

## **WE to offer meals for homeless weekly**

**By Julie Akins / For the Tidings**

Posted May 8, 2016 at 2:13 PM

Updated May 8, 2016 at 2:35 PM

“People slow down and listen to each other and this beautiful thing happens — they find common ground,” says Wellness for Everyone community organizer Vanessa Martynse Houk. She’s so pleased with the growth of the meals which began earlier in the spring that she’s decided to make the gathering a weekly event.

The most recent meal on Friday at Railroad Park on A street in Ashland offered more than 50 people the chance to eat together, bring food and sit in a listening circle in collaboration with the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission. Ashland City Councilor Stefani Seffinger sat in that circle and ate with community members, as did many others who brought food and support.

Houk’s partner in WE, her husband, Jason Houk, believes getting people from different walks of life together is critical to raising voices not always heard. “The voice that gets marginalized is the one that needs to be heard the most,” he said. “If we can’t get people to come to an office, then we’ll come out here on a street where they are.”

That said, both Vanessa and Jason are looking for a church to step up and allow them space for the community gathering when the months get quite hot or cold so those who are homeless, home-free or traveling can have a restful experience, out of the elements, when they come to visit and get a meal.

Woody, who gave only his first name, says he’s been on the street for around four years. He wolfed down two plates stacked with various warm casseroles and vegetables as well as salads and desserts. He says he appreciates the opportunity. When asked if he thinks the community meal is helpful, he says between bites, “It depends on what you want, getting homeless off the streets or making it so everyone gets along.”

He describes the cycle of wanting to work so he's not homeless but having a tough time making that happen because he's homeless. Woody says if people could get showers, had addresses so they could obtain ID cards and had a place to store their stuff, they might not be on the streets. "Get them lockers," he said. "You can't look for a job with a backpack and you're afraid to leave it anywhere because it's all you've got."

Woody, a 27-year-old, also says not having any place where you can sleep makes it hard to be productive. "They won't even let you sleep anywhere, not even in an open field," he said. "I can see it if you're trashing the place, but if you're not and you're not in a place where anyone else is or needs it, why can't you just sleep without being bothered?"

His concerns are echoed by Red, a man who says he's been outside since 1989 when he was 20 and also only gave his first name. "I just didn't connect with my family," he said. Traveling ever since, he wears layers of clothing and keeps a knit cap over his long, grey dreadlocks. His hands have tremors while he eats his food slowly. "There's obviously a problem. People are chased around. There's not a place where you can be safe even."

Red says he sleeps in his truck. "I can't live without a vehicle so I can't afford a house," he said. He says he doesn't have money for both, so he kept his vehicle rather than trying to come up with money for rent. "I feel trapped if I can't move around. It limits my income if I can't get out. I can't work at McDonalds."

Red makes money by traveling around seeking out gemstones and found materials to create art. "I make high end art objects out of found and re-used material," he said. Like Woody, he says he wishes there was a place outdoors where he could feel safe to camp and spread out without being told to leave.

Taber McBee, a 23-year-old who is currently housed in Medford and works at Caldera Tap House in Ashland, says he was homeless for six years. "We were homeless. I was 16 when it started," he says while balancing a paper plate of greens on one knee, his blue eyes expressive under rounded glasses.

His mom's drinking issues got them kicked out of their apartment without enough money to get into another place. McBee says he's never had a father in his life. His hardest days apparently behind him, he relates to the plight of those

who are on the homeless spectrum. “I’d be sleeping under a four-foot awning at a church and be told to leave in the rain,” he recalls. He remembers the feeling of struggling, saying, “Nothing has come easy.”

McBee says he sees the problem as systemic and disproportionately affecting the poor. “If you have money you can be anywhere. They don’t even ask you for it. They come down on poor people.” He also sees discrimination against a growing population of the homeless who are people of color, saying “There’s institutional racism.”

Shankara Das, a homed Ashland resident, says it’s his second time of coming to the gathering. “The goal is unselfish, taking care of other people,” he said. “No one’s getting paid.” He described the WE group as those who understand the nature of connection between people. “A lot of them don’t forget we’re connected cosmically. You want to keep your brothers and sisters fed.” Das says the food is important but he advocates for more services as well. He says people need a safe place to sleep and to be part of a healthy community.

Activist Mike Marshank is optimistic. “There’s hope for a coming together of community. I get a sense there’s going to be a breakthrough,” he says as he gestures back toward the line of volunteers serving up food to anyone and everyone who lined up.

Wellness for Everyone will have another meal at Railroad Park this week. They’ll also take a program of card and letter writing to connect homeless, home-free and traveling people to their communities of origin to the Ashland Resource Center. Paper, cards and stamp donations are welcomed, as well as food and indoor locations for the now-weekly meals.

For more information about Wellness for Everyone, **[email sunriver@gmail.com](mailto:sunriver@gmail.com)** or call 541-690-2807.

*Email Ashland freelance writer Julie Akins at **[akinsj@sou.edu](mailto:akinsj@sou.edu)** and follow her on Twitter at **[twitter.com/@julieakins](https://twitter.com/julieakins)**.*



## **SIGN UP FOR DAILY E-MAIL**

Wake up to the day’s top news, delivered to your inbox

---

