic Charities provides case management and housing plans for single self-identified women 25 and older who are homeless and who don't have children in their care. But outreach workers visit everyone.

The 90-year-old nonprofit focuses on a few areas east of the Willamette River with large populations of people who are homeless: inner Southeast, including the zone around St. Francis Parish and the East Bank Esplanade. The teams also venture north into the Hollywood District.

The first rule for outreach workers is to operate with utmost respect.

As the team approaches a camp, the leader calls out from a distance, "Good morning! Outreach workers!" In loud places, such as under bridges, the greetings need to be downright hollers. But it's always done with deference.



Workers announce that they have lunch sacks and life kits and other items if they're in supply, including sleeping bags.

"Someone might want to tell their story and talk a little," says Hehn. One man recently sang the workers a song he wrote.

If the person is a woman who meets the Housing Transitions requirements, the workers describe the hope-filled program and offer a card.

Campers may ask general questions about surviving on the streets, so outreach workers need to stay up to date on what's available, including showers, internet and laundry.

Staff learn that people are homeless for many reasons, not just drugs and mental illness. One man lost his house in a fire. Often, women who are homeless lost a place to live after being a caretaker for a parent or other loved one who died.

It's no surprise that chief among the needs outreach workers identify is housing. There is not nearly enough of it in Portland. Catholic Charities owns 1,200 affordable units and is developing more.

"I have had very pleasant interactions so far every time we go out," says Hehn. "People want the supplies we have. And they notice that we are non-threatening and respectful of their space."

That said, Catholic Charities workers do always go out in pairs or triads.

Once, a man appeared with a knife and large stick. The outreach worker was able to talk to him in a non-threatening way and the interaction turned into a positive moment.

Waldrep sums up the work, both the joys and perils: "We are not there to bother people. We are there to be in solidarity with them and show care."

Have a story about Catholics reaching out to those on the margins? Contact Ed Langlois, Catholic Charities communications director, elanglois@ccoregon.org or 503.539-6333.



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