



Photos by
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The Oregonian

A homeless man, left, sleeps along a snow-covered East Portland sidewalk in the long hours before dawn. Below, paramedics load the man, suffering from hypothermia, into an ambulance.

A night on the town

Darkness brings danger to city's homeless

By STEVE ERICKSON
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At nightfall a gory murder victim was rushed past the horrified gaze of an Old Town crowd; just before sunrise an eastside wino was rescued from death in the snow.

Violence and brushes with death are an every-night routine for the 3,000 homeless people of Portland — nearly 1 percent of the city's population. Commuters to whom a street problem is a traffic jam relinquish the city's concrete cobweb each night to the street people whose best hope for safety is dawn.

They're out there all night long, but especially after the bars close and before breakfast cafes open — from 3 to 5 a.m. — these social outcasts have the shadowy streets to themselves.

"It's a miserable life, I wouldn't recommend it to any-

body," said Ronald DeMasters, a former long-haul trucker who now slumbers rolled up in a sleeping bag at the door of a Skid Road delicatessen.

Outdoor life in the city has "no comforts," DeMasters said. "I don't mind it while I'm on a hunting trip, but I don't like living out here."

DeMasters, 53, said he was a trucker for 28 years "till I got shot down for high blood pressure." Now he makes a living gathering glass and selling it for recycling. "I get disgusted," he said, "but I can't give up."

Shelters for the homeless offer warm space, a hard floor and togetherness, but DeMasters prefers to take his chances outside. "They're just too noisy," he said of the shelters. "Guys snoring and talking all night. I just don't like to put up with all those people."

The majority of Portland's homeless spend nights on the floors of free shelters, but by day many are visible from the Old Town office of Micheale Williams, executive assistant to the director of Central City Concern, a social

service agency.

"I see people sitting in the rain, squatting in doorways, huddling to keep warm," Williams said. "There's no place they can even go to the bathroom. There are predators, victims, people you can feel empathy for and other people who are so wretched it's hard to even look at them."

Portland's street people are townsmen, said Jack McGowan, aide to Mayor Bud Clark. "The majority of the homeless in Portland are really residents of the city — this is not a mobile population that comes and goes as it pleases."

At Baloney Joe's shelter, which can house 99 people, 21-year-old Gary Olson said: "You make your own little world out there on the streets: It's called survival. You've got muggers out there that stab people for money."

Olson, who hitchhiked from Iowa to Portland two months ago, said, "You get here at 4 o'clock in the morning . . . if you're in downtown Portland there aren't too many places to sleep except the sidewalk, or a ditch if you can find one, or abandoned buildings, under bridges, in hooches (makeshift wooden shacks)."

Snowfall worsened Portland street life last week. As the temperature dropped to 33 degrees Wednesday night, routes through the Skid Road district were desolate. The scene was cheerless but benign until just before 6 p.m., when six police patrol cars, a fire rescue unit and an ambulance converged on the Tacoma Tavern, where a 26-year-old resident of the New Ritz Hotel, Adan Fierro Gonzalez, had just been shot in the throat.

Spectators hushed when the badly bleeding Gonzalez appeared on a litter, Portland's third Skid Road murder victim since Feb. 6.

"There's violence all the time," said William Ceasar, 40, who moved to Portland five years ago. "You're so numb and hollow-eyed when you realize what's happened to you that you don't have a lot of fear."

Fear is no help anyway, said Frank Lynch, who turns 73 Tuesday.

"It's rough, there's people who think you've got money and they'll hit you on the head," he said. "You can't protect yourself, you're helpless. I can't be scared because I've got to see myself through."

Lynch, who said he had been periodically hospitalized since suffering a stroke five years ago, and who was released from a Portland hospital Wednesday, appeared frail and disoriented as he prowled the North Park Blocks

at 8 p.m.

"I don't have a home," he said, explaining that he was evicted from an apartment a month ago for drinking. "I've been walking up all through the park to see if there was any kind of garbage can I could get in, 'cause it's going to snow."

Later, Lynch would find shelter at Baloney Joe's. The roof over Darrell McConaughy's head that night was the west end of the Burnside Bridge, which in season covers Saturday Market. The crowded bazaarlike grounds of the area's daytime craft market had become by night a shadowy, ominous echo chamber.

McConaughy, 26, a Portland resident for seven years, was shrouded in a pair of bedspreads over a nylon jacket, jeans and canvas shoes.

"I stand here all night and try to sleep sitting up during the day at the Salvation Army," he said. "I've had people try to kill me — draw knives."

McConaughy would rather be in a shelter, but he avoids them "because of scuffles" in their oft-crowded quarters.

Wilbur T. Stark rarely stays in shelters because when night falls, he goes to work.

"I pick up bottles trying to make a few cents," he said. "I've walked these streets many a night, all night long. I'm too old to be scared, going on 62. I just think about picking up all the glass I can."

Stark said Skidmore Fountain was the "roughest place I stayed" on the street.

"I fell asleep and somebody was taking my shoes off," he recalled. "There were two kids. I said, 'What do you want to steal my shoes for?' They said, 'We can sell them for 50 cents.'"

Near dawn Thursday, a man wearing a cotton jacket, T-shirt and jeans was discovered sprawled unconscious from a recessed doorway into the snow. A team of firefighters and paramedics from the Portland Fire Bureau arrived, took a look and called an ambulance.

Joel Kasprzak of the Fire Bureau team said the man suffered from "a touch of hypothermia — and alcohol."

"This guy needed to get out of the snow," Kasprzak said. "Otherwise he wouldn't have lasted too long."

Forty-five minutes before the sun came up, a block-long line had formed outside the Blanchet House of Hospitality. Free breakfast awaited. Then, for many, it would be back to the bricks.



In the shelter of the Burnside Bridge, Darrell McConaughy, above, passes a night by smoking, waiting for daylight and sleep at a Salvation Army center. Night ends on Skid Road with a block-long line of people, right, waiting at dawn for a free breakfast in Blanchet House of Hospitality.

