

Homelessness

Special Edition
March 2014

Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation
www.ouuc.org

SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK TACKLES HOMELESS ISSUES

Projects offer care and hope

Since 1994, the OUUC congregation has sought justice, equity and compassion through actions on behalf of people who are homeless.

WHY ARE PEOPLE HOMELESS?

No two stories are alike, but there are some common themes and threads for why people are homeless. All stories involve pain and heartache.

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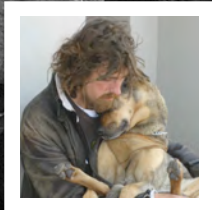
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Seattle Times photo
Resident of Camp Quixote



Photo by Tim Ransom
Camp Quixote dinner at OJUC



Photo by Jeremy Bittermann
Resident settled at Quixote Village

Tackling Issues of Homelessness

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This is the first publication on a topic of interest and action among the members and friends of the Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation. This and future publications will be available on the web at www.ouuc.org.

Theme or topic suggestions and articles for future publications are welcome. Submit to publications@ouuc.org.

Social justice actions in support of the homeless address two of the principles of our faith: the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

Thirty years ago the Unitarian Universalist Association adopted a new set of Principles and Purposes in recognition that the original statement of purposes, adopted when the Unitarians and Universalists joined forces in 1960, was outdated and less than useful. The contentious crafting of that original statement had almost derailed the merger as delegates struggled with references to "God" and "Our Judeo-Christian Heritage."

In contrast, in 1984 the new Principles and Purposes were adopted almost unanimously thanks to several years of groundwork by church and lay leaders, especially women. They have stood, basically unchanged, ever since.

The great thing about the Seven Principles is that they offer us a way to act on our own recognition of "what is right." As The Reverend

Barbara Wells ten Hove has said, "The Principles are not dogma or doctrine, but rather a guide for those of us who choose to join and participate in Unitarian Universalist religious communities." The Principles, and Unitarian Universalism, offer us a way of acting intentionally to help make things better in this life for ourselves, for others, and for this world.

Our congregation uses the Principles as guidance in pursuit of social, economic and environmental justice. In several articles following, I will try to acquaint you with some of our efforts to fulfill the first two principles:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person; and

Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

—Tim Ransom



Photo by Tim Ransom

Quixote Village, a housing development for individuals who are homeless

Out of the Woods

Out of the Woods is an overnight shelter which offers emergency services for families with children for up to 90 days. The goal is to help families with children to move on from homelessness to stable, sustainable housing.

Late in 1994, Bill Arensmeyer received a call late one evening. For a brief time Bill years before had been our first paid and ordained minister; more recently he had suffered hard times—illness, a divorce, a breakdown—and had lived in his car on the streets of Olympia for a year. "The people in the congregation ended up pulling me out of that," he said, but not before he had gotten to know, and be known by, many other homeless people on the streets and in the woods.

The call that night was from someone who had heard that we had an empty house on our property. Could a desperate family stay there for the night? Earlier that year, at the urging of our Minister, Sandra Lee, and a number of its members, the congregation had decided to buy the small, older house with the half acre just on north of the church. A commuter, Rev. Lee needed a place to stay occasionally, and the Religious Education Program needed more space. But six months later when the call came, the small, dark building was not being used after all and Bill had a key.

"I went out by Evergreen State College to an old chicken coop there," said Bill, "and there was a man and his wife and two boys. The boys—little kids—were not in good shape [pneumonia probably] so I figured 'What the hell, the house is empty.'" Bill had no official permission from the church, but he

"kinda had a feeling for Unitarians, that they weren't going to be too upset because I got a family out on a pretty cold night." He brought them back to sleep on the floor for the night, and that was that. The calls started coming in, and Bill, the offspring of a communist and a Quaker, and a man with a huge heart, could not say "No."

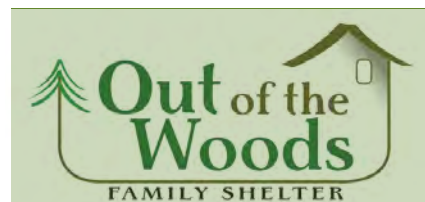
In Out of the Cold

So began the unofficial existence of the emergency shelter that eventually became Out of the Woods. Bill told Rev. Lee who approved and took news of what was happening to the Board. With the help of resident hosts, themselves homeless, and of a growing number of OUUC members led by "St. Kay" Engel (as Bill calls her), the shelter soon was taking in people almost every night.

Rules were established: no single men were allowed; families and single women could stay for two weeks at the most, but only for the nights. Bill estimates that on some of the coldest nights of the winter when all the others were full, the shelter housed as many as 50 people, and the annual number of "bed nights" approached 1400 even though in the summer months it was hardly used.

Nonprofit Status Formalized

Out of the Woods began to take on a greater semblance of formality when it obtained nonprofit status as a 501(c)(3) corporation, established a board of directors, and began to get referrals from Olympia's Emergency Shelter Network and the Salvation Army. Its relationship with our congregation changed over time, as well. While we continued to provide the building for free, the shelter began paying a share of the



Bill Arensmeyer and "St. Kay" Engel, founders of and advocates for the Out of the Woods shelter.



Selena Kilmoyer and Mary Walton Cameron reorganized the shelter with 24/7 wrap-around services.

utilities, and the host was also given the job of sexton of the church.

Cracks Led to Remake

But cracks began to appear in the foundations, both figuratively and literally. Our Board and minister, now the Rev. Arthur Vaeni, began to have serious misgivings about the shelter's operations, beginning with the fact that it had never been formally recognized by the City of Olympia. Moreover, it was routinely violating the city's ordinance that limited the building's occupancy to six adults a night. The Board, too, was increasingly concerned about its liability for the building and its occupants, and about the safety of the old, increasingly decrepit structure.

This came to a head early in 2006 when serious misbehavior by the shelter's hosts occurred. It was closed, and with the help of the OUUC Board and members of the



Photo by Linda Crabtree.

Out of the Woods Family Shelter on church property off Division Street

Congregation, the Out of the Woods Board, who, like its chair, Mary Walton Cameron, were mostly members of the Congregation themselves, undertook a reorganization of the program. Bill Arensmeyer stepped down as director, and eventually Selena Kilmoyer, a member of the Congregation and of a homeless service provider, Bread and Roses, took his place.

Up to three families with children could receive “wrap-around” services 24/7.

For some time Selena and others had been advocating for the shelter to provide longer term and more in-depth support to families. By the time the doors reopened later in the year, it was on a path to become a successful provider of emergency and “wrap-around” services for up to three families with children at a time, 24/7 and for up to 90 days each. Residents no longer had to leave each day and then return at night.

Church/Shelter Roles Defined

A new Memorandum of Understanding was struck with the Congregation, whereby we committed to the responsibility of maintaining the building while the shelter’s board was responsible for operations and programming. The Board sought and received formal recognition from the City of Olympia to operate the shelter at its present size and soon was writing and receiving grants for funds to improve operations.

For its part, our congregation stepped up to the challenges of its new relationship to the shelter and its responsibilities as landlord. The Buildings and Grounds Committee has put serious time and effort into improving the structure, including badly needed attention to ancient wiring and plumbing. All along, members of the Congregation have supported the shelter financially through direction donations and Share the Plate, and for some years now the entire proceeds of our annual Books, Beans and Brownies sale—over \$12,000 this year—has been donated to its operations.

Vision Evolved

Looking back, Bill Arensmeyer is conflicted. He is impressed with what Out of the Woods has become, but at the same time is sure that his heart didn’t lead him astray, twenty years ago. “I don’t know how many people would have died if we hadn’t gotten to them and gotten them off of the street into a situation where it was at least warm. That house was never meant to be more than to be warm and to feed them chicken soup! People thought we were more than that, and I never wanted it to be more than that. That is what I set out to do, that is what Kay was helping me do, and that’s what the community needed at the time.” A simple concept, well done. Some day ask Bill about the two babies that were born in the shelter.

—Tim Ransom
Panza Board President

[Panza is a 501C3 non-profit organization that mobilized community support for Camp Quixote, helped build Quixote Village and now supports the ongoing operation of the Village.]

The Emergency Overflow Shelter

The homeless are our neighbors who have no homes—a truism, perhaps, but a concept that becomes more profound the more you think about it.

Those of us with homes—houses, apartments, condos—take so many things for granted as we go about raising our families, caring for our loved ones, pursuing our careers and passions. So many things are possible when you know you have a place to lay your head that is warm, safe and yours. The loss of all that when you have no home hits us very hard, and none harder than women, especially women with children.

Almost 25 years ago, a non-profit association of faith communities and individuals of diverse faith traditions, Interfaith Works, organized the first "Emergency Overflow Shelter" for single women and women with children who were turned away from other shelters because of lack of room or incompatibility. In the coldest months between November and April, participating churches have hosted up to 18 women, many with children, at their facilities for two to three week stretches with the help of teams of volunteers. Members of the host church staff overnight shifts in the building, launder bedding, and provide hot food and transportation to their homeless guests.

It is no surprise that Bill Arensmeyer and Kay Engel were the first members of our congregation to take on coordinating hosting of the Emergency Overflow Shelter. [For years they also ran a food voucher program out of the church with a grant from FEMA and donations from members of the Congregation.]

Five years ago, when Bill retired from the role of coordinator at our church, Jo Ann Young stepped in to take over the not inconsiderable task. A counseling psychologist by profession, Jo Ann discovered UUism and our congregation with her husband Mikel in 2003. Having worked professionally with individuals healing from physical and sexual abuse as children and adults, she is particularly sensitive to the issues of women. She volunteered to be our coordinator of the Emergency Overflow Shelter, she says, because "I saw it as an opportunity to offer safety and support to homeless women, many of whom are often survivors of abuse."

Overwhelmed by first winter of acting as the shelter coordinator, Jo Ann was overjoyed when Billie Williams asked if she needed help. Billie had been drawn to a meeting on homelessness that Rev. Vaeni, I and others from our congregation attended at Westwood Baptist Church. Billie felt deep sympathy for the homeless people she met on the street, and at first she often gave them money. But she knew that wasn't solving the larger problem, and hoped that there was a better way.

Billie felt she had found it when she attended the meeting and learned of the overflow shelter. It was "something I could do," she said, and she became co-coordinator with Jo Ann. For Jo Ann, working with Billie, her son's French teacher and someone she had always wanted to know better, was "a gift."

Even with two of them in the job, coordination of the shelter's stay at our church each winter for the past five years was exceedingly challenging. The logistics of simultaneously providing space for



Jo Ann Young and Billie Williams have coordinated the Emergency Overflow Shelter at OUUC each winter for the past five years.

the shelter and for normal operation of the church proved difficult, and often the clients themselves had special needs that were hard to satisfy. A high, or perhaps low, point was reached a few years ago when it was our turn to host the shelter over the Christmas and New Years when it snowed and snowed and snowed.

But Jo Ann's and Billie's labors have been rewarding, to them of course, but especially to the Congregation. Participating in the overflow shelter was given many—over 70 of us were involved this year alone—the opportunity to help others on a small but significant scale, and we owe them, and Bill, Kay and others before them, our thanks for that gift.

A note: late in 2012 Interfaith Works reorganized the overflow shelter as the year-round "Interfaith Women's Shelter" just for homeless women. The pastor and congregation of First Christian Church have donated space in their church for this shelter, and participating congregations such as ours now send their volunteers there for their two-week stint of hosting. Jo Ann and Billie are still coordinating our participation. Please thank them when next you see them.

—Tim Ransom

Camp Quixote → Quixote Village



Photo by Tim Ransom.

Camp Quixote in 2007: temporary sanctuary which started in the wetland property of OUUC. With wood chips and support from many, the camp evolved over time into a defined community.

The meetings of the Board and the Congregation [to vote on hosting Camp Quixote in February of 2007] were two of the most incredible and wonderful events in my life as a member of OUUC.

The decisions were not easy—here we were essentially flying in the face of municipal code and laws, the wishes and fears of probably the vast majority of our neighbors, and our own fears and lack of understanding of the implications of what we were doing. And there was vigorous disagreement—while the goal of helping others was clear, how best to go about it while fulfilling our own rules of governance and protecting the congregation was fiercely debated. But in the end we acted with one heart and head.

I wrote that years ago, not long after our board first invited a rag-tag group of homeless men and

women and their political advocates to take up residence in tents on the lawn adjacent to the Out of the Woods shelter. The import and impact of those first events stay with me today. The story of the development of Camp Quixote and its eventual evolution into Quixote Village deserves a full length book! Easily a dozen congregations and hundreds of volunteers have participated, and along the way, many "heroes" have stepped up to

Easily a dozen churches and hundreds of volunteers have helped.

take on the herculean tasks of coordination and support. Their stories deserve to be told as well. But here I must limit myself to the part that our congregation has played in the past seven years.

It all began when a delegation of Unitarian Universalist Evergreen students came to our February 2007 board meeting. They were

from a group of homeless people and their activist supporters, the Poor People's Union, who had set up an encampment on a downtown city lot in protest of a city ordinance that severely restricted the use of sidewalks. They were being threatened by eviction and more. We had agreed to meet with them to talk about providing the encampment temporary sanctuary on the front field below Out of the Woods. They wanted to move the camp there, and it was my job as board president, along with Rev. Vaeni, to see if that could happen within the context of our congregation, its mission and its approach to decision-making and ministry.

In hindsight it might appear that the obvious answer to this request from us as a Unitarian Universalist congregation would be "Yes." But back then, it quickly became apparent that there was a diversity of opinions about, and understanding of, homelessness and this particular iteration of it, tinged as it was by political activism. Then,

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too, we had serious concerns that the Board would be subverting the normal procedures of church governance if it acted without seeking the approval of the Congregation and informing our neighbors first.

After heated debate the Board reached consensus to offer sanctuary, and the next day the campers began their move to our property. Within days special congregational and neighborhood meetings followed; overruling the



Camp downtown in 2007

board's intention to limit the camp's tenure to 45 days, an enthusiastic congregation voted to offer them a full 90 days. This, despite the fact that the Olympia City Manager warned us that, as far as the city was concerned, an encampment on church property without a permit was just as illegal as the one downtown had been.

The true test began, of course, when the encampment arrived on our property, now calling itself Camp Quixote in solidarity with a tent city protest in Paris called the Children of Don Quixote. As Bill Arensmeyer and Arthur will attest, pandemonium reigned. It had been a wet winter, and the Out of the Woods lawn immediately revealed its true nature as a wetland. Eventually volunteers provided truck loads of wood chips, and later pallets were used to keep tents out of the mud. It was apparent right from the beginning that the camp was going to need a great deal of help to survive and not implode.

At first some of this was provided by the activist contingent, people like Rob Richards and Phil Owen of Bread and Roses, but then more and

more members of our congregation quietly slipped through the woods to help set up tents, spread wood chips and welcome the residents.

The presence of Camp Quixote on our property brought us many daunting challenges. First on the list was negotiation with the City of Olympia to get a conditional use permit to legally host the camp (despite the fact that federal case law clearly indicated that faith communities have a constitutional right to provide such a ministry). Out of these negotiations came the rules regarding sanitation and safety procedures and eligibility for admission to the camp (background checks, no outstanding warrants, no



use of drugs or alcohol, and so on) that were eventually to become features of the residents' own self-governance.

Another requirement was that the host church hold a community meeting to inform its neighbors of the camp's coming and provide them an

Pandemonium reigned. The work of building community in the camp, church and neighborhood began.

opportunity to voice concerns. These meetings proved to be a mixed blessing. They were both a chore and an opportunity for the OUUC congregation especially to get to know our neighbors and begin to build community with them. They were also an opportunity for the community to see growing support of the camp from city planning staff and police who attended to help address our neighbors' issues and attest to the validity of our approach.

From the very start the camp's residents and their supporters talked of finding a site where it

could be set up permanently, perhaps on someone's private property. perhaps at The Evergreen State College. But time slipped by and nothing came of it. Meanwhile, Arthur and members of our church began enlisting the support of other faith communities in the region. Eventually 14 religious leaders from eight churches, Temple Beth Hatfiloh, the Quakers, the Community for Interfaith Celebration and the Baha'i signed a letter exhorting the greater community to make a place in its midst for this response to homelessness and poverty, saying "Our willingness to reach out to those at the margins of society defines us as people of faith and



Camper in Camp Quixote

morality. If we fail in this outreach, we fail our entire community."

Suddenly we were on a countdown to the end of the 90 days OUUC was allowed to host the camp. Efforts to find another host were redoubled, and at the last minute volunteers from the United Churches of Olympia convinced their congregation and leadership to step up. Thus began the peripatetic adventures of Camp Quixote as it moved every 90 days (later 180 days) from host congregation to host congregation, a herculean labor that would sorely test the perseverance of the residents and of their many supporters who time and again showed up to help dismantle and cleanup the encampment, truck it to the new site and then set it up again.

Support of the camp truly became an interfaith activity as five faith communities in Olympia (OUUC, United Churches, St. John's Episcopal, First Methodist and First Christian) and one in Lacey (Lacey Community Church) became hosts. Many others, including Temple Beth Hatfiloh, Westwood Baptist Church

and the Muslim community provided financial and logistical support, help with the moves and meals, and other forms of assistance.

Recognizing from the start that the future of Camp Quixote would require an extraordinary level of coordination and cooperation, Rev. Vaeni began a series of faith community meetings that engaged the participants (including lay leaders from the churches, camp residents and regional experts on homelessness) in educational and planning exercises. Eventually these gatherings gave rise to Panza (named after Don Quixote's squire, Sancho Panza), a Camp Quixote support group made up of ordained and lay leaders charged with coordinating moves and hosting, facilitating the residents' development of self-government, and pursuing the passage of

members, testified at public hearings as the local municipalities—Olympia, Tumwater, Lacey and Thurston County—one by one passed ordinances allowing for church-sponsored tent camps within their jurisdictions. Perseverance and growing community support were building a constituency.

Over time the residents of Camp Quixote changed as some moved on to more permanent housing, jobs, or opportunities elsewhere. Others found they could not obey the self-imposed rules of camp residency and had to leave. But despite these changes, one idea remained constant: to find a permanent site, perhaps one where tents could be exchanged for permanent structures.

Eventually this concept became a guiding principle for Panza, and when I returned to the Board in

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neighbors in southwest Olympia, applied for permits, struggled with the limitations of the site and our funding—all the one hundred and one things a home builder must contend with, multiplied several-fold. And there were the residents of Camp Quixote who spent hours to help develop the concept and design of the Village while all the time still facing all the difficulties of life in a tent.

Our struggles were suspended at least temporarily on Christmas Eve, 2013, when the 30 residents of Camp Quixote became inhabitants of Quixote Village.

—Tim Ransom

Quixote Village practices self-governance with elected leadership and membership rules. While a nonprofit board called Panza funds and guides the project, needing help is not the same thing as being helpless. As Mr. Johnson likes to say, "I'm homeless, not stupid." - NYTimes.com

supportive ordinances among the local municipalities. Fairly quickly, under the leadership of its OUUC representatives, including Selena Kilmoyer and me, Panza established itself as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation and established a board of directors.

The next few years saw great deal of energy spent by the Panza Board and the supporters of the Camp to work out the logistics of host church scheduling and the providing of support by volunteers. It was apparent from the start that the best way to build support for the Camp was by encouraging people to visit it, meet the residents and help out. Moreover, as part of the original agreement with the City, volunteers were needed to staff a host table in the Camp 24 hours a day. This extraordinary commitment was initially made with the idea of protecting the neighborhood, but soon it became obvious that the real value was in providing security for the residents themselves.

During this time as well, a flood of friends of Camp Quixote, along with dedicated residents and Panza

2012, something truly amazing had happened. The Board had doubled in size to include both faith community members and professionals with expertise in architecture, finance and social work. At the helm was OUUC member and long-time volunteer, Jill Severn. And Panza had just received notice that the state legislature had set aside over \$1.5 million to build Quixote Village, a permanent supportive housing community for chronically homeless adult men and women! Thurston County had promised to lease Panza a 2.7 acre site upon which to build in southwest Olympia for a dollar a year for 40 years!

The rest of the story is one of a community—the constituency built during seven years of fighting for and growing support for Camp Quixote—coming together to make the Village happen. There is not space here to list all the people, churches, businesses, elected officials and staff that went to extraordinary lengths to help as we sought additional funding, responded to the concerns and then legal attacks of some of our



Kitchen with dinner ready to serve



Residents in community room



Photo by Janine Unsoeld

Dining and lounging space

Why Are People Homeless?

About a week after people moved into Quixote Village, I mentioned to a resident what pleasure it gave me to go to bed at night knowing that they were all warm, dry, and cozy in their houses. “Yeah,” she said, “but there are still a lot of people who aren’t, and we can’t stop thinking of them.”

“Really?” I responded. “Can’t we just take a week off from that worry?”

“No,” she said, “We can’t.”

She’s right of course. Though building Quixote Village was a huge effort and a wonderful victory, it’s just 30 drops in the bucket. Every time I go downtown, I see people I recognize – people who are still homeless, still hurting, still struggling just to get through the night. Some of them are Camp Quixote alumni – people who were too acutely mentally ill, too angry, or too deeply addicted to live in the Camp community. Other familiar faces belong to those who came to the Camp but found it full, or came to the Camp for an occasional meal

or a visit to one of their more fortunate friends.

Quixote Village also has homeless neighbors who live in the woods just to the north of us. One of them is a kind-faced man with a friendly dog, and we are enjoying getting to know him.

Many people simply experience more suffering than they can bear.

Why are all these people homeless? Every one of them has his or her own story, and no two are alike. But there are some common themes and threads – all involving pain and heartache.

One of the most comforting things Rev. Vaeni said in a sermon a few years ago was that the old adages that “God never sends us more than we can handle” or “whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” just aren’t true. It was liberating to hear someone say that, because as a volunteer at Camp Quixote, I was seeing every day just how false and unfeeling those adages are.

Every homeless person I’ve met carries heavy burdens of grief,

trauma, mental illness, disability, chronic health problems and/or addiction. Many people simply experience more suffering than they can bear, and their lives fall apart.

One of the biggest contributors is mental illness, and the stigma that goes with it compounds the suffering. Mental illness often alienates family members who just get worn out by the behavior of a loved one with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, major depression, PTSD, or other conditions that cause erratic or unpredictable behavior. It’s typical for people with these conditions to get treatment, take medications for a while, and believe they are fine and stop taking their pills. After a few cycles through this routine, even the most devoted families sometimes throw up their hands.

Quite a few people with mental illnesses sincerely believe that alcohol or street drugs do more to alleviate their most distressing symptoms than anything a doctor prescribes. Heroin makes the unloved feel loved; some people report that it’s “like a warm hug.” Others say that meth helps them concentrate and get things done, which makes them feel competent



Photo by Tim Ransom

Eleven of the thirty residents of Camp Quixote in 2012

and in control. The combination of mental illness and addiction is probably the most common shorthand description of why adults are homeless. But there is so much behind those shorthand labels.

First, there are all the early deprivations that leave people unprepared for successful lives: chaotic, terrifying childhood experiences, growing up with addicted and/or mentally ill parents, acute intergenerational poverty, and lack of success in school, both academically and socially. All these conditions often come in a single package.

But perhaps the most devastating is child sexual abuse. For girls, sexual abuse and premature sexualization are frequently forerunners to chronic victimization and abusive, often violent relationships. For men, childhood sexual abuse often engenders feelings of profound homophobic shame and self-contempt. (It was a surprise to me to learn how many homeless men were sexually abused as children.)

Today we read about “adverse childhood experiences,” or ACEs. Social work professionals and researchers have charts and graphs that show that children who witness violence or death, or experience abuse, neglect, or family chaos are far more likely to have “bad outcomes.” Those outcomes include pretty much everything that can go wrong in a human life including chronic illness, homelessness and early death.

And then there are all the adult experiences that pile up on each other and contribute to the disintegration of a life: too many deaths of friends or family too close together, physical injuries that don’t heal and cause chronic pain, domestic violence, loss of jobs, and family breakups.

Once someone becomes homeless, more trauma is waiting around every corner. People who are homeless are victimized by crime, abuse, and

ostracism from society. And the longer someone is homeless, the more likely they are to experience more trauma. In fact, the longer someone is homeless, the more likely they are to remain homeless and to become habituated to a life lived on the edge of survival.

This litany of woe stands in stark contrast to the conventional view of homeless adults as irresponsible, deceptive, and possibly dangerous miscreants. Homeless people sometimes become some or all of those things, especially if they are addicted to alcohol or illegal drugs. But no one starts there, and no one should have to end there.

How Do We Respond?

So in addition to sustaining Quixote Village, what must we Unitarian Universalists do? First and foremost, we must protect children from harm. We must advocate for continuing improvements in our child welfare system, for parent education classes, for early childhood education for all, and for schools that pay attention to the needs of every child, every day. If all children felt safe, loved, and competent, it would do more to

reduce homelessness than anything else on earth.

But of course that is a very long term goal. More immediately, we must continue to advocate for a safe, low-barrier shelter – the People’s House – that can create healing relationships with the homeless adults who may not be capable of living in community because of their histories, their mental illnesses and injuries, their anger, and their addictions. Everyone in our society shares responsibility for the conditions that made them what they are today, and we all share responsibility for what they will become.

This may seem like a vast responsibility, and indeed it is. But as Unitarian Universalists we all know that our separateness is an illusion, and that every beating human heart is part of the interdependent web of life we revere and seek to serve. So Karen got it right: we can’t forget about people still on the streets – not even for a single week – and we can’t stop seeking justice for infants, children, adolescents and adults from every walk of life.

—Jill Severn
Panza Board Member



Photo by Tim Ransom

Volunteer with Camp Quixote resident

Contempt or Compassion

As a nation our society's relationship to the poor and our desire to alleviate poverty often seem to be informed by two opposing emotional responses: compassion and contempt.

I will address our contempt first. Our disregard for our poor citizens is commonly informed by racism and classism as well as a lack of understanding about mental illness and addictions as health issues.

Underlying all of that our disregard is also informed by an ancient and often unconsciously held belief that wealth is a sign of virtue, and conversely, poverty reveals the cursed state of those whose lives lack virtue. Tied closely to that belief is the understanding that those who hold the right values and work hard will ultimately be rewarded. It is a belief so ingrained even the poor believe it. Of course, hard work and good values often play a large role in contributing to one's well-being, but they are seldom the whole explanation.

During his confirmation hearing in 1991, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas made disparaging remarks about his sister because she had taken welfare payments. In an article published several months after the hearings, Caryl Rivers, a professor of journalism, wrote:

"As it turned out, [Justice Thomas's sister] was not at the time on welfare, and had, in fact, worked hard all her life to support her children by taking a series of low-paying jobs."

Professor Rivers continued, "Unfortunately for her, she did not have the support of a group of nuns to discover her abilities and start her on a path that would get her an affirmative-action scholarship to college as her brother did." Dr.

Rivers then came to this conclusion, "[Justice] Thomas never seemed to acknowledge that it was perhaps a lucky accident that he got the break that led him out of poverty, while his sister was not so fortunate."

Serendipity Factor

In using this example, it is not my intention to revile Justice Thomas, but rather to lift up his understanding as one that is commonly shared. His example is a good one because it is so stark—the contrast between his life and that of his sister. I do not want to take anything away from his own hard work and determination. I wonder, though, if he would have been able to attain such success without the good fortune of the nuns' attention and without the sacrifice of those who brought affirmative action into being.

Is he really any more worthy than his sister? Again, it's not my intention to disparage Justice Thomas. His understanding is not uncommon. Those of us who have attained any measure of what our society labels as success want to perceive it as testimony to our own

Those of us whose lives are well sustained are called to seek justice.

hard work or cleverness. We seldom acknowledge our good fortune for being born white in a culture that favors being white, or being born into a middle or upper class family, or having access to a good education, or any of the factors that contributed to our success and over which we had no control.

I am sure if we look around long enough, we could identify people we know or about whom we have heard who seemingly had no lucky breaks yet who overcame obstacles and achieved success. Nonetheless,

for most people, as with Justice Thomas, success usually results from a combination of factors with hard work and intelligence or cleverness being just part of the equation. When we imagine that whatever success we have achieved, we owe solely to our own grit and abilities, it becomes easier to perceive those who live in poverty with contempt.

Our interrelatedness

Fortunately, that is not the whole story for in contrast to our society's too frequent demonstration of contempt for our citizens who live in poverty, as I mentioned at the outset, we are also capable of responding from a perspective informed by compassion. Our compassion arises from our recognition of both our shared humanity and the inter-relatedness of our well-being. To the extent more of us (ideally, all of us) are able to thrive, then the healthier our society will be, and each of our lives benefit. This is an ancient understanding shared by the early Hebrew prophets. It bears a truth we have yet to fully absorb and appreciate.

One of those prophets was Isaiah. He acknowledged that his fellow citizens often maintained the form of an appropriate spiritual life in that they fasted and humbled themselves, but they ignored the substance of a healthy spiritual life in that they disregarded their relatedness to those who were in need. This is what I believe to be such a profound insight on Isaiah's part and, indeed, on the part of most of the ancient Hebrew prophets.

They proposed that those of us whose lives are well sustained are called to seek justice for our contemporaries who are experiencing poverty, oppression or disenfranchisement. Such a call

‘Grace’ with Curtains

does not arise from a sense of guilt but from the compassion that arises when our hearts break open in the presence of others’ suffering, and, again, from the insight of our interrelatedness. With such insight we understand those others are not others at all, but rather they are us.

An end to injustices of poverty

How can we know wholeness when a part of ourselves is oppressed or is disenfranchised or is living in the misery of poverty? That is what Isaiah was telling us: When we seek to bring an end to the injustices that perpetuate poverty, “then,” he declared, “shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you.”

In this way we uncover the truest sense of spirituality when we make our “oneness with all” our lived experience. For our own, for one another’s, for our society’s welfare, may we learn to respond to the poverty in our midst with compassion rather than contempt, and may we act to make that the basis for our nation’s social policies.

—Arthur Vaeni
Minister

Many years ago, Nancy Zieman from the long-running PBS show, “Sewing with Nancy”, suggested that sewists sew something for someone we don’t know, and may never meet.

That idea helped fuel the curtains for the cottages at Quixote Village.

On November 20, 2013 twenty women transformed the church Religious Education Wing into our very own curtain-sewing sweatshop. The women came from OUUC, the United Churches, and the American Sewing Guild. We set up sewing machines, sergers, irons, ironing boards, cutting stations, and fabric stations. We used fabric donated from a drapery business on Steamboat Island. The owner was going out of business and gave us enough white, gold, and pinky-beige fabric for almost all of the cottages. The fabric was very high quality and we were thrilled to have it knowing it would last a long time and look terrific. We also had other fabric donated that magically appeared at OUUC.

We sewed 98 curtain panels that day. We still had more to sew so we made curtain kits for members of OUUC to take home and sew. We will never know who all the sewing elves were because

the kits were set out and magically returned with no names of the sewists. I think this is called “grace.”

Soon it was time to go to the Village and hang the curtains. This required power tools and husbands. Another donor from one of the tribes gave us a gift card to purchase the curtain rods. We hung all of the curtains in about two hours wondering how the pinky-beige ones would go over with the men in the Village.

On Christmas Eve after the great move-in, the residents were excited about the curtains, but concerned that we didn’t provide them with a curtain for the window in the doors. Darn! It is a metal door, and we didn’t know how we would hang a curtain there, especially with our limited hanging skills. The residents improvised and hung up towels, sleeping bags, and blankets in order to cover the door windows.

The other thing we didn’t anticipate was the desire for darkness. We gave them white, gold, and pinky-beige curtains that allowed light to come into the room. They really wanted dark curtains that would give them complete privacy. After being in tents with so little privacy, they were ready for total privacy in the cottages.

Some of the residents have replaced the curtains with ones that more fully represent their style. Some of the residents are fine with the existing curtains but are looking for ways to black out the windows. This is a constant source of wonder. There are opportunities to sew more things, and to figure out the coverings for the windows in the doors.

In the meantime, we sewed something for someone we didn’t know and may never meet. “Grace.”

—Melanie Ransom

Resident in bigger unit sized for a wheelchair. Note sewists’ white curtains. Door window is covered with fabric draped over the top of the door inside and out. Sharon also has a quilt on the wall made by male inmates. Her unit feels very warm and cozy.



Photo by Linda Crabtree

On Homelessness

Throughout my various periods of homelessness, I have become aware that there are as many reasons for it as there are those who experience it.

I have finally realized, with some reluctance, that some folks actually wish to be homeless – at least initially. These are typically “kids” in their 20s or 30s who embrace a Kerouacian life “on the road,” mostly traveling up and down the West Coast as Blue States are replete with resources for that sort of existence: free food, shelters, less rabid law enforcement agencies, more grassroots political programs to represent us.

But for each adventurer there is a unique psychological driving force. It begins, innocently enough, as an adventure. I myself was such an adventurer.

Obviously, of all the situations I’ve observed in my life on the road, I can speak with authority only of my own. However, as middle age has crept up on me, I’m aware that I have witnessed many of the devastating consequences that can result for anybody out in the cold, despite how innocently, even romantically, it may have begun.

Out there age is the great equalizer, and, as all the trappings of youth have fallen away, I’m left with the realization that there is *nothing* romantic in Modern American Homelessness.

My story began in the politically repressive climate of beautiful East Tennessee wherein grassroots movements are usually choked out by good ol’ boys before seeing light. I was never homeless there, thanks to friends and family, despite the psychological

homelessness resulting from a broken home – not at all insidious, but all-too-common circumstances. I don’t wish to belabor that psychology. It is, however, inescapable, and it merits individual exploration. So, barring that, and the restlessness of young men for whom society offers so much boredom, circumstances were not yet such that I became one of the homeless proper.

But upon choosing to join a friend in “going West” I arguably threw myself into a life of true homelessness without the knowledge gained with age or what that would ultimately come to mean. I was a young 30 then, and I had all the confidence that my chosen line of work – cooking – would sustain me.

I’ve read that modern American childhood lingers, carrying with it a naiveté that can be blinding. I never thought of myself as needing much in

the way of worldly things, seeing myself as a sort of Johnny Appleseed figure – a wandering ascetic, able to carry all of my worldly weight on my back and proud of it. I hadn’t thought of dental plans or healthcare, let alone what I would have to offer a potential wife. Also I had not realized that the worldly weight I thought I was avoiding was manifest in drug use, a truly decadent and worldly practice.

Homelessness and addiction are so bound up together that they can appear synonymous. I was very lucky to travel abroad in my early 20s, and in Amsterdam there were signs everywhere saying “No Junken”. To them addicts and the homeless were the same. Homeless and addiction are often symptoms of the same psychological disorder. Often the disorder is just enough to cause the sufferer to turn to illicit drugs



“My natural habitat – sitting at my writing and reading desk with bookshelf. Living here is such a blessing, it’s almost surreal. I’m very grateful for it.”

Rapid Rehousing

without being pervasive enough to warrant clinical treatment or prescription drugs. Often it is enough to cause the sufferer to get trapped in a cycle of gaining then losing housing without warranting hospitalization. It's a sort of no man's land between demographics, a non-category into which many of us fall.

The same romantic innocence that leads to wanderlust can lead to drug use. You can call it personal freedom and exploration. You can start, as I did, by reading Castaneda and eating mushrooms and getting "spiritual" but end up, as I did, a heroin addict.

The everyday realities of homelessness are simply maddening. A predilection for drugs will send you running for their comforts: warming well-being, like having home and hearth within, but for a short while. Despite the knowledge that spending all your money on drugs will perpetuate your problems, you will do so with zeal.

Homelessness, like addiction, reduces all the world to fundamentals, to the base of Maslow's hierarchy. You can spend a morning's worth of time and energy on finding a warm, dry place to relieve your bowels. Time becomes a daunting enemy, and you'll find all manner of ways to kill it, with the goal of thinking as little as possible about your circumstances. This is perhaps the cruelest aspect, a sort of Catch 22: you've all the time in the world but nothing to do.

I've learned that boredom can be a destroyer of men, that it can be hard to distinguish from depression, and that pondering it can be the very engine of anxiety. The mind itself, as the Buddhists maintain, can be its own worst enemy, and the stagnation of homelessness, however it may have come about, can be a killer. The Buddhists also teach the value of compassion, and the compassion of others is a candle in the window to the wayward homeless.

—Jon Waddey, Resident
Quixote Village

Over the last couple of years, our congregation has had the opportunity to hear about and support a program of Interfaith Ministries called Sidewalk, one of several programs in our community addressing homelessness.

Unlike a shelter program, the Sidewalk approach to housing the homeless is called "rapid rehousing" which provides time-limited small rental subsidies. The process can take a qualifying homeless person off the streets in as little as a week. But just having a home won't necessarily solve the person's problems. That's where Sidewalk's volunteer advocates help.

I heard about Sidewalk from Phil Owens, Sidewalk Executive Director, when he spoke to our congregation. Phil asked for volunteers to "help end homelessness." The idea stuck in my mind and became part of the threads I followed when I retired. After 40 hours of training, I became a "housing stability advocate". I help willing clients remain housed and work towards goals. I have been working for several months as an advocate. My skill level grows as I learn more about services and resources available to people in poverty.

One important feature of Sidewalk is that after finding housing for clients, it's up to the client to set goals and work towards solving ongoing issues. My experience is that not all clients are interested in taking these next steps. This is not too surprising. Imagine yourself being assigned an advocate who is a volunteer. You don't know them. They may even know less about the tattered safety-net system than do you. Throw in that it is hard work to dig your way out of poverty and that people don't always appreciate what seems like meddling. It is not surprising that some clients

don't use the services of an advocate. But some do.

I am going to focus on one client, Sam (not his real name). Sam is applying for Social Security Benefits. He has mental and physical disabilities. Sam is partially supported by Aging Blind, or Disabled cash assistance (administered by Washington Department of Social and Health Services). This cash assistance is so little that a person probably could not sustain a house without additional help. Luckily, Sam entered the program when the Affordable Care Act (ACA) made Medicaid available.

One of the first goals I helped Sam reach was finding a primary care provider. He had a persistent problem in his sinuses and wanted a doctor to help diagnose the problem. Thanks to St. Peter's Family Medicine and ACA, Sam got his doctor.

Sadly, Sam's sinus problem turned out to be cancer. What now? Even transportation to chemotherapy is a worry to someone in poverty. I have tried to help, but it is Sam who does most of the work. I think it is fair to say that Sam's chances to survive were helped by the presence of Sidewalk. Sidewalk helped provide Sam a roof and some stability. Through Sidewalk he was helped in his goal to get the medical help he needed to diagnose and now to treat the cancer. As an aside, thank goodness for ACA/ObamaCare.

Sidewalk is a new organization with growing pains and promise. For me personally, it is a place where I have been given the opportunity to extend a hand to people who will take it. Sidewalk continues to expand its role. Besides rapid rehousing, it partners with other organizations to provide shelters and longer-term supportive housing. The Sidewalk board of directors is trying to expand funding to help more people. Please consider volunteering and donating to Sidewalk.

—Brian Hovis

Who Are Our Neighbors?

One of my favorite Christian stories to teach the children is The Good Samaritan. This was the story that Jesus told in response to a man who asked him about the law to “love your neighbor as yourself” with a question: “who is my neighbor?”

The story of the Good Samaritan is the story of a Hebrew in need on the side of the road who is helped not by someone like himself or someone who lived nearby him, but by a Samaritan (a different tribe and a people despised and disliked by the Hebrews). In other words, Jesus was saying that we should act neighborly to all we encounter, not just people similar to ourselves.

Perhaps it is because I grew up watching that wonderful teacher, Fred Rogers, but I have always liked the word “neighbor”. To Mister Rogers, anyone could be a neighbor, and when he sat down and sang “Won’t you be my neighbor?” I knew he wasn’t just inviting me to be his neighbor, but to be everyone’s neighbor. I was being invited to be in right relationship with the world at the tender age of six years old.

Words have power, and how we refer to others influences how we think of them. You may have heard of “people first” language – the idea is that instead of referring to others by a characteristic (tall people, for instance) you always put their humanity first and say “people who are tall”. When homelessness is the topic, “homeless people” can emphasize the differences between us, while “people who are homeless” emphasizes that we are all people, and the homeless condition is secondary. That’s good, but it is also awkward. It doesn’t quite get

to the point of a universal human relationship.

And so, back to the word “neighbor”. As I have worked to educate the children at OUUC about homelessness issues, I found myself adopting the language “our homeless neighbors”. This language has proven to be just right – just like when Mister Rogers invited me to be in right relationship with the larger world here I am inviting our kids to see themselves in relationship with the world too.

In our religious education classes and workshops, we have learned about homelessness and the various projects OUUC has been part of to help our homeless neighbors. But I think one of the most important projects we have done has been to create care packages that the kids can carry in the car and give to homeless neighbors when they see them. Yes, there are more effective ways to assist homeless folks. But are there more effective ways to remain in right relationship?

You may remember I told a story in church once about a time when I was driving with my kids. They had just started reading and were working on reading all the signs as we drove around. We were at a red light and there was a man with a cardboard sign that said “Homeless, Please Help” which they sounded out just as the light changed and I drove away. “Mom! That person was saying they needed Help! How could you not help them?”

Each time they see us drive off and ignore the person asking for help, what are we teaching them by that example? When we avoid eye contact and try to ignore the person asking for help, our children are watching us and wondering how and why we can do that. A simple little gift bag, so that you have something to give, is the neighborly thing to do.

But let’s not forget that the idea of homelessness can be scary. The first time I took my kids to Camp Quixote to deliver a dinner we had cooked for them, many of the residents were glad to have the chance to visit with some children and to thank them for the meal. But on the way home, my kids had concerns and questions. The main ones were, “Why don’t they have families to take care of them? Could I end up homeless? Would you ever not take care of me?” Much like other human tragedies, kids can be scared when they realize the world isn’t always good and fair.

This brings me back to Mister Rogers again. His advice on talking to children about scary and sad events is to focus on the helpers. Whether it is a natural disaster or a war or homelessness, look for the people who are there helping. There are always helpers. I love this advice, but I like to take it even further. There are always helpers, and we can be helpers.

We can all help. We can all be a good neighbor, loving our neighbor as ourselves. Who is our neighbor?

—Sara Lewis
Director of Religious Education





Photos by Sara Lewis



Children in Religious Education classes created care packages that the kids can carry in the car and give to homeless neighbors when they see them. This simple little gift bag is a neighborly thing to do and makes a difference in understanding 'right relationship'.

Chess Game Makes Connection

This chess game originated at an OUUC Circle of the Spirit last spring.

We were discussing the topic of volunteering...where we volunteer, why we volunteer, who benefits, etc. Some of us, being "doers," simply said, "Someone has to do the job... pour the coffee, lick the envelopes, greet newcomers...or it doesn't get done." But the conversation went deeper and people talked about the intrinsic benefits and how volunteering can "transform our lives."

Volunteering in certain positions that maybe we are not comfortable in can help us reach out and truly make a difference both for others and ourselves. Many of us had volunteered with the homeless community either at Sidewalk or Camp Quixote. I had been a host at Camp Quixote and had tried hard to learn campers' names so I could greet them personally, but I still felt my volunteering was just on the surface. A Circle participant shared how she has made a point to really look deeply at the campers when talking to them and try to make a connection.

A few weeks later, I was hosting at Camp Quixote when Jackson (not his real name) asked me to play chess. Jackson was a young man who often dressed in a long black coat and a wide brimmed black hat. I had seen him before at camp and would notice him walking downtown. When he asked if I would play chess my immediate response was, "No thanks. I don't play chess. I don't know anything about chess." "Oh, come on," he said, "I'll teach you."

The laughter rose from the other guys sitting around the tent. "He'll teach you all right, and beat you good. He's wicked when it comes to chess," or words to that effect. Amidst the laughter, a little voice said to me, "Make a connection... Why not take a chess lesson from Jackson?" So I timidly said, "OK Jackson, if you have the rules printed out so I can look at them, and I can ask lots of questions, and it's not a REAL game, I'll play."

Jackson sat down at the host desk with a tiny traveling chess set and began explaining the names of the pieces and their possible moves. He unfolded the several sheets of "Rules" and we began. I was full of

questions, and he was polite and helpful but he played seriously and I lost many of my pieces to him. We had an audience that hooted and hollered as the game wore on. They especially liked it when I exclaimed, "Wait a minute Jackson, you didn't tell me that rule. I think you're taking advantage of a beginner."

That afternoon shift at Camp Quixote went faster than any other. I joked and laughed and looked at Jackson — really looked at him. He was obviously bright, witty and competitive! I went home that evening and printed out my own set of chess rules and started to study them. I'm competitive too and wanted to be more prepared if the opportunity arrived again.

I was disappointed the next time I hosted at camp. Jackson wasn't there. I haven't seen him since.

I have to admit that I haven't been hosting at the camp for a while but I thank Jackson for teaching me more than chess that day. And I thank the member of the Circle of Spirit who taught me as well.

—Helen Henry

Landlord for Homeless Women

I am the landlord to four women who were previously homeless guests at Bread and Roses. My little rental house, now known as Valentine House, located in the Eastside neighborhood of Olympia, is now the permanent home of four amazing ladies.

In late January, 2013, the house I have owned for 18 years was vacant and I was almost ready to rent it. I usually find tenants by posting a rental ad on Craigslist. In years past I have rented my house to a young couple, a working couple with a small child, and to Evergreen students.

When I shared news of my vacancy with an OUUC church member, she suggested I look into renting the space to people who were homeless and seeking housing through SideWalk Advocacy and Support Center, the homeless advocacy group in Olympia. Advocates from Sidewalk met me at the property and initially told me my house was not a good match for their single homeless adults. I thanked them and proceeded to ready my house for tenants.

About two weeks later I received a call from Jill Esbeck, operations manager at Sidewalk, inquiring if my little house might still be available. It was. She shared that there were four women guests at Bread and Roses working with Sidewalk advocates who wanted to find a home together. With cautious optimism, I rushed to customize a rental ad and sent it to Jill who shared it with her clients and their advocates. Aware I was charting new territory, I decided I would treat any homeless rental applicant as I would any other any other rental applicant.

The four women were very interested and quickly arranged to visit the property. They arrived with Selena Kilmoyer to look at the house. Upon meeting the women I noted their sincere desire to bring about positive change in their lives. Their immediate excitement and underlying positive attitudes were contagious. I was impressed with the way they cooperated with one another, demonstrating concern for each other's well being. They began sharing their stories with me. I gave them rental applications and instructions.

A couple days' later, each woman submitted completed rental

applications and the many supporting documents I had requested. I ran background checks and checked references. I was sure I could offer space to three of the four women. The fourth gave me pause due to uncomfortably recent criminal problems. I called the fourth woman and asked if we could meet to talk. I met her at Bread and Roses and we had a brutally frank conversation about addiction, the many problems that can accompany addiction, her new sobriety, and her path forward. I thanked her for her raw honesty and invited her to join the household. All four women were offered a room. They moved in on Valentines Day 2013.

The four women combined pay market rate rent for the house. All had their deposits subsidized and most had their first year of rent covered or subsidized through Thurston County Rapid Rehousing funds administered through Community Action Counsel. From a landlord perspective, it is slightly more effort to handle four individuals rather than one family. I have four rental leases and I receive four rent checks each month. That reality being said, I am very happy I took the extra time and helped give opportunity to the women who were homeless.

One year has passed since the original four moved in. Three of the original four women just renewed their leases for six more months. Those three and I recently celebrated our one-year anniversary with a fancy dinner at Anthony's. The three remaining original womens' rental subsidies have just ended and they are now paying their rent themselves. One woman is employed, another was just granted SSI benefits, and the third receives state assistance while awaiting a benefits determination.

Recently a fourth woman signed her lease, got her key, and joined the



Valentine House in the Eastside Neighborhood of Olympia

household. Her deposit and a portion of her rent is subsidized by Rapid Rehousing (RRH) funds for eight months. With a permanent address she can now proceed with her Social Security application and move toward resolving her legal troubles. She is an amazing cook and hopes to apply to cooking school. Although I have been doing this for a year now, it still took me by surprise how much receiving that house key meant to her. She was overcome with happy emotions and thankful to have a place to call home.

The women missed the application deadline for raised garden beds through GRUB a year ago but created a fantastic vegetable garden in the back yard with little assistance. This year they applied but were not selected in the GRUB lottery. I am currently helping them look for lumber and garden soil.

My tenants have enriched my life in many ways this past year. I am truly grateful for the opportunity to be their landlord. Through the process we have had lots of laughs and many meaningful conversations. Friendships have deepened. I hope I have been able to help build their self-esteem and empower the



Photos by Jennie Patton

First year celebration dinner

women to make collective decisions about their household including who joins them. It makes so much sense to make the extra effort to help people who are homeless obtain great permanent housing. Once housed in a safe and comfortable home, people can focus on physical and emotional healing and other things they need to take care of.

I am a resource for other property owners who would like to learn

more about renting to people who have been homeless. I am happy to answer any questions and can assist with rental applications, leases and other landlord details. I own land behind Valentine House where in the future I hope to build three cottage homes for homeless adults and/or homeless families with children.

—Jennie Patton



Jennie Patton, fourth in first photo and on right in second photo, with Valentine House renters and friends



Photo by Jeremy Biftermann

One of 30 cottages at Quixote Village in Olympia, Washington



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