

Every month since February 1987 the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation has produced one-hour TV programs on issues related to peace, social justice, economics, the environment, and nonviolence.

The Olympia FOR's program airs several times every week for the entire month on Thurston Community Television (TCTV), channel 22 for Thurston County's cable TV subscribers. You can see TCTV's schedule at www.tctv.net.

You can also watch the program described below (and more than 100 of our previous interview programs and special programs) at the Olympia FOR's website, www.olympiafor.org. Simply click the "TV Programs" link to reach www.olympiafor.org/tv_programs.htm, scroll down, and click the program you want to watch.

Many of our website's TV program listings also include a document (in Word and/or .pdf format) describing the program.

JUNE 2015

"Young People Downtown: Realities and Opportunities"

by Glen Anderson, producer and host of this TV series

The Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation's June 2015 TV program provides fresh insights into the realities experienced by young people who spend a lot of time downtown. We debunk the myths and offer constructive ways for our local community to address problems and include everyone.

While this program focuses especially on young people, much of our conversation will pertain also to people of other ages whom we see downtown.

The most common way that governments and social service agencies deal with disadvantaged people is from the top down. In contrast, **all three of our guests** on this TV program practice **solidarity** with the people they serve. They create a strong interview by sharing their humane concerns, extensive experience, and important insights:

- **Cole Ketcherside** is Program Coordinator for the Street Outreach Program of Community Youth Services. Cole has provided a variety of direct services for at-risk young people, and has been doing outreach in Olympia since 2004. Cole has a relevant bachelor's degree and is working on a Master's degree.
- **long hair david** came to Olympia in 1991 after release from prison and lived in a halfway house. In Olympia he has accomplished a lot of very positive things for our local community. He started new groups, including EGYHOP (the Emma Goldman Youth and Homeless Outreach Project), and Books to Prisoners. He is widely respected and appreciated by many people, including me.
- **Meg Martin** is the Program Director for the Emergency Overnight Shelter operated by Interfaith Works of Thurston County. This new shelter is located at First Christian Church, 7th & Franklin. Meg has a Master's Degree in Social Work and seven years of experience doing street outreach, including providing mental health services.

Many people in the general public have negative feelings about young people they see downtown. Some of the public's negative feelings are based on assumptions that are not true. Our guests clear up some of the misunderstandings and correct some myths.

For example, most young people downtown are not unruly and disobedient. Some have problems, but our local community and larger society do not fund adequate social services to meet the needs that do exist.

It is a myth that Olympia has abundant social services and is a "magnet" that draws people here. The overwhelming majority of young people who spend a lot of time in downtown Olympia actually come from within Thurston County.

Ironically, the local political and economic elites keep trying to attract more people to move here, but this is a class-based bias seeking middle-class people. Lower-income kids from our own community are treated as outsiders, even though they grew up here.

Many of these kids are “throw-aways” who have been abused, neglected or rejected by their families. They gather together downtown to seek a community where they will feel welcome.

Everyone has biases, but we should not let biases, assumptions, and stereotypes mislead us.

Some young people are homeless. We do not have enough shelters, so the longer a person is homeless, the harder it becomes to get off the streets. If you do not have ID, it can be very hard to get. If you are poor or have other problems, transportation to social service agencies can be very difficult.

Society is harshly biased against these people, and they know they are held in contempt, so this lower self-image causes them to retreat into lower levels of functioning. When they feel hated by society and suffer other pains (psychological, health, etc.), they may tend to “self-medicate” with alcohol or drugs in order to relive the pain they feel. It is hard to get treatment for health problems or other problems.

For a long time, social service agencies tried to make people stop drinking or get off drugs **before** the social service agencies would find them housing. More recently, the best thinking and research have **reversed** that. Now the top priority is to help people get safe, stable **housing first**, and make progress on other problems after a person has a decent place to live. Our guests explain why this “housing first” strategy is much better.

Likewise, another flip is important. Instead of demanding that people kick drug habits or stop other dangerous behaviors “cold turkey,” the new, smart approach is called **“harm reduction”** – reducing the danger and damage to a person, even if some behavior continues. Our guests explain why “harm reduction” is workable.

Needle exchange programs are a classic example of this “harm reduction” approach. These life-saving programs have been going on for decades, but many people in our nation still do not understand or appreciate them. Our guest long hair david started Olympia’s program more than twenty years ago. Our TV program includes a 5-minute video from the early 1990s in which long hair david explains the needle exchange program.

The people who spend a lot of time on the streets differ in age and in other ways. There are a number of sub-populations that vary by demographics, problems (health, mental health, sexual orientation and gender identity, substance abuse, etc.). Some people are on the streets temporarily, while others spend many years there. Each person is a unique individual, so addressing their needs requires getting to know each person individually, rather than lumping everyone together into some kind of stereotype.

All three of our TV guests emphasized the heavy burden that labeling and stigmatizing places upon people who spend a lot of time on the streets. Labels ignore people’s individual differences. Labels are negative and box people into traps that are hard to escape.

Terms such as “addict” or “homeless” are stigmas for persons, rather than descriptions that understand behavior. These labels say you **are** your behavior, so these stigmas disempower people and make recovery more difficult.

People on the streets know that the larger society looks down on them. They read the newspapers. They know what business people and city council members say about them. Negativity toward them provokes more negativity.

Society’s stigma even reduces further the already inadequate level of social and medical services. If someone calls 911 to report an overdose, the ambulance will not respond as quickly as if the caller does not imply drug use but merely reports the symptom as an emergency (e.g., “My friend is not breathing.”).

The professional field of child development includes a concept (“Positive Youth Development”) that recognizes people have strengths and capabilities that we can reinforce. People will rise or fall to the expectation that is conveyed to them. If people expect you to succeed in life, most likely you will become successful, but if people expect you to be a failure, it is extremely difficult to overcome that and succeed. People live up to – or live down to – their self-image. We should be appreciating each person’s inherent humanity and each person’s

gifts and talents. We should reinforce positive characteristics rather than focus on punishment. The trauma that many people on the streets have experienced interrupts their normal development as capable human beings, so we should get to know people and reinforce their positive qualities so they can grow and become more satisfied.

Everyone has biases, so we should always be careful to check those and avoid making assumptions or snap judgments. Our guests emphasized the importance of actually getting to know individuals who hang out downtown. Volunteering with compassionate non-profit organizations helps a lot too, but anyone can make friends even without volunteering through organizations.

David spoke positively about punk rockers who are not understood. He has made friends with many punk rockers who are intelligent and wise young people who have important messages for the larger community.

The City of Olympia and the local community overall make young people feel unwelcome. Young people need to be able to gather somewhere, but they get pushed out of every space where they gather, like a “whack-a-mole” game: Sylvester Park, Intercity Transit station, and now the Artesian Well area (south of 4th Avenue, just west of Jefferson Street), which is currently the front line of the struggle for young people to have a gathering place. Young people deserve to have a space.

The Olympia community should welcome them into the community rather than push them away and disperse them into areas where they could be much more at risk. Every person – including every young person – needs opportunities for meaningful participation. We should protect spaces where young people can gather and build a sense of community. Most adults have other resources (cars to get away, money to go to other places, etc.), but young people without resources need an accessible safe place right here.

David’s vision for that area would also include not only affordable food vendors but also on-site presence of relevant social service agencies (e.g., Community Youth Services, EGYHOP, health and mental health agencies) in trailers or other portable facilities. This would actually serve the people who visit the Artesian Well area, and it would provide a friendly “adult” presence.

Meg mentioned that Olympia enjoys its self-image of being progressive, but the city government does not really serve homeless people well, because people need social gathering places and basic infrastructure such as bathrooms and showers.

Meg mentioned the “zooming out” methodology that she finds useful. Instead of focusing on just one person’s behavior, “zoom out” to see the larger picture. So instead of simply blaming a person for leaving a drug needle on a sidewalk, consider the larger issue of why people use these drugs. Glen urged people to ask what it is about our society that leaves people so hurting or so despairing that they use drugs to escape the pain they feel. Solving the problems we see requires using Meg’s “zooming out” methodology.

David affirmed some of the guiding lights that helped him move from a background as a “failure” in prison to accomplishing great things since he moved to Olympia in 1991. He has drawn great inspiration and strength from Emma Goldman, a wise anarchist from a century ago, and from Dorothy Day, who co-founded the Catholic Worker movement in the 1930s.

Near the end of the TV program we affirmed some of the local non-profit organizations that accomplish good work here because they are compassionate and grounded in understanding the realities. Here are some great ones:

Community Youth Services provides a variety of services to young people into their early 20s.
711 State Ave NE, Olympia
(360) 943-0780
www.communityyouthservices.org
Search Facebook for “Community Youth Services”

Rosie’s Place is part of CYC. It offers a drop-in center and a shelter.
(360) 943-0780, extension 191
Search Facebook for “Rosie’s Place”

Emergency Overnight Shelter is operated by Interfaith Works (see below) at First Christian Church at the SW corner of 7th & Franklin in downtown Olympia.
The shelter's hotline is 1 (844) 628-7343
www.iwshelter.org

Interfaith Works of Thurston County has – since the 1970s – brought together people from a very wide diversity of religious faiths to promote interfaith understanding and to collaborate in meeting human needs, especially regarding hunger and homelessness.
(360) 357-7224
www.interfaith-works.org

EGYHOP (Emma Goldman Youth and Homeless Outreach Project) is an all-volunteer effort serves people of all ages downtown during evenings and nights. EGYHOP provides emergency supplies, services and resources to low-income and homeless persons living on Olympia's streets.
www.oly-wa.us/EGYHOP
www.facebook.com/egyhopolympia

Partners in Prevention Education (PiPE) engages young people who are homeless or at risk. It helps to prevent sexual violence, bias and other problems that young people experience on the streets.
408 7th Ave SE, Olympia
www.YouthChangeAgents.org

The most common way that governments and social service agencies deal with disadvantaged people is from the top down. In contrast, all three of our guests here practice solidarity with the people they serve. Our three guests are very well informed. Research supports the main points they stated during the TV interview.

Our society is discovering that assumptions about gender and race misunderstand the realities. Let's extend this awareness to society's assumptions about low-income young people and adults who spend time downtown.

Assumptions, stereotypes, labels and stigma are parts of the problem. We can overcome those by actually getting to know some of the people. Volunteers are absolutely crucial.