

The Oregonian

PORTLAND'S STREET KIDS

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You see them camped across the downtown and, if you're like me, your first response -- OK, maybe even your last response -- isn't, shall we say, Christ-like. Portland's street kids aren't all that easy to love. If you get beyond the body tattoos and hardware-heavy faces, there are the defiant or dead eyes, the sneering mouths and scruffy get-ups. They're a hard and surly lot, and somehow more of an affront than Portland's older, beaten-down street people. Simply ignoring their requests (demands?) for cash often seems the height of forbearance. Too often the inclination is to purse the lips and mutter, "Get a job."

At least, it was for me until I came to know the folks at "Dinner & A Movie."

"Dinner & A Movie" is a faith-based ministry to the young and homeless in downtown. Every Tuesday evening, the staff and volunteers offer food and a flick to Portland's street kids, from nine months to 27 years old, at First Baptist Church, which donates the use of its facility on Southwest 11th Avenue. No prayers or strings attached.

Other nights during the week, the staff heads out on "sock walks" along the streets and under the bridges and highway ramps where the kids sleep. They hand out socks, gloves, blankets, sleeping bags and granola bars. Again, no quid pro quos.

If things work right after a while -- sometimes quite a while -- the staff establishes a relationship with homeless kids who open up. They take them to dinner at a restaurant and first-run

movies. And -- again, if things work out right -- it can lead to the young men and women getting help to overcome the cause or causes of their homelessness.

What the "Dinner & A Movie" people know is that the basic causes aren't laziness or youthful rebellion or even a fondness for drugs, though drugs (tar heroin and meth) are inevitably a problem. The major cause of homeless among the kids who don't go home after a few weeks on the street is the sexual and physical abuse at home. Executive director Will Sharp figures that up to 90 percent of the kids that "Dinner & A Movie" ministers to suffered significant abuse: incest and other sexual violations, beatings and other unimaginable physical violence, psychological and verbal mistreatment.

Yes, these street kids can be surly and strange. Yes, they can be rude and defiant. Yes, they like heroin, because it makes them feel great and forget the pain. Yet, says Sharp, "I've come to the realization that had I walked in their shoes I probably wouldn't be much different."

The upshot of that realization is a program that tries to "walk through life" with the kids who come to trust the "Dinner & A Movie" staff.

It can take a while -- one, two, even up to three years. "When your mom and dad have failed you at a profound level . . .," Sharp says, "you can't trust."

Once trust is established, however, the staff works to connect the kids to

counselors, social welfare and drug-treatment programs, as well as employers. It involves making phone calls, getting them to appointments, celebrating birthdays with them and just being there to listen or advise. Sharp and the staff call it "re-parenting," showing them the unconditional love of true parents. Showing them -- and never proselytizing -- the unconditional love of Jesus Christ.

Before last Tuesday night's dinner and movie ("Pirates of the Caribbean") I talked to Sharp. I asked what many people who worry about downtown ask: Why don't these kids just get a job?

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to get a street kid a job?" Sharp said, before half-apologizing for the hint of frustration in his voice.

The kid who left home at 15 does not have a valid ID, which is increasingly difficult to get right away. He doesn't have a permanent phone number to give a potential employer. His appearance is not what anyone would consider job-ready, what with the mangy clothing and drug-destroyed teeth. Finally, Sharp says, "They're not fit for a job because of emotional trauma. They need a period of recovery."

But recovery and employment can happen in time. He's seen it work over the last five years. ("Dinner & A Movie" opened its doors on 9/11.) The ministry's successes include job, college and housing placements, successful drug treatments and even professions of faith.

"Dinner & A Movie" manages on a paid staff of four and volunteers. Donations and foundation grants provide for the organization's \$200,000 a year budget. (A benefit showing of "A Christmas Story" will be at 12:30 p.m. Saturday at McMenamins

Baghdad Theater, with a silent auction of "A Christmas Story" memorabilia.) The need is great. An estimated 2,500 homeless kids live on Portland streets. The ministry's goal is to mentor 250 kids over the next 10 years, which would require 16 full-time mentors.

It's not an easy sell. The kids we see on the street aren't sympathetic and, says Sharp, "the desire to demonize homeless youth is very powerful because we have to admit a lot has broken down in our society."

But I learned things Tuesday night that suggest Portland businesses should consider funding the additional full-time mentors as one way to address the city's homeless youth problem. More importantly, I saw things Tuesday night that suggest anyone who's turned down a street kid's request for cash -- properly, I think -- might consider sending a donation to Dinner & A Movie (www.dinnerandamoviepdx.com).

The kids were the same ones on our streets, park blocks and public squares, the kids with the tattoos and piercings, multi-colored hairdos and grimy clothes, with sometimes the tiniest babies in their care. Street-hardened boys and girls. But, as they came in from the cold night air and approached the serving line, their faces softened. Their eyes brightened a bit. You could see the child -- your child, my child -- in them. Many said thank you for the food, blankets, sleeping bags and gloves. Some smiled.

And all headed back out into the December night.

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