



Ted S. Warren/Associated Press

## Tent city welcomed at Seattle University as protests dogged camps on Eastside

By Elizabeth M. Gillespie  
Associated Press

When a roving homeless encampment arrived for a month-long stay on the tennis courts at Seattle University, the school heralded it as an opportunity to help the poor while raising the region's awareness about its shortage of shelter space and affordable housing.

Students and faculty at the Jesuit college called their tent city a blessing.

On the Eastside, opponents of another homeless camp have called theirs a curse.

Critics have picketed three churches that let the bustling enclave of tents onto their property, arguing that neighbors have been shut out of the process and that the homeless need roofs over their heads and better access to support services to help them get back on their feet.

Some have suggested that campers are bound to pee in their bushes or scare their children as they walk to school.



Rick Schweinhart/Journal

A tent city resident in Kirkland erects a framework for a tarp over his shelter. Activists say the tent camps are a safe alternative to sleeping under bridges.

### A DAY IN THEIR LIVES

Twenty-four hours with a few of the estimated 500,000 to 700,000 homeless in the United States, 4A

It's enough to make Eastside tent city resident Charles McKay shake his head and wonder why they've never asked him what it's like to lose everything and have no place to go.

"They refuse to come speak with us to learn what we're about. I think that's cowardice," he said, wearing a wool knit hat on a chilly morning as he worked the front desk, a weathered green tent cov-

ered by a blue tarp where St. John Vianney Catholic Church holds Bible school lessons in the summertime.

### Miscast as heartless

Steve Pyeatt, a vocal critic of the Eastside encampment, said he and others in a group called Tent City Solutions have been unfairly miscast as heartless suburbanites who want the homeless to stay away from their two-car garages and manicured lawns.

"People think that because we want real solutions to deal with the homeless that we hate the homeless. We do not," Pyeatt said.



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He contends a nonprofit behind Seattle Housing Effort and the Workforce and Equity and Enhancement — should focus on people in churches with people who have spare bedrooms.

The activists in tent cities, temporary safe alternative bridges in a region of 8,000 homeless people and more than 5,000 shelter



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He contends organizers with the nonprofit behind both tent cities — Seattle Housing and Resource Effort and the Women's Housing, Equality and Enhancement League — should focus more on housing people in church basements or with people who volunteer their spare bedrooms.

The activists maintain that tent cities, temporary as they are, offer a safe alternative to sleeping under bridges in a region with roughly 8,000 homeless people and fewer than 5,000 shelter beds.

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# Cities

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## Stream of donations

While they groan about their critics, suburban campers say the vast majority of people have made them feel welcome and respected.

A group called Eastside Cares has donated a steady stream of food and clothes. A Sunday school class gave campers a posterboard-sized Valentine saying they'd miss them when their three-month stay ends. Kirkland's mayor helped pitch tents in the camp's latest move to a church parking lot across the street from City Hall. Only a few protesters showed up.

"We've been trying to take a very positive view that courts have ruled that churches have the right to do this, so our goal is to make this a very positive and safe experience for everybody," Mayor Mary-Alyce Burleigh said.

Seattle's first tent city sprang up as a political statement in 1990 on land near the now-demolished Kingdome. It grew quickly, then moved indoors within weeks after community leaders scrambled to find space in a bus barn, a church basement and later a run-down motel.

The city bulldozed a second tent city a few weeks after it was set up.

## Off to a rocky start

Tent City 3 got off to a rocky start in 2000, but a judge even-



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Alana Bell, a freshman at Seattle University, laughs with Tent City 3 resident Melvin Tubbs. At right is Denise Nichols, another tent city resident.

tually ruled that the city couldn't prevent private property owners from hosting the encampment as long as certain rules were followed. It has moved nearly four dozen times. After Seattle University, it's heading to a church that's hosted it several times before.

Tent City 4 opened last May at a church in Bothell and is on its fourth site.

Seattle University, which has bragged about being the first college in the country to invite a homeless encampment onto campus, spent months planning for Tent City 3, raising \$4,500 to pay for the camp's trash removal, portable toilets, a cell phone, bus tickets and other expenses.

Volunteers served daily dinners to about 100 campers and made sack lunches. Students and faculty organized legal and health clinics, job training

workshops, weekly movie and game nights, and had residents speak in classrooms and on panel discussions.

## College student helps out

Freshman Alana Bell, 19, found out one of the residents was deaf and couldn't speak or sign many words, so she volunteered an hour or two a night, helping 46-year-old Melvin Tubbs learn to communicate. Standing in the dinner line with her one day, he smiled and nodded excitedly as she asked him about his plan to go to community college.

"It's been such a gift to be here, to finally have it be not just this event that we're planning and discussing and advertising, but for it to be really men, and women, and stories," said Katie Penard, 25, a theology and ministry graduate student who helped plan for Tent City 3.

Michael Stoops, acting executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, said he hopes more schools and communities will follow Seattle University's lead.

"This is a way to remind the country that homelessness is a pressing issue that won't go away unless we focus our energy and resources on it," Stoops said.

Things are pretty quiet at both tent cities by day. Most people work. Strict camp rules require residents to put in several hours of camp security shifts a week and take part in meetings where they appoint a five-member executive committee twice a month. The camps' code of conduct also forbids drugs, alcohol, violence or abusive language.

Litter patrols pick up trash in the neighborhood. The front desk at each tent city is manned around the clock. Residents take care of business like keeping records of donations and helping campers get in touch with any support services they need.

### Laid off from high-tech job

Don Goodwin, a divorced father of two, has lived at Tent City 4 since last August, when he ran out of money after getting laid off from a high-tech company that offshored all its jobs to Canada and Israel.

He's sent out hundreds of resumes, but most businesses have hung up shortly after finding out he's homeless. Before the tech boom went bust, he never figured he'd wind up living in a tent.

"It was a promised land ... are you kidding me?" Goodwin, 47, said, waiting by a dryer outside the church for clothes he planned to wear for a job interview — his second in six months.

Back at Seattle University, 28-year-old Denise Nichols raves about Tent City 3's month on campus.

"The students, the faculty, everyone who's been part of this — it's been a great thing," said Nichols, a self-described "out-of-control teen" who's been homeless off and on since she was 18. These days, she'd blend in easily with the college students that mill about campus, with her jeans, zippered

sweatshirts and shoulder-length brown hair.

Over the years, she's worked as a telemarketer, janitor, cashier and at a fast food joint or two — nothing that's paid enough to keep her from winding up back on the streets from time to time.

After her first week at Seattle University, she and two other campers were featured speakers on a panel with the school's president, the county executive and a business leader.

"I knew my voice was being heard," she said a few days later, "which made me feel important."

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