

Sisters' Voice



Summer 2023

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Front photo: *(Present day) Sisters staff remove cafe sign*

Back photo: *Genny Nelson and friends raise sign above the cafe*



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We're Moving – Two Blocks Down – to the House of Louie

Kat Mahoney, Executive Director

We have good news. Great news, actually.

By the time you read this, Sisters of the Road will officially be the new owner of the House of Louie in Old Town/Chinatown.

As you may remember, it was just eight months ago when I greeted you, introducing myself as acting director and acknowledging the difficulties we faced to keep our cafe open. All we wanted to do was be there for our partners and houseless neighbors but we made the difficult decision to keep the cafe closed and look for a new permanent home.

At the time, many people understandably had fear and doubts. Sisters of the Road's cafe had become a staple on NW 6th and NW Davis since it opened over 40 years ago — a steady

and reliable presence for people looking for a welcoming space to take refuge and nourish their bodies. Our community sorely felt our absence and it was tempting to band-aid over our deteriorating space and re-open as soon as possible.

Fast forward to today: As I write this, we are quickly preparing to sign our closing papers for our permanent home. The journey of finding our forever home has been assisted by doggedness, luck, and the support of our community. The doggedness came from my conviction that all people inherently have dignity and Sisters of the Road needed to honor this more intentionally — even if it wasn't widely expected of us.

Dining with dignity isn't a privilege just for people with money. Working in a safe, dignified environment isn't just for employees of for-profit, corporate entities. A permanent home that we could transform to fit our needs and the needs of those we serve was essential to meeting this standard.

House of Louie is a dream building for us — and luckily it was for sale. As a landmark of Chinatown, it represents immigrant resilience in the face of otherness and displacement, and a sense of belonging carved out in a corner of an unwelcoming world. Being able to purchase and revitalize this piece of history, after five years of emptiness, is extremely rewarding.

Finally, property ownership and the stability and power that brings to us as an organization cannot be dismissed. Both as a reliable safe haven for houseless people and an advocacy organization seeking systemic change, our impact can only become stronger from here.

Here's what's next. For the next two years, we will renovate and design our new home to meet our unique needs and wants. We are committed to seeking input from our community so we can co-create our space together. We are also committed to preserving the history of House of Louie so we can always be reminded of historic Chinatown and honor those who have survived displacement before us.

While our cafe won't return for another two years, we are more present in the community than ever.

We've been vocal in opposing city policies aimed at further marginalizing, criminalizing, and over-policing houseless people. We are showing up in debates related to police accountability, gun detection technology, mass encampments and Urban Alchemy, the service provider hired to run Portland's camps with a problematic history.



Sisters staff poses in front of the House of Louie, the future home of Sisters of the Road

We've partnered with the Portland Farmers Market to revamp the Fresh Change program, which will give houseless people a safe, guided way to access fresh food.

I am grateful for the support, help, and expertise of colleagues, business partners, and friends who have been paramount so far: David Wynde, Bruce Knivila, Patricia Dost, Saerom Yoo, Lorraine Crooks, Greg Capen at B&G Builders, Michael Holzgang and Rob MacNichol at Collier's International, Skylab Architecture, and the Board and staff at Sisters who have been steadfast and unwavering.

Our team is extremely energized by how far we've come since the fall — and we hope you're excited, too. If you'd like to support our advocacy work and building renovations, donations are always welcome. You can also help by sharing this newsletter with someone you know and inviting them to get involved.

Thank you for joining us on the journey. We'll keep you updated.

Our hopes for the future...

Rhea

When I think about Sisters' new home, I imagine opening our doors and welcoming our community inside for the very first time. It gives me goosebumps. The old cafe had such a rich, radical history housed within its crumbling walls, and I hope this new space will honor that history, while catalyzing a long, even more radical future.

George

I hope that our new home at House of Louie will be colorful and full of character and charm. I'm so excited for the community to fill the space with life and begin making memories in the new space.

Migyoung

I am dreaming that our new space will have more room so that people could take the time to relax a bit and be in community with each other. I am also very much looking forward to hearing old community members say, "Are you still here? Haha, so good to see you, Migyoung."

Lauren

Purchasing a much larger space so close to our first home is an amazing opportunity to fully live out our mission. I'm so glad we made the [heartbreaking] decision to move, looking back I can't imagine the alternative. I'm excited to build up our new home together!

Justice

What I'm most excited about is being able to bring barter workers back in for the first time since the pandemic started. Even when we were cleaning out the cafe, people from the neighborhood kept dropping by asking if they could help, so I think they're excited for this too!

Elle

Sisters has always had a special place in my heart. I am ecstatic that the organization will flourish in a new building and welcome even more community in the new space. I am honored to be part of the team and cannot wait to dine in the cafe.

Kat

We are carrying our roots to a new home. It may not be easy to do but it is 100% worth it. I am excited to see the cafe reopen, reinstate our barter program, and reconnect with our friends and customers.

What Makes a Community Safe?

by Justice Hager
Fundraising and Communications Director

When Sisters began speaking out against the City of Portland's plan to construct a number of mass sanctioned encampments across the city, we received a number of frustrated emails and phone calls from our supporters. It was a good reminder of how frustrated people have been with a perceived lack of action or coherent plan to address the humanitarian crisis that no one living here can ignore.

When you're desperate for something to happen, any plan at all will start to sound like a good one. Many people have grown to feel unsafe in their own community, and, to some degree, those fears of violence are legitimate. Over the last few years, outbreaks of violence have spiked across the country.

other forms of oppression are more likely to end up suffering from poverty and homelessness themselves.

Injustice and violence lay at the heart of this country's history, just as much as freedom and liberation do. If we want to make a true radical change from the status quo, then we have to start by recognizing that history. Attempts to otherize and demonize our unhoused community are connected to that long history of doing the same to other people. This is a distraction from the fact that we live within a system that intentionally produces winners and losers.

Sisters has always stood committed to making systemic change by investing in addressing the root causes of the violence of

Sisters has always stood committed to making systemic change by investing in addressing the root causes of the violence of poverty

We should all try to remember, though, that those facing oppression and marginalization due to their identities are most at risk of being targeted. Our unhoused neighbors are far more likely to be the target of violence than engage in it themselves, and it doesn't end there—we've seen Black people continuing to be subject to state-sanctioned violence, rising attacks against our Asian American and Pacific Islander community, and growing hostility towards LGBTQIA2S+ peoples across the country. Of course, these identities intersect with each other, and we know evidence suggests that people experiencing

poverty that so many in our community still suffer from every day. Shiny flash-in-the-pan ideas like the sanctioned encampments are distractions from addressing the reason that so many people end up living on our streets—the cost of housing rising faster than people's income.

We need to break the cycle of violence and harm that has been running on repeat since the first colonists arrived in this region. As we've been saying for months now, one of the ways this starts is by unraveling some of the harmful narratives that marginalize the unhoused community.

"UNHOUSED PEOPLE ARE DANGEROUS"

REALITY: Our unhoused neighbors are incredibly varied in their abilities, experiences, attitudes, and behaviors, just like housed people are!

Addiction and mental illness are not inherently barriers to housing or employment and many people manage to be high-functioning despite these challenges.

"IT'S EASY TO BE UNHOUSED"

REALITY: Living unsheltered is incredibly dangerous, especially for women and children. Theft and violence are a constant problem. Navigating different services spread out across the city can be a full-time job. People often have to choose between accessing a meal or moving forward with a process that might get them housing.

"PEOPLE PREFER TO BE UNHOUSED"

REALITY: The vast majority of people want housing, but, simply put, cannot afford it or struggle to navigate the bureaucratic systems necessary to access it. Similarly, many people turn to drugs or alcohol when living outside as both a coping and survival mechanism, rather than as a lifestyle choice.

"PEOPLE ARE MOVING TO PORTLAND AND LIVING OUTSIDE TO ACCESS SERVICES"

REALITY: Most people who are unhoused in Multnomah County have lived here for 2+ years. When people lose housing, they tend to stay where they are to stay connected to family, friends, and familiar places.

"NOT EVERYONE IS READY FOR HOUSING"

REALITY: A growing body of research shows that what's called "rapid rehousing" - moving people directly into housing from being unhoused (with rent-stabilization) is incredibly effective. Much more effective than attempting to transition people from temporary housing or shelters once they're "ready".



Without Housing Revival

By Nathan Lerum, Tami von Linsowe-Wilson, Keisha Muia, Tisa Pickering, and Lauren Jean Voigtlander

For the past seven months Sisters of the Road partnered with WRAP and graduate students in Portland State University's Master's of Social Work program. This partnership provided the capacity to update materials necessary to effectively present the root causes of houselessness to our community. In this article, the students speak to their experience leading this project.

In our final year of the Portland State University's Master's of Social Work Program we choose between two education tracks. In the clinical track we learn skills to promote healing and hope with individuals and families. In the macro track we learn to advocate with communities, organizations, and larger systems to promote healing and unearth the root causes of oppression.

Our group is on the macro track, and we came together because of our common clarity about the urgent need to decriminalize houselessness. Rather than starting our own projects, we wanted to partner with groups already doing this work.

After reading one too many superficial, scapegoating articles we found something refreshingly different in Western Regional Advocacy Project's (WRAP) Homeless Bill of Rights Campaign. This campaign strives to ensure that all people have the basic right to live where they choose without fear of harassment and criminalization at the hands of the police.

After finding the Homeless Bill of rights, we cold called WRAP last October to see if they had a project we could work on to change public perception around homelessness. Paul Boden, the executive director, answered the phone. He swore a lot which made him easy to trust, and his sense of solidarity in the work was immediately

“We would organize with the perspective that there is wisdom and experience and amazing story in the communities we love, and instead of starting up new ideas/organizations all the time, we would want to listen, support, collaborate, merge, and grow through fusion, not competition.” ---Adrienne Maree Brown



infectious. Minutes later he referred us to Lauren Armony (from Sisters of the Road - a founding member of WRAP) and Kaitlyn Dey (Portland-based WRAP Organizer) via email.

During our first meeting, Lauren and Kaitlyn expressed a great need to update the Without Housing presentation. After publishing Without Housing in 2006, it was last updated in 2010. Through this project, we frustratingly found that although much has changed, just as much has stayed the same since then. **Homelessness continues to rise and the root causes of homelessness continue to be ignored.**

In updating “Without Housing” we feel there is new data that is crucial for our community to know.

The primary tool for gathering data on rates of regional houselessness is the “Point in Time Count” (PIT). This event typically takes place in January, a time when weather provides insurmountable challenges to connect effectively with folks experiencing houselessness. Due to weather and other factors, PIT Counts are universally acknowledged to undercount rates of houselessness. Although it does not accurately reflect the need for resources and services, it is still the primary tool used to determine HUD funding.

In 2022, only 7% of our national 1.5 trillion-dollar budget was allocated to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). In contrast, the majority of our budget, at 50%, was spent on the military.

This discrepancy in investment is reflected in the housing crisis our country faces, as there is no region where housing is affordable on minimum wage.

Contrary to popular belief, houseless people are overwhelmingly the victims of crimes, not perpetrators. People experiencing homelessness, particularly people of color, often face disproportionate levels of policing, harassment, and criminalization, leading to increased rates of arrest and incarceration. This is a nationwide issue, and Portland, Oregon is no exception.

Another misleading narrative is that unhoused residents generate waste in our community. Settlements of unhoused residents are common scapegoats for illegal dumping by housed residents. Less than one-quarter of waste comes from houseless people while 53% comes from residential sources.

Through this experience, our group has gained valuable insights into the root causes of homelessness and the need for advocacy to change public perception. By partnering with WRAP, we have worked collaboratively to promote the Homeless Bill of Rights Campaign and challenge the criminalization of homelessness. Through our non-hierarchical approach, we have built a sense of solidarity and hope for long-term change. We hope this updated advocacy tool will catalyze calls to action and celebrate small wins towards a world without homelessness.

***Paul Boden from WRAP often says:
“If we’re going to get our asses kicked, we might as well have a good time doing it”***

My Sisters of the Road Story

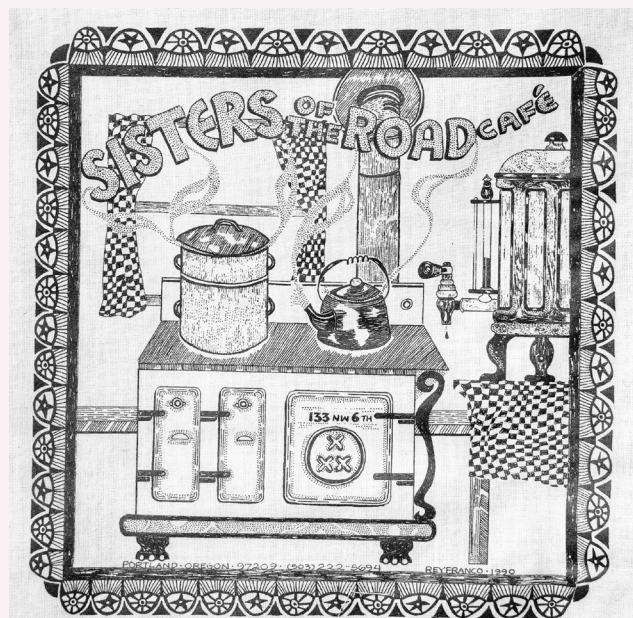
Gus Kroll, Board President

In the fall of 2006, you likely found me sleeping under the Burnside Bridge. I was 23 and recently finished two years of college. I had started to deconstruct the religious framework I held deeply as a teen, and my plan to join the military fell apart. Also, the idea of working thirty years in a job I'd hate sounded like a fate worse than death. My relationship with my Dad was rocky and I read a little more Jack Kerouac than was strictly healthy. In short, I had no idea what I wanted to do, but I knew it sure as hell didn't involve staying in my parents' basement any longer.

I felt more than a little lost.

The year before, I was part of a group of Community College students that spent the summer in Portland volunteering at Blanchet House, St Vincent de Paul, and a little cafe, that was like nothing else I'd ever seen before, called Sisters of the Road. It was a social justice organization that happened to run a cafe.

As a kid, I'd helped my mom bake pies for the local Mission, and as a teenager I volunteered there, but it was always a charity model. There was no sense of that at Sisters.



To paraphrase the legendary anti-poverty activist Willie Baptist (in whose workshop I got to participate at the cafe in 2008): Given three very bad months we could be staying at some place like the Mission. Homelessness and grinding poverty was something that happened to other people, not something that would happen to folks like us.

“The thing that made Sisters special was you knew that you were more than just welcome there, you were valued and invited to come in.”

Sisters' cafe felt different: I'd never been somewhere where I was asked to think critically about how and why people end up on the street, where unhoused people were treated like they have meaningful insight into their own lives, where people's unhoused status was treated as a societal failing instead of as a personal moral one, and where people were addressed as people deserving love and respect instead of being handled as problems needing to be fixed.

The cafe has been closed the last couple of years but that doesn't mean it is dormant. Sisters has been a part of countless efforts to pressure City Hall to treat unhoused neighbors with the dignity and respect they deserve. Even as we say goodbye to the old building and move into a building, the advocacy work has not stopped, won't stop, and cannot stop. Because Sisters at its core is an agency for social change.

It's summer 2023, I've spent the last decade doing support and advocacy work with unhoused neighbors here in Portland. The values and vision I learned at Sisters has been foundational for how I approach this work. I have never forgotten the love, respect, and kindness I received at Sisters from staff, fellow customers, and volunteers. Throughout the years I've returned to Sisters as a friend, volunteer, and now, to serve as the Board President.



I feel like I should say something about the trope of people "choosing" homelessness. I remember reading an interview with Graham Pruss, an anthropologist who studies people living in their cars. He talked about the real way people make decisions about their living conditions and that most folks living outside are choosing the best option from a list of very bad options. In a real way I could have chosen to move back home. Having that option available absolutely colored my experience. Most of the folks I met had far more dramatic and traumatic experiences that led them to living outside.

Cafe Stories from Migyoung

by Sonya Kauser, George Bonoan

Leaving the Sisters office one Saturday evening in March, Sonya and I noticed Migyoung was in the cafe wiping away the last of the colorful artwork from the windows. Every Saturday prior to this one, all staff worked together to pack up and clean the cafe, an early step on the path towards reopening the cafe in a new space.

We popped in, at first unnoticed. Tom Waits growled “Sea of Love” from Migyoung’s iPhone.

“Migyoung, what are you still doing here?”

“Oh, I just have to sweep a little bit more, sweep the corners and get a couple more windows.”

We offered her a hand. After an hour, we said it was time for us all to go. From my perspective, the place looked immaculate. Migyoung waved us off to go home and enjoy our weekends, probably her way of saying she wanted a moment alone to say goodbye to a very special space for her and Sisters’ customers. This was the last time she would lock the doors to 133 NW 6th Ave.

Migyoung is the Operations Director at Sisters. She started working at Sisters 11 years ago as a cafe volunteer and quickly became staff. She acquired a wide array of skills, earning promotions that led to her current position. It seemed natural to interview her and find out what made the cafe special and what we need to make sure we recapture in our new home.

Sonya and I had crafted a question-answer format but it turned into Migyoung telling us her favorite and most impactful stories. One story Migyoung told us was about what dignity and systemic change looks like in the cafe.



““ One winter day, a customer walked in wearing a lot of jackets. He wanted to buy coffee and dug in all his pockets for a barter ticket, finding it after minutes of rummaging. Another customer watched me waiting and said, “You’re the coldest person I have ever seen. The coldest heart.” I was absolutely shocked. She continued, “Why couldn’t you just give him a cup of coffee for free? Since when did Sisters become all money, money, money?”

I was fairly new but I understood that Sisters is a barter cafe, not a soup kitchen. Nothing wrong with a soup kitchen but Sisters is different. “Sisters has changed so much,” the customer said as she sat down at a table. So I kneeled down next to her and said, “Hi, I am Migyoung, can you tell me your name?”

She didn’t want to share her name with me, she was that mad.

“Okay, first of all, my mother’s going to be very disappointed that somebody thinks her daughter is the coldest woman ever.”

I then explained why the barter system exists: as a sense of pride, ownership, and autonomy. Tension shifted after this and she told me her name and apologetically how she judged me too quickly. She had a rough night on the street. As our eyes got teary we hugged.

As I recorded this story, Sonya chimed in and asked Migyoung more about the barter cards and how customers used them. Migyoung surprised us with such a sweet scenario, one I couldn’t have even dreamt up.

“ Sometimes folks would save barter credit earned working in the cafe until they had a stack of barter cards, enough to treat everyone to an unexpected free meal. That gesture of communal generosity would bring so much unexpected joy to the room that one could only imagine the raucous energy filling the space.

Sonya asked what other memories are special to Migyoung. She shared the morning routine the cafe staff had before opening to the community.

“ Kitchen staff showed up at 7:00. The smell of spices coming from the kitchen, the preparation of desserts, and setting up of the dining tables everyday was predictable and comforting. You know the routine. Staff, volunteers and barter workers worked together side by side chopping, mixing, cooking, and making coffee.

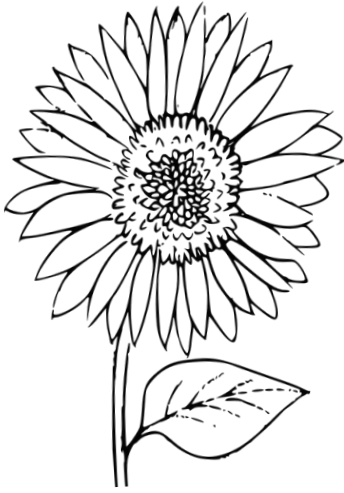
Some folks would be waiting for us to open so they could help in the kitchen even on rainy winter days. I learned that the sense of belonging to Sisters is very important to our community members. By 10:00 am, the meals were ready to be served. It was special to know that everyday you spent the morning doing this and, like art, people enjoyed what you made.



Like Migyoung, a lot of folks made memories at Sisters. People who met in the cafe got married and had children. Sisters is the place their love began. Others who worked or ate at Sisters Cafe still come back and say hello. The cafe was- and will be, in a new space- an anchor for many who needed to feel seen, heard, and cared for.



“Sisters is, in a way, a perfect place in this imperfect and unjust world” -Migyoung Won



Gather & Grow

As the crisis of housing insecurity in our community continues to grow, we know that we need to come together as a community to work towards systemic solutions. While we expand into a larger permanent home, Sisters is also working to strengthen our connection: with our allied organizations, with the unhoused community, with our donors and supporters, and with the greater public who is concerned about what they see on our streets every day. Support our Gather & Grow campaign to help keep Sisters hardy as the seeds of our future begin to sprout.

Ways to Give

You Can Always Send a Check

...but here are a few other ways to support Sisters of the Road's Gather & Grow campaign.

DOUBLE YOUR IMPACT

Does your employer match donations to 501(c)(3) non-profits? Many do, including employers like Intel, Nike, and even Starbucks. Contact your HR department and/or email us to see if you can double your donation and your impact!

DONOR ADVISED FUNDS

Do you have a Donor Advised Fund through a financial institution or community foundation? You might be able to get your donation to Sisters matched through the #HalfMyDAF campaign! Go to halfmydaf.com for more information.

PEER TO PEER FUNDRAISING

Do you know other people who also might love to support Sisters' mission? We have a toolkit that you can use to share why you love Sisters and help encourage your family and friends to support us as well! Reach out for more information if you'd like to help us grow our base of support.

CONTACT US

Need help giving? Reach out anytime.
development@sistersoftheroad.org
503-222-5694 x114

STOCK DONATIONS

Do you want to make a donation and own some stock? You can avoid paying taxes on the sale of the stock by donating it directly to Sisters. Contact us, and we can put you in touch with the bank representative who handles these transactions for us.

FACEBOOK FUNDRAISERS

Did you know that you can host your own fundraiser for Sisters of the Road on Facebook? People often do these for their birthdays in lieu of gifts.

PLANNED GIVING

We hope you're going to be around for many years to come, but if you're thinking about your lasting legacy, consider adding Sisters of the Road as a beneficiary of your estate.

QR CODE



PROVIDING A SAFE DIGNIFIED SPACE &
ENSURING ACCESSIBILITY TO
SAFE & NUTRITIOUS MEALS

A

fold this section over left

B

fold back so A meets B

SISTERS OF THE ROAD CAFE

331





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