

Culture of Peace: Growing peace by providing shelter

By Bob Morse Ashland Culture of Peace Commission

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“When I started reaching out to homeless people, I intended to help others, but they help me,” explained Vanessa Houk, the coordinator of Ashland’s Sunday night shelter. “They give me a sense of peace that I don’t get anywhere else.”

Similar revelations came to light in meeting with a core group of volunteers responsible for keeping Ashland homeless shelters open five nights a week. The Ashland Culture of Peace Commission (ACPC) convened this gathering to explore what attracts, challenges and reinforces volunteers and how their service fosters a culture of peace.

Houk described the risks taken by members of the homeless community when they trust her with bits and pieces of their stories and how it benefits her to listen. “Shelter work is powerful healing for me,” she said.

Karen Amarotico, who oversees the meals at First Presbyterian Church’s Monday night shelter, recalled her first overnight at the shelter. Delighted by the food she was offering, Amarotico was surprised by a guest’s first liner: “No nachos for me, I have no teeth. He then told me all about his life.”

The theme is consistent across volunteers: by giving they receive. Sharon Harris of Temple Emek Shalom coordinates the Tuesday night shelter, which, along with Sunday and Thursday night shelters, is housed in Pioneer Hall. “When homeless people let you in, you find yourself in one of Ashland’s nicest communities. Indeed, we’re more than community — we’re family. We hug and say ‘I love you’ to each other before going to sleep.”

“I don’t feel judged,” continued Harris. “But there’s a lot of judgment toward them.”

Heidi Parker also described a common experience. “Before I started serving homeless people, I had fear that they could hurt me,” she said. Now after five years of coordinating shelter volunteers, Parker recognizes that, “It’s a growth process that (positively) changes how you view yourself and humanity.”

“I really enjoy the people,” stated Liz Olson, who sees how she was changed after her first night of hosting Sunday night shelter. “In between checking people in and pouring them coffee, there’s time to just plain listen.”

Olson said she noticed how the shelter is a safe place where the guests are looked at and listened to. Their grief is heard, and their stories are acknowledged. “In contrast to the streets where unhoused people feel invisible, and are often treated as such, in the shelter they are treated compassionately and non-judgmentally. If people don’t feel safe, they can’t sleep.”

Besides compassion, other values fundamental to a culture of peace are respect and inclusivity. John Wieczorek said he believes in the dignity and self-worth of all human beings. Wieczorek, coordinator of Thursday night shelter, noted that in serving people “marginalized in our classist society, we (volunteers) receive more than we give.”

Wieczorek referenced the words of a fellow Unitarian Universalist, “Every action is either an act of love or a cry for love.” Allan Miles, who coordinates Trinity Episcopal’s Wednesday night shelter, quoted his Bible as his reason for responding to local cries for love: “For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing” (Matthew 25:35-36).

Parker keeps a data base on all volunteers. She’s tracked the increasing need for more community involvement as the number of shelter guests has risen from a dozen when Parker started to more than 50 on some recent nights.

Just being oneself is the sole volunteer prerequisite. New volunteers best learn through shadowing more seasoned volunteers.

Guests arrive hungry and cold, and most soon fall soundly asleep. “Were you here all night?” Olson recalled being asked by a guest. But more than astonishment was his gratitude. “Before we even get into the building, the guests awaiting us on the porch are expressing their thanks.”

But overnighting isn't for everyone. Some volunteers instead provide food. Greatly needed are folks to show up at 7:30 p.m., stay a couple of hours, and just provide a listening ear — and a compassionate heart. This is “shelter listening.”

A culture of peace invites everyone's participation and relies on the natural gifts of each community member. Showing up, showing interest and deeply listening are truly action verbs in shelter.

— *Bob Morse is an ambassador of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission. Email comments and questions to ashlandcpc@gmail.com. The ACPC website is www.ashlandcpc.org; like the commission on Facebook at www.facebook.com/AshlandCultureofPeaceCommission; follow twitter.com/AshlandPeace on Twitter. All are welcome to join the ACPC's Talking Circle at 11 a.m. Tuesdays and Community Meeting at 4 p.m. Wednesdays, both at the ACPC office, 33 First St., Suite 1, diagonally across Lithia Way from the Ashland Post Office.*



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