

# The faces of dignity: rethinking the politics of homelessness and poverty in America

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Photographs by DAVID YATES AND ROBERT BUREKER

The conditions of homelessness and poverty in America are being criminalized and pathologized such that people who are poor or homeless are marginalized and paternalized to the point of corrupting the possibility of human dignity. In a radical revision of accepted charity models for dealing with homelessness, a group of homeless people have established their own tent community based in the concepts of democracy, community, and care. At Dignity Village, human compassion and self-governance are guiding homeless people into better lives. These street people have recognized and directly address their responsibilities to develop and practice a liberating pedagogy. In partnership with the author in a project at Washington State University, Vancouver, Village residents are involved in learning about technology and are engaged in other literacy efforts, while also playing an active role as teacher educators, providing a curriculum for understanding the living situations of students who are poor or homeless.

## Introduction

Dignity Village is an experiment in democratic self-governance and independent living for homeless people. It grew from the “Out of the Doorways” campaign organized by a group of unhoused people in Portland, Oregon, who protested the way the shelter system patronizes homeless clients, and who challenged the area’s continuing lack of sufficient beds and space to meet the needs of the local poor and homeless.

The goal for the homeless people who organized the dignity movement was always the same: to renounce charity models for responding to poverty, to be self-governing, and to demonstrate the “practical wisdom” behind the creation of a city-sanctioned campground for homeless people. Repeatedly, however, the city forced the continually growing group of homeless squatters to break camp and move on. The “Out of the Doorways” group retaliated by staging shopping-cart parades – noisy, eye-catching affairs that drew lots of media attention and raised public concern about the forced evictions of homeless campers. Finally, after six moves, the tent camp resurrected and, under the name Dignity Village, a group of about 60 homeless people, newly activists, relocated to city-owned land.

Leaders of Dignity Village, who were the homeless organizers of this movement, had negotiated with city government – in highly publicized and politically charged circumstances – to provide a temporary location for the village. For its part, city administration was forced to recognize their failure to meet the needs of their unhoused citizens. No longer “invisible” – and no longer perceived as a loud and rag-tag group of untouchables coming “Out of the Doorways” – the faces of Dignity had made themselves known as an organized constituency with a set of specific and well-articulated public issues to address.

In this article I argue that the residents of Dignity Village have engaged a praxis of liberation, undertaken through public, dialogical reflection, realized in social and collective empowerment, and encoded in both a physical location and a social identity based in love and care. The dignity movement toward self-directed, democratic governance has introduced a new way of life to formerly unhoused persons – and it presents a model for new ways to address poverty and homelessness. This praxis of liberation at Dignity Village is performed through its dialogical pedagogy. This form of liberating pedagogy is realized in the ways by which Dignity’s residents engage in critical reflection in a public arena and in their exercise of democratic governance. Further, by becoming political representatives for homeless persons through the pursuit of social change for all poor people, Dignity’s residents have enabled their own social emancipation, insuring some degree of freedom from coercion by the larger social order. The “revolution” at Dignity Village is carried out in its political-pedagogical practices. By regaining political voice, the residents of Dignity Village have revolted against the accidents of history and the incidences of oppression that had left them peripheralized, marginalized, and contained by the dominant culture in which they have lived. In their dialogue with City Hall and with the citizens of Portland, they have broken away from foundational structures that forced them to the status of “other.”

### **The faces of dignity**

The people of Dignity Village are economically poor. The Village houses 60 adults, although residents may have friends who visit. Another 5 to 10 trailers and cars with homeless people, some of them families, park on the “apron” of the Village gate. Although no children live at Dignity Village, many of the people who do live there are parents, or grandparents. Elizabeth and Gary, for instance, have posted photographs of their extensive family of smiling grandchildren above the bureau in their cottage. One of the advantages of Dignity Village is that people can live in family units, and there are many couples, of various sexual orientations, who share cottages or tents in the Village. Additionally, there are families constituted of parents and adult children: Momma and her son live in neighboring tents; Grandpa and his son Tom live nearby. In addition, people at Dignity share the affection of their pets – dogs and cats accompany many Villagers.

Some of the Villagers have substance addictions – although their self-written community rules prohibit drug and alcohol consumption at the Village, in both public and private areas. Their group includes people in need of mental health care and there are people who have been released from prison. Dignity Village is made up of people of diverse backgrounds: Native Americans, Latina/o, and



**Photo by David Yates**

African-Americans; Christians, Rastafari and Muslims; heterosexuals, and gay and transvestite men, and lesbian women. There are young people who have never had the opportunity for full employment and older people who have worked all of their lives. Some of the residents of Dignity Village plan to stay and create a permanent home and stability for their community. Elizabeth explains that “Gary and I want to



**Photo by David Yates**

stay at Dignity Village to help young people who come there to find jobs, apartments, and have a chance at normal lives." In about 18 months, over 135 Dignity Village residents have successfully transitioned from the village into housing, and shelters, police, and other social agencies include Dignity Village as a referral choice.



**Photo by David Yates**

### **Building dignity**

For the members of this tent community, “dignity” is defined by the rights of individuals to have equal voice in governance and to enjoy equal protections among all members of their community. As the community grew and they



**Photo by David Yates Elizabeth: “I pray every day that God will watch over my girls. I also pray that they won’t forget how much we love them. They’re safe with family so I try and be content with that. Mother’s Day was very difficult.”**

experienced the “messiness” that characterizes democratic political structures, they engaged a system of representative democracy. Decisions on projects and planning implementation are decided by a 12-member council. In turn, members of the council are democratically elected by all residents of the Village. In an effort to maintain transparency in governance, a community meeting is held every



**Photo by David Yates**

Wednesday and is open to the public at large. Detailed minutes are kept of every meeting. In addition, a filmmaker who is producing a documentary about the Village has video-recorded the public meetings and random council meetings. Residents of the Village and the public are invited to participate in discussion about any pending decisions by the council. Advisory votes are taken during public meetings. This system of checks and balances between elected representatives and the public assures a great deal of local input in the planning and organizing of

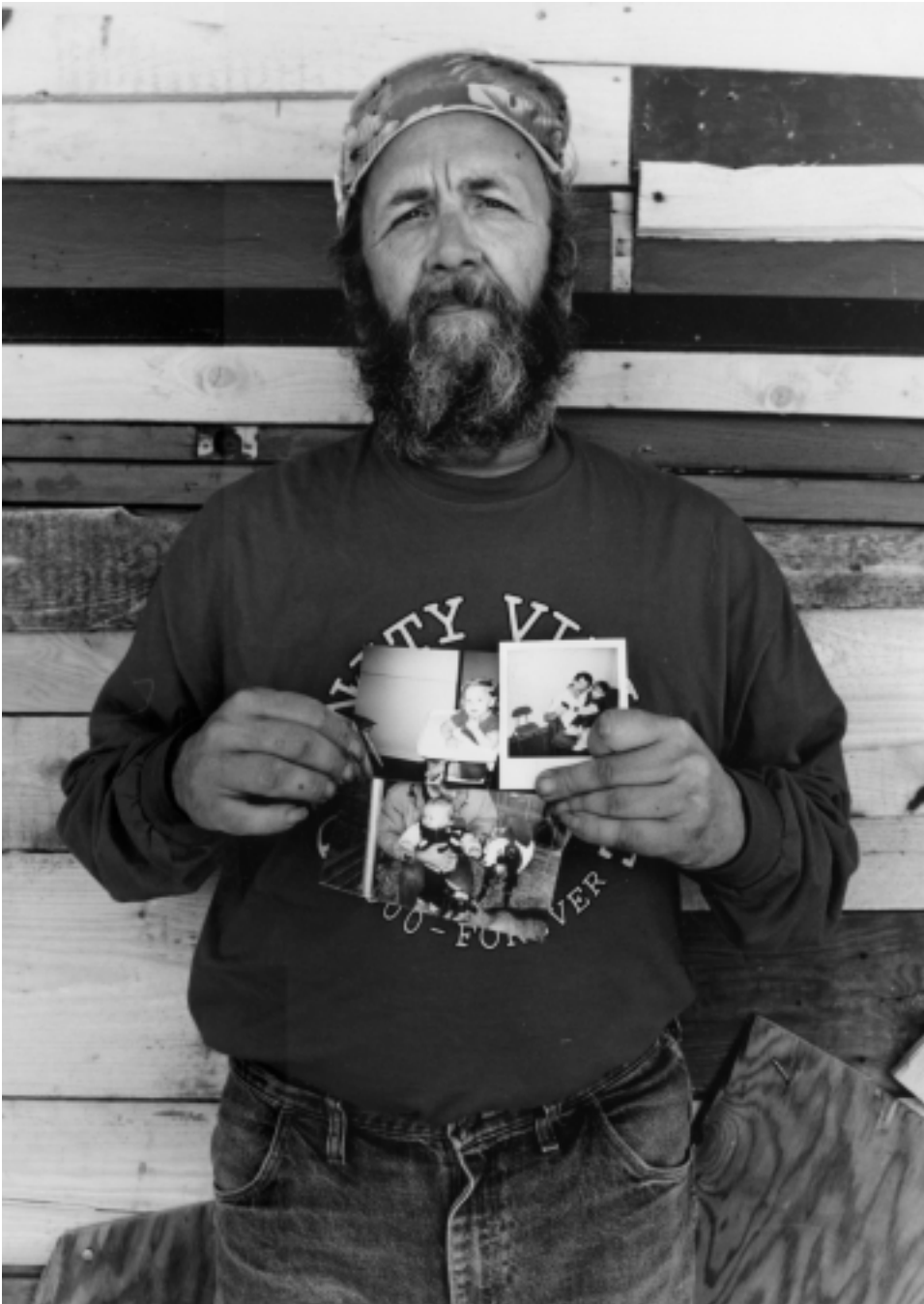


Photo by David Yates Tim: “Being one of Portland’s ‘invisible society’ has brought me to a place called ‘Dignity Village’ where I have a place to sleep, eat, and keep what few things I have safe. Since all my possessions have to fit into my backpack, I’ve left many things behind except for pictures of my three grandsons and my Bible. Of course I have my dog (Zogs) and my cat (Za Cat), which I’ve raised from babies and go everywhere with me.”





Photo by David Yates “Just Joseph”: “This lamp was thrown away by somebody who didn’t care enough to fix it. I wish people would care enough to look at what can be fixed before giving up on it. I wish you would try and see me and others the way I see this lamp.”

projects taken on by the Village. All binding decisions as to the conduct of business by the Village are made by votes taken of the 12 representative members of the Village community.

The tents at Dignity Village have increasingly been replaced by small hunting-shanties and miniature, cottage-style types of buildings, most situated on raised pallets to avoid the floodwaters. Cozy and even charming on the inside, the exteriors of the homes are wrapped in opaque plastic or blue tarps. Much of the architecture is symbolic of historical village-style arrangements for living, and the Village even includes a central water source (made from hoses and spigots) – a modernized nod to the historical importance of a village well. With the donated services of an architect, the Villagers have built a dome-shaped structure out of recycled windows and solar panels as a community gathering place for their governance meetings. A smaller structure was built as a dog kennel so that pets are not roaming unattended while Villagers work or are otherwise away from home. Villagers have constructed handicapped-access ramps to public areas, including the portable shower and bathing area. Faced with the transportation difficulties imposed by their location, village resident and co-founder Ibrahim Mubarak worked with a local environmental organization that encourages bicycling over driving among commuters. As a result of Ibrahim's efforts, the Community Cycling Center provided bicycle safety instruction for Dignity Village riders and donated 20 bikes to be used by Villagers who need to get to work in the evening and weekend hours when there is no bus service. The community bicycles are also crucial in serving transportation needs of Villager who need to access social services, counseling, or to find housing and jobs closer to the city center. When the city cut electrical power because the Village could not pay for the service, Villagers accessed plans on the Internet to assemble a working windmill to generate their own electricity. As residents sought increasing stability for their community, Dignity Village organized as a private 501(c)3 corporation, for the potential of better access to grant dollars. This type of self-sufficiency is not expected or planned for by service providers who minister to the poor and homeless.<sup>1</sup>

Dignity Village residents have created a new response to the problems of poverty and homelessness. The old (and still prevalent) charity model, if it ever was useful, was designed in a mode of deficit thinking and is geared toward images of homeless people, mainly men, who live as bowery bums and drug-addled street people. In the post-Reagan era of cuts to mental health facilities, the character of homelessness perpetuated in the media includes a stereotype of raving lunatics who are beyond care or unwilling to take their "meds".

The faces of homelessness today simply do not fit the images created in this deficit frame – if they ever did. The fastest growing group of unhoused people are families with children, primarily families headed by women; the scales of homelessness are tipped heavily toward minority populations; among street youths, there is an over-representation of gay, lesbian, bi- and trans-gendered men and women. Aged-out-of-foster-care youths, working poor, and victims of penal sanctions practiced during the U.S. War Against Drugs all contribute to the harsh statistics of homelessness. The failures of U.S. social policy to address mental health care needs of patients further inflate the numbers of people who are unhoused, as do zero-tolerance drug policies and lack of prison release transition programs.

To simply banish and condemn to the status of “invisible” thousands of drug or alcohol addicted and mentally ill people is both the result and the cause of social inequality for the working classes. To similarly sanction poverty – “treating” homelessness by depriving people of freedom to make choices about their own lives, in some instances removing children from families simply because parents are poor and unhoused, or continuing the institutionalization of poor children who have aged out of foster care by assigning them to the ranks of the homeless and unemployed – occurs in a society where a broader political agenda aims to create a system of castes that contains and isolates its economically and socially marginalized individuals as an alternative to providing social protection. Writes Wacquant:

The regulation of the working classes by what Pierre Bourdieu calls “the left hand” of the State, symbolized by education, public health care, social security and social housing (Bourdieu, 1998) is being superseded – in the United States – or supplemented – in Western Europe – by regulation through its “right hand”, i.e., the police, courts and prison system, which are becoming increasingly active and intrusive in the lower regions of social space. (2000, p. 1)

### **Dignity as a model for social transformation**

The new model for social transformation offered by Dignity Village suggests a radical shift in social attitudes toward poverty and homelessness. Their creation of a new type of democratic coalition of poor people builds upon goals stated in their operating charter, where the Villagers commit themselves to providing a community in which “all constitutional and human rights of all people are respected and protected.” They propose a community where “mutual interdependence of all people may be recognized, and . . . where the mutual aid among, by and for poor people may be facilitated” (Bylaws). The people of Dignity have as a goal the reconsideration of mechanisms of societal control and dispatch of poor and homeless people.

Dignity’s declaration of purpose and system of governance indirectly mirrors the purposes and governance structures of the Zapatistas,<sup>2</sup> an indigenous Mexican revolutionary movement whose grassroots efforts have been to create a democracy that includes diverse voices and interests, and is a protected place for the very poor to have political voice. Zapatista’s leader Marcos (*Fourth declaration*, 1996) describes the purpose of the Zapatistas as a national project to encourage political reconstruction, fortified by “the stability and security given by democracy and liberty,” wherein “justice and hope are aspirations,” and where “dialogue, tolerance and inclusion emerge as a new way of making politics.”

Political commentator John Holloway observed that the Zapatista movement promotes the concept of “dignity” and not class struggle, despite the Zapatistas’ origination as an instrument to encourage radical democratic transformation across the entire Mexican nation, at all levels of government and in all of the structures of society, i.e., business, arts, and government. Rather than isolate issues of class struggle from other social issues, according to Holloway, the Zapatistas offer a “more experimental and more flexible form of organization that recognizes the

validity of different forms of struggle and different opinions as to what the realization of dignity means” (Holloway, quoted in McLaren, p. 66).

Zapatistas leader Marcos (*Fourth declaration*, 1996) suggests that new approaches to political transformation will take place through “an intercontinental network” that is dedicated to realizing liberty and justice for all people. Importantly, he continued his comments with the admonition that, “The purpose of this network is not to seize power on behalf of the people – rather it is to create a space in which people can define their own power”. This is not a call for support of a particular ideology, or even of a singular approach to addressing the problems of the world’s poor people. Instead, the comments focus on the need to reconceptualize political space in order to realize democratic living. This reconceptualization may have been what Dignity Village organizer Jack Tafari had in mind when he wrote:

Today we live in a time of social transformation . . . a new informational age and a time of economic globalization. It is a time of social dislocation. Today the economy is booming and so is the homeless population. What we see around us now in the downtown core of our cities is homeless people wall-to-wall. Many of the jobs that paid anything have gone south or elsewhere or are now done by machines. Today the cost of space in our cities to live in is climbing beyond the reach of many low income people. And today homeless people are harried and harassed, run from here to there, taxed by fines, commodified and used as a resource, sometimes brutalized, occasionally felonized and often used as slave labor by the prison industry. You know what they say: the good can’t rest and the wicked never sleep. Not, of course, that ev’ry one of we is good. But we are human beings and we do not deserve the treatment we receive at the hands of wicked men. (Tafari, 2000)

Dignity Village did not arise according to some deliberate plan for cultural revolution. Instead it emerged in an authentic response by homeless individuals to their dehumanizing living conditions. Villagers make no attempt to seize power or even to gain power through political acts. They seek only to create a new space, an empowerment zone for their own growth, development, and happiness. What they pursue is a kind of social justice. Simply, they ask for government and people generally to consider a new way of thinking and acting toward people who are poor and who are unhoused. They ask to not be condemned before they are heard. They promise to make noise before they are silenced. But they also understand that their precarious hold on respect from a larger social order requires that they not become isolationist, an island of homeless people concerned only with issues related to homelessness. Consequently, they have pledged their involvement in issues that are important to the local community that holds Dignity Village, and to the world at large. In their detailed organizational plan, they write:

Dignity is poised to become a unique prototype for synergistically addressing two critical social issues at once – homelessness and sustainable “green” development – issues that are normally addressed quite separately. Through a hands-on process of involvement, Dignity will enable Government agencies, social service providers, educational institutions, and private citizens to exchange knowledge and resources directly in a context of learning and teaching that will produce social and environmental benefits for the whole society.

Through its efforts at social transformation Dignity regularly realizes its function as an important teaching organization. Everyday types of learning events in which Villagers teach each other are common – instructional moments that I have recorded include everything from how to build a structure that is impervious to the months of near constant Oregon winter rains, to functional literacies such as reading bus schedules, to planting productive gardens. In addition to these instances of community learning, however, residents of the Village engage in a considerable amount of educational outreach. There is a standing committee of people who go into the public arena as speakers at events or who visit schools and churches to discuss social issues related to homelessness. Several women, organized by Gaye, gave a Sunday seminar at the Village on the topic of domestic abuse, an event for which the sponsors amassed reliable information and community resources for homeless women, regardless of whether they lived at Dignity Village. More formally, they enjoy a “community partnership” with Environmental Middle School, a Portland public school, where they serve as a location for students’ learning in community and service projects. In addition, they have a learning partnership through which they provide field experiences for teachers at Washington State University.

### **Partners in education**

Dignity Village and I, in my capacity as an assistant professor at Washington State University Vancouver (WSUV), have entered into a unique learning partnership. Together, through dialogue, we have established mutually beneficial goals for our collaboration. We are each equally committed to using the structure of our partnership to cross boundaries between Dignity Village and this (public) university. In our written agreement we speak of our boundary crossing as the need to “retrieve public [educational] spaces for unhoused persons.” In other words, we use the partnership agreement as a battering ram to crash the gates of the ivory towers of academe.

There are both explicit and implicit purposes to our agreement. As an educator, my purpose is to provide educational access through technical supports to Dignity Village, ranging from coordinating educational opportunities with Village residents, to researching funding sources for technological improvements. Residents of Dignity Village are interested in fully developing microbusinesses or cottage industries and I have supported that effort with several instructional workshops on grant writing and by funding a graduate student from the business school to assist with grant procurement. In the future we (Dignity Village residents and I) hope to coordinate educational activities for educational programs on a broad range of literacies, which we have begun in the terrain of computer technology. Implicitly, these educational and financial initiatives are intended to further empower Villagers in their movement to establish a self-sufficient, democratic community.

Meanwhile, Villagers provide educational experiences for teachers who do diversity fieldwork and community-based educational programming to complete course and/or WSUV Department of Education degree requirements. Teaching through example as well as by direct instruction, Villagers provide opportunities for teachers to witness dignity, democratic governance, and empathy, as well as to

analyze the direct impact that poverty and homelessness have on the lives of individual people.

From the point of view of my role as a teacher educator, I believe that these reciprocal teaching and learning opportunities between Dignity Village residents and teacher education students will promote important communication and empathy skills and understandings that teachers require in their interactions with children and parents living in poverty. My request that the residents of Dignity Village assume this commitment to teacher education is consistent with Dignity Village's charter goal to "enable" the exchange of knowledge and resources to the benefit of the whole society, rather than existing solely for the support of the Village community. Thus, Dignity Village and I both share the much more fundamental purpose of encouraging all people to seek justice and humanity in their communities.

Our partnership is similarly responsive to ongoing work I have been doing with homeless parents of children in school, sheltered and unsheltered, in which I have encouraged educators to engage in creating dialogues among unhoused parents, youths, and children in order to improve communications between the two groups (e.g., Finley, 2001). In my experience of bringing educational issues of homelessness into teacher education courses, I have noted that teachers would benefit from frequent educational opportunities that encourage empathetic relationships and understandings of the lives of extremely poor and unhoused people. These teacher education experiences are needed, for instance, for teachers to establish workable communication systems between teacher and parents, to realize encumbrances inherent in homework assignments and to provide alternatives in ordinated and linear lesson structures. Teachers need to understand the impact of hunger and the stresses of poverty on children. And teachers need to find ways to thoughtfully create community spaces that are welcoming to all students, including those who are transient or poor. Perhaps most of all, teachers need opportunities to build empathy and understanding toward the parents of children who live in cars or shelters, or who are otherwise housed in nontraditional ways.

### **Technological literacy: creating an empowerment zone**

As the result of working in collaboration to shape a curriculum plan specifically providing educational opportunities for village residents, we decided to focus first on technological literacy because of the potential for increasing skills that would be useful in achieving other ends. Persons searching for housing and employment or filing applications online (many employers either prefer or mandate that these be submitted online) need to be able to work with websites, as do students and grant writers. We also defined one of our purposes as exploring the possibilities of technology for building communications networks with other homeless people living in tent communities nationally and internationally.

With our background of shared purposes firmly established, the first formal event of our learning partnership was a technology fair, held March 23, 2002, on the Washington State University Vancouver (WSUV) campus. Twenty residents of Dignity Village, 15 educational master's degree students at WSUV, and 10 university staff and faculty participated in the event. Others were also present.



**Photo by Robert Bureker Collaborators in education: Dignity Village and Washington State University Vancouver, College of Education.**

Following our collaborative goals and through joint planning (Dignity Village leadership received consultant's pay for their part in organizing the event), this one-day technology event was designed to respond to two primary purposes agreed to in the partnership:

1. To draw upon the resources of the university and its faculty to retrieve public spaces for unhoused persons, in part through initiatives in technology. And,
2. To provide a forum for reciprocal teaching and learning where residents of Dignity Village encourage understanding among university faculty and teachers about conditions of homelessness and poverty.

The technology event was successful on both counts. Dignity Village residents participated in a day of technological literacy instruction, and teachers learned something about homelessness, community, teaching, and life for those who do not share their material privilege.

During the course of the day, Dignity residents established email accounts for all Villagers who did not already have them; several Villagers explored ways to search

grant resources online; and Gaye, the Village treasurer, learned how to create spreadsheets for village accounting purposes. A group of about 10 Villagers and teachers co-participated side by side as students in daylong courses devoted to HTML and the maintenance and continuation of websites. (There was some movement between computer labs as people acclimated their instruction to their existing technology skills and to their areas of interest.)

Participants from Dignity Village represented a wide range of computer skills. Many established their first email accounts and had their first experience with word processing. Internet searches were new to some Villagers who had already established email accounts. Most of those people who were interested in learning about searches had a specific goal of locating grant-writing opportunities that they could take with them at the end of the day. Because technological know-how by village participants had generally been acquired on an as-needed basis, if they had acquired these skills at all, there were gaps and inconsistencies in what people could do with computers. For instance, several Villagers were very adept with establishing email accounts, but had no prior experience with word processing. For them formatting letters of application for employment and sending attachments became the important skills to learn. Ross, a Villager and a beginning student at Portland State University, learned how to establish files for papers he writes for class, and learned additional word-processing techniques necessary for meeting technology expectations common among higher education faculty. Previously, a few Villagers had worked closely with a community volunteer to establish a website for the Village; thus, primary interest for this group was website maintenance, a higher-level computer literacy skill.

To sustain technological literacy and offer new members opportunities to learn introductory computer skills we have repeated the workshops in different forms to be responsive to evolving technological literacy and needs, about every 6 months. Beyond mention of the dual roles that the participants have played as both teachers and learners at these events, and mention of the success of some of the technological advances for assisting villagers to bridge the technological divide that separates communities of wealth from communities of poverty, my focus here is not on the experiences of the Villagers as learners, but instead on their role as teachers. I have noted in the ensuing weeks that most Villagers I know are easily accessible through email; the Dignity Village website undergoes regular maintenance; and several Villagers have identified grants to pursue, using Internet search strategies. Twelve weeks after the technological literacy day, I was told by Tim, a Villager of middle age who gained email access and search techniques at the event, that he had successfully located all of his geographically scattered siblings by using the Internet. This was an important achievement since he had only recently discovered that a heart ailment he suffers is genetic. By reconnecting the scattered family has been able to construct a family tree of health histories to use for their and their children's future care.

As we continue efforts of Villagers to use technology, in subsequent daylong technology events we have focused on Internet searches for possible financial contributors, and other grant procurement skills during a grant-writing workshop. We also have planned additional technological literacy days and a university-sanctioned certificate of technology skills is in the planning stages. Ross, the college student I mentioned above, was one of the participants in the grant-writing workshop and his improved comfort and speed with the computer and advanced





**Photo by Robert Bureker** Ross, center, uses technology-day forum to hone computer skills for college.

Internet skills verified his continuing use of computers in the course of his university experience. He and I have also been trying to locate scholarship sources. Ross wrote in a recent email:

waz'up? susan I am so grateful to you and WSU for your effort and endeavors in bringing education and empowerment to Dignity Villagers. I am 42 and a year ago I would have never dreamed I would be a freshman in college come april 1st 2002. there is no dollar amount that one can put on the giving of empowerment to a fellow human being. education and enlightenment is the vehicle, but giving it is the true key to success. I will get right on that scholarship it will be of most help in my endeavors of the education of environmentalist/reporter and just maybe philosepher, oh' oh' better not get to cockey just yet.

any way much love and respect

Ross Bennett

Rainbow warrior

### **Teleconferencing: retrieving public spaces**

By definition, a public university in a democratic community should be a space that is open to all citizens of that community. Individuals who cross social barriers to claim their educational rights demonstrate one way of retrieving spaces in public education. Given the limited technological resources of poor people and the problem-solving capacities of universities, discovering ways to increase accessibility to computers, copying machines, and telephones for people who have little or no access could become a university priority. Because the Dignity Village learning partnership has stated its commitment to explore initiatives in technology for their usefulness in retrieving public spaces for poor and unhoused persons, we decided to research technological innovations in communication as part of our technological literacy project. We decided to explore the question, "How could video-telecommunications expand the communications capabilities of the Village and other tent communities?" Thus, a featured event of the technological empowerment day with Dignity Village was a demonstration of the Washington Higher Education Telecommunications System (WHETS). For this event, technicians simply wired together two WHETS classrooms and opened the floor for discussion about the use of the system. Additionally, during the discussions, groups of participants went into the control room and worked the equipment.

In some ways, computer technology has already revolutionized infrastructures that create new public spaces. Kevin McKeown (1991) has studied an initiative in Santa Monica (the Public Electronic Network, PEN) that successfully opened communications which included homeless persons. As a result of their participation on PEN, facilities were established where homeless individuals seeking jobs could shower, do laundry, and change into fresh clothing.

Newly created public spaces have emerged on the web and networks of individuals have discovered new opportunities for exchanges. As Dignity Village chair, Tafari regularly initiates online public conferences with active participation among supporters and Villagers. In addition, Dignity Village regularly conferences with tent villages in Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, Seattle, San Francisco, and Toronto in North America, and Nagai and Osaka, Japan. Relations with Japan are sporadic and hindered by difficulty translating between languages. Very regular communications are shared between the North American group. With the exception of Toronto, these villages involved in this communication network exist along the western coast of the U.S. In May 2002, these coastal villages gathered for the "Right to Sleep" summit in Santa Cruz. Sharing physical space and actually meeting one another face to face were the primary motivators for the gathering, although several of the tent communities had sent one or two emissaries to Dignity Village for previous meetings.

Our purpose with setting up an experience with video-telecommunications was to take advantage of technology available to us in this university (to claim this public space), but also to explore new possibilities that this particular technology might hold. Clearly, video-telecommunications are extremely useful for bringing together a group of people in real space and real time, without physical travel. People in different geographical locations can actually see one another. They can speak to each other as well, and without time delays. Motion

pictures, overheads, photographs, and other visual objects can be displayed and referenced in multiple locations while speakers are still in focus of the cameras. Music can be played on a recording device or performed live. The greatest potential benefit from this type of technology in service to poor people would probably be that bringing people together creates a new, larger, and less isolated community. It reaches beyond geographical boundaries to cast larger dialogic circles. This is, in itself, politically empowering. One poor or unhoused person has no power to be heard by the majority of people who do not share the same fate. The political clout that Dignity Village gained and that established it as an organization which needed the responses of city leaders came as a result of street homeless coming out of individual doorways and banding together for common purposes. Only in their congregation of many, rather than single voices of few, did they find an audience for their cause. Poor people are often isolated, many in rural communities, and even in the instances of Dignity Village isolation is one of the primary difficulties of the community since the move to Sunderland Yard. Joining poor people from multiple communities in several countries into one conjoined effort has the potential to reform cacophony into a single, strong chord, turning the isolated voices of the few into the shout of the many.

Another advantage WHETS video-telecommunications holds for building stronger communications among poor people is that sessions can be recorded onto videotape, edited and shared with other groups, even in other video-telecommunications sessions with different audiences, using the demonstration facilities that allow real-time conversation juxtaposed with visual/audio documentation. Thus, the community that experiences an event can broaden and various groups can interlope at differing points in a communication experience. These features of video-telecommunications are being further explored for their potential to create educational forums around topics of homelessness. One example is *Stories of us*, an emerging project that combines literary readings and dialogue about individuals' experiences of poverty and homelessness. In this effort writing workshops will be held with street youths and other homeless adolescents and young adults. Two purposes will be served by the workshops – but writing and reading literacy instruction will be secondary to demonstrating to participants that their personal stories are meaningful and can help improve and broaden dialogue about homelessness and poverty. Public readings of the works created by writer-participants will follow, in WHETS settings. In these public sessions, youth and adult workshop participants will read their own poetry and short stories to other young people. Other writers who address poverty and homelessness will also be invited to read their works. Dialogues about the shared works will punctuate readings. Tapes will be made of the sessions with the purpose of editing them for use in multiple, diverse educational settings, but primarily in teacher education.

Although we were unable to set up telecommunications connections for the Right to Sleep Conference with Dignity Village, both the Dignity Village community and other communities of homeless people that I work with are intrigued with finding opportunities for face-to-face communications among geographically dispersed poor people. In the future, Dignity Village plans to hold educational and community events with other homeless people in their network of tent cities, using the technology of video-telecommunications.

### **What did teachers learn about homelessness – and dignity?**

Before the technology day was announced, I had assigned a field research project in a nonschool setting as part of the assignments for a theory-into-practice section of my foundations course. To pave the way toward diversity experiences, I had sought and obtained human subjects approval for any field experience that had poverty or homelessness as its focus. Yet, several teachers indicated that they had no idea where to begin their field projects. They professed no knowledge of the locations of shelters or food distribution centers or other agencies serving poor and homeless persons. A few teachers expressed concerns about their personal safety, if they were to work with homeless individuals. One of these teachers later described her trepidation as she arrived at the Dignity Village technology event. She said:

Driving to WSU that morning, a number of thoughts crossed my mind. What would the people of Dignity Village be like? Would they be open and willing to talk to me? Was I overdressed? To be completely honest, I was a little bit scared. I had never met anyone who was homeless and I had no idea what to expect. As I drove into the WSU parking lot and parked my car, I actually gave some thought to turning around and leaving!

. . . As I walked back to my car that afternoon, I found that I was very pleased that I had decided to participate in the technology fair. I realized that many of my beliefs about the homeless were unfounded. I found the technology fair to be a great experience for me, and I hope it was a great experience for the people of Dignity Village.

In fact, the technology fair offered a nonthreatening opportunity for teachers to interact with homeless people and observe first hand that homelessness is not equivalent to decadence, mental illness, or criminality. Most importantly, the event seemed to provide some basic lessons in humanity. One participant confessed:

I am embarrassed to say that I had prejudged these people from Dignity Village to be illiterate and lazy. However, I soon realized that these students were quite literate and they were like anyone else, with hopes, dreams, and goals for the future.

For a few of the teachers, the Villagers provided some basic lessons in the ways that social policies play out in the lives of people. In the example below, the teacher came to a better understanding of the need for health care protection for families. Her thinking about health policy issues was based in empathy – she found understanding of the people of Dignity Village when she could imagine herself in their places. “There but for the grace of God, go I,” this teacher responded. She continued:

I started to think about it and how could I say that none of my Aunts, Uncles, cousins, even brothers or sisters, would ever become homeless. And then I heard one of the Villagers talking about the need for health care and how poverty and the illness of loved ones can often be connected. I just thought, Wow, it is truly conceivable that I would love my daughter enough if she were ever really ill, that I would be willing to sacrifice all personal wealth for her care. Is it possible that I could become homeless for love and lack of health care?

Empathetic understanding by teachers of the many causes for homelessness may actually empower teachers to become proactive about the rising costs of housing that disproportionately impact public employees. Dignity Village residents are homeless because there is not enough affordable housing available. For instance, in the statistical metropolis comprising Portland, Oregon, and Vancouver, Washington, conjoined cities breaching the Columbia River, the housing wage is \$14.37 per hour, which is 214% of minimum wage. For a first-year teacher making \$34,000, housing is going to take up over 85% of net wages, so increasing housing costs could eventually exceed take-home pay. What results is a housing market that forces teachers to live in surrounding communities from those in which they work. This phenomenon is increasingly common. In San José, the Teacher Housing Program offers down-payment assistance to teachers. The U.S. government currently offers the Teachers Next Door program to facilitate teachers' homeownership. Some high-priced communities have even weighed the possibility of building specially subsidized housing units for teachers and other public employees.<sup>3</sup>

### **Some problems: can Dignity Village self-sustain?**

The problems of the village are primarily economic (and, to me, therefore inherently political). The residents of Dignity Village are extremely poor. The Dignity Village community has little outside money coming in to support it, and efforts to be self-sustaining have not been successful to date. Many of the people who live at Dignity work, most often at temporary, day work, or part-time jobs, and a few have seasonal work at the City Market. Despite a core group of about 20 residents who are stable in the community, this is a highly transient group of people, as is expected, given the Villager's mission of poor people serving poor people. One way that Villagers care for one another is through community work, especially in the gardens of Dignity Village.

To earn money for the Village, there have been fundraisers, grant applications have been written – with some limited success – and attempts have been made to sell the Dignity logo on T-shirts and mugs and to sell “Dignity-blend” coffee. Individual donations in the 50 to 500 dollar range covered operating expenses (e.g., telephone line, electricity, portable bathrooms – including handicap access), until September 11, 2001 events seemed to divert giving to other causes. Dignity Village is currently in the process of establishing microbusinesses in hopes that cottage-industry production and sales of leather goods, silk screening, and furnishings made from recycled materials can generate needed capital.

The problem of money extends well beyond the need for operating funds and staying fed, however. The economic problems of sustaining Dignity Village are the most serious issues they face as a community. In their current mode of paying rent to the city, living on extensions and under constant threat of eviction, the effort to find a parcel of real estate for a permanent community has come to dominate the minds and activities of the Villagers, especially Village leaders. The city has been reluctant to assign any city space for a permanent campground. “Not in my backyard”-touting neighborhood residents and businesses quickly shout down every proposal the Villagers extend to that purpose. So, not only can they not afford a city property, they also cannot readily identify a location for their site. Meanwhile, property in Portland is in great demand and the prices are prohibitive.

Affordable housing, fair pay for an hour's work, accessible health care and education for all people are fundamental to self-sufficiency for poor people, but the Village has been largely silent on the broader specter of economic issues and has focused almost exclusively on its own need for space. Even as squatters, the Villagers go forward without any argument for rights to real property such as those that are levied by indigenous peoples (such as Zapatistas), or people who can claim their rights "for having worked the land." This tension around land ownership is not the fault of Village leaders, but it is a reality of poverty that poor people have no direct rights to real property, are not likely to benefit from inheritance, and are, thus, dependent on charity housing for homeless people, and in that dependency become subject to prescribed living from judgmental outsiders. In this tension resides the danger of Dignity Village ever succeeding as a self-sustaining community. The search for land too easily forces the co-option of the basic conceptual, organizing principles of Dignity Village as a source of learning about a new way to live and a new way to govern.

To sustain their community, the roles Villagers play as democratic teachers and workers need to be emphasized in the forefront of their plan. The educational power of Dignity Village is in their ability to lead by example. Their methods of self-governance and independence are radically different from the traditional project of charity. It is up to Dignity's teachers to elaborate a new educational project that teaches peace, care and tolerance, diversity, and inclusion. Most likely, the children of Environmental Middle School, the high school and college students who have worked on environmental and social field projects with Villagers will continue Dignity in the way they live their lives. Through the learning partnership with WSUV, Dignity has formed beginning inroads with a few teachers, that they might teach the children in their care a different stereotype of poverty and homelessness, that they might exercise their powers as public intellectuals in gaining equity for poor and homeless children to receive education and love in schools. The kind of social change and radical revolution that reconstructs social power, that reconsiders the motives of democracy, that reclaims public spaces, and that recoups love and creativity as cornerstones of society, needs to come from the children. To make this social change, we all need Dignity in education.

Just because people are poor does not mean they need other people to make decisions *for* them. The people of Dignity ask only that they be allowed to participate directly in decisions which govern them, without acquiescing to a life of mere obedience based in obligation for charity. Their purpose is to change their world by restoring dignity to the governed, beginning with poor and unhoused persons. It is not a political revolution in the sense of right, left, liberal, or conservative need for control of power and government over poverty, instead what Dignity offers is truly a model for non-violent revolution. The vision of a new kind of democracy, based in community responsibility, respect, compassion, and love is what drew me to the Village. It is time to rethink the politics of poverty and homelessness in America; Dignity is a good place to start.

### Notes

1. The many achievements of the residents of Dignity Village have not gone unnoticed by the press and supporters. Features have been included in *Architecture Magazine* (May, 2002), the *New York Times Magazine's* (December 2, 2001) "What Were They Thinking" feature, *Yes! Art and Community* (Spring, 2002) and *YM* (July, 2002).

2. The Zapatistas are undeniably more of a “liberation army” than are the residents of Dignity Village. While there are the commonalities of indigenous leadership and peaceful social transformation to democracy, based in pedagogical praxis, to bridge the purposes of the people of Dignity with the larger Zapatista movement, I must emphatically state that residents of Dignity Village are not political soldiers and do not emulate revolutionary armies. Nor do they own weapons, or otherwise engage in acts of war against the state. Although the Zapatistas did declare war against Mexico in 1993, their more recent efforts have been toward peaceful transformations to a democratic society. (For a detailed account of the Zapatista movement as an instance of radical, critical pedagogy, see McLaren, 2000, p. 65.)

3. (See <http://www.teachershomeloanresource.com/links/links.htm> for information about programs to support teachers’ home buying.)

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