Dignity Village

Dignity Village in Portland, an intentional community of homeless people, is a membership-based, nonprofit organization. It is recognized as a legal encampment by the City of Portland.

In September 2000, a landmark decision by Judge Liam Gallagher overturned the city's camping ban, judging it to be "cruel and unusual punishment." Galvanized by Judge Gallagher's decision, eight Portland homeless men and women took the first steps of civil disobedience by camping on unused city land. In mid-December, they created shelters for themselves on public land in Northeast Portland.

Efforts to remove the "squatters" received widespread media coverage and brought attention to homelessness in the city. Word spread quickly among the homeless, many of whom gravitated toward the encampment, swelling its size and adding to the ever-expanding shopping cart parades that attracted both critics and supporters.

Important support came from many sources, including the business community, City Hall, churches, and nonprofits. Crucial to the campaign's success was the early support of community leaders, including Mark Lakeman of the City Repair Project, Leland "Lee" Larson of the Larson Legacy, City Commissioner Eric Sten, Bryan Pollard of *Street Roots* (a grassroots newspaper), Eli Spevak of the Housing Development Center, and Genny Nelson of Sisters of the Road.

Soon an "Out of the Doorways" campaign was established, led by Jack Tafari (one of the original eight to respond to Judge Gallagher's ruling), and the group of homeless took political steps to secure a safe place to live. Attempts to find a suitable location were met with strong opposition from local residents, and the group appealed to city government for help. In 2001, the Dignity Village site, which can accommodate sixty people, was established on city-owned land adjacent to the Sunderland Recycling Facility near Portland International Airport.

Dignity Village has no electricity or heat. With help from architects, designers, students, and community volunteers, individual 10-by-12-foot cottages were built from recycled lumber and materials. A Dignity Village flag flies from a wooden tower. As of 2009, Dignity Village is a sustainable, self-help, eco-friendly village for the homeless, with rules for membership and guidelines for behavior. The site also has gardens, a security force, a communal bath and sanitary facilities, and a democratically elected governing council.

Written by Joan Yasui Emerson

Further Reading:

Budnick, Nick. "Dignity Village to Get New Look Under City Deal." *The Portland Tribune*, 8 May 2007.

Dignity Village. http://www.dignityvillage.org/content/

Estes, Carol. "A Place for Dignity." *Yes! Magazine*, Spring 2002.

Sabatier, Julie. "Laura Brown: Life in Dignity Village Through the Eyes of One Longtime Resident." *Willamette Week*, 11 January 2006.

Copyright © 2008-2013 Portland State University