



Culture of Peace: Intention is Everything

By Kacky Hoffman - April 22, 2019

On any given night this past winter you could walk into one of four big open church halls in Ashland and be greeted by a world you can't quite identify. You might catch the scent of chicken soup wafting from a well-worn kitchen and hear the hum of voices sometimes laughing, sometimes grumbling but always connecting. You would see giant backpacks and mounds of blankets, some dogs and a creamy gray cat, a wheel chair, a guitar, a rolling cart.

In these halls the front door might open every few minutes blowing in a weary guest along with the wind and rain. Bundled from the wet and cold and exhausted after a long day outdoors, smiles will be exchanged and greeting given. If you stayed, you might hear adventurous stories or a haiku awaiting publication in the Tidings. If you were really lucky you might hear a battered guitar coaxed to sing out with such beauty that time would seem to stand still. A dog might bark, a voice shout out, an argument flair up, and then be calmed.

Welcome to the Ashland Winter Shelter, which was held in four church halls from November 11th to April 13th. Here you could meet guests looking bone tired, with expressions cautious but grateful to be together in safety and kindness, and dedicated volunteers whose watchful presence ensures everyone will make it through one more night.

Those volunteers, and all the volunteers who work in the shelter doing hundreds of jobs for one hundred sixty four nights truly embody the values of Ashland's Culture of Peace. Respect, compassion, inclusivity and accountability are demonstrated on any given night in the four church halls along with deep gratitude for the opportunity to serve, to meet, to know and to care for one another.

Eleven years ago, a loving and neighborly volunteer project started with the intention of providing shelter for those who had no home and no family to care for them. Over time this project grew until this year shelter was provided seven nights a week in the church halls of First Presbyterian Church, Trinity Episcopal Church, First United Methodist Church and Rogue Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship.

Throughout last spring and summer, volunteers committees met and began and imagining a path to end homelessness. They worked with the Ashland Winter Shelter consultant, Phil Johncock, and created a new model for providing shelter while at the same time helping people move toward self-sufficiency. The intention shifted from what appeared to enable dependency on existing systems toward empowering people to attain independence.

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This winter, the shelter program began implementing the new model and was able to hire staff and pull in support from the Ashland Community Resource Center (ACRC), and the board of Options for Helping Residents of Ashland (OHRA). With everyone working together, the shelter program experienced phenomenal success, and with grant funding, in-kind donations, and community funds, has grown to a program worth over a million dollars in committed assets in seven short months.

It took hundreds of shelter volunteers, dozens of guests, church and synagogue leaders and congregations, Southern Oregon Jobs for Justice, Ashland city leaders, Ashland Culture of Peace Commission, ACCESS, ACRC staff, board support of OHRA along with Phil Johncock, to make it all happen. Hard work still needs to be done and volunteer committees will continue to work throughout this spring and summer to fine-tune the new shelter model for next fall.

As the winter shelters closed their doors for the year, sleeping mats were rolled up, coffee cups stacked and blankets piled in a heap for one final washing. Voices were thin in the morning light and hard words exchanged under the stress of not knowing what come next. It's not an easy ending as giant backpacks are shouldered and guests drift slowly out the front doors with heartfelt wishes and prayers following like wisps of smoke.

The spirit of Ashland's Culture of Peace feels woven into the fabric of our volunteer community providing a touchstone "affirming the inherent dignity of all people". Helping us remember we are all connected and living in interdependence. By living within our own culture of peace, Ashland can continue to make great programs happen.

Kacky Hoffman moved to Ashland with her husband in the summer of 2017 having lived in Portland for twenty years working as an educational psychologist. In addition to working as a volunteer with Ashland Winter Shelter, Kacky is involved with the Kagyu Sukha Choling Buddhist Center in Ashland, and enjoys exploring the beauty of Southern Oregon.