

Carl Harris, June 2007

Interview by Orion Lumiere

SOR: Where are you from, Carl?

Carl: Nawlins, Lousiana.

SOR: Nawlins, huh? (laughs) You man New Orleans? How do you spell that?

Carl: N-A-W-L-I-N-S. (laughs) This time I've been in Portland four months. I've been going back and forth since 1997. I can't stay away! I go back south, and there's too much sun, I gotta see the darkness again. But then it's the darkness that drives me away.

SOR: You mean our legendary Portland rain.

Carl: Yeah, the limelight, the flip of things – you can't win for losing with the rain.

SOR: What do you do at Sisters?

Carl: I was hired at Sisters on May 15. I'm a part-time staff, I do it all. Dishwashing, cashier, floor managing, mail duties. In general, just tryin' to make somebody happy. When [Cafe Manager] Cathy says "we might need your work today," I say "I'll be here." I come by every day, just to make sure.

SOR: So what has it been like working at Sisters?

Carl: Great. I'm not gonna lie, a lotta days, because I'm not a morning person, I'm irritated at the state of the world, people so into themselves, competition and greed. I'm an older man, you know, and what's going on out here gets me all cranky and edgy. Because I don't view the world like that. Every night before I go to sleep, I envision a utopia. I'm not kidding, I can see utopia. But then in the morning I get off the Max [train], and I get within one block of Sisters Of The Road, and I don't know what happens. I'm glowing, it's like a rainbow's inside of me, I'm floating, I'm in my zone. It's how cool people are at the cafe. They're getting their bellies full, getting their hygiene needs met, they're having conversations. I'm peaceful, I don't have to think, my mind is floating.

I was talking to my mom last night and I told her, you have got to see these women at Sisters Of The Road. Y'all are the coolest. I've never been to Amsterdam, but I imagine Sisters is like that. It's people doing what they want here. Where I'm from, everybody follows each other in their dress code. Here, you wear what you like. Portland should be called the Amsterdam of the United States, because you have your individuality.



They need to kick out all of those criminals in Washington DC, George Bush, Dick Cheney and the rest of those clowns, replace them with Sisters Of The Road staff, including myself, and we'll put things right! Because every night before I sleep I envision utopia. I'm serious. I know we could all have what we need: eat, have housing, jobs. I know we could.

I brought my friend, a New Orleans fireman, here to visit in 2001. He likes to camp and hike, which he can't do in Louisiana. I took him to Mount Hood, and he started crying, it was so beautiful. I took him to Hawthorne, and he couldn't believe how nice it was, the lawns, the people. He never saw Caucasian people like this; they ride the busses in masses, and they're nice to Black people. Where I'm from, Blacks sit over there, Whites over here. He couldn't believe it: here it was Asians with Caucasians, Caucasians with Blacks. He promised he'd come back someday.

Portland is like a time warp - you come here, and you're shot to the future. People are open-minded, they take time to think about things. Down there, they're set in their ways. I try to implement these western ways when I'm visiting my mom in Texas, and she gets after me: "you're in Texas now!"

A lot of people back east don't know about Portland, and they don't want to know. That's fine with me. I say, 'stay away, you'll mess it up!' (laughs) I would like my brother and cousins to come here, though. They're having a hard time with finances in Louisiana since Hurricane Katrina. I feel sorry for the youth there; they don't have a way to express themselves. Everything is just aimed towards reconstruction.

I've always said, the first thing is, feed the people, fill their stomachs so they can go through their week and take care of their business. I've seen homelessness in Dallas and other cities, but they don't help out like you do here. I was in Orlando at Christmas, and the Mayor got on the TV and said point blank that people who pull up in vans under bridges and feed the homeless couldn't do that, or they'd be put in jail! There was only two places they were allowed to eat, the Salvation Army and a mission, and man, the smell coming out of there, phew! It was all dilapidated and terrible. There are a few people in Portland giving the homeless a hard time, police, merchants and what not. But overall, people here are sympathetic to the homeless.

SOR: Were you homeless in Orlando?

Carl: Well, I was visiting and I ran out of money. My father rescued me; he sent me money and gave me a three-hour long lecture that went back to 1978 and how I should have gone to college! (laughs) But in Orlando, I read that twelve or sixteen homeless people were murdered there. Beaten, burned alive. Homeless vigilantes, taking out their anger on the homeless. I said, "I got to get out of here!" They just kill people and jail 'em. The Mayor just clamping down on the poor and homeless, "My way or no way."

I wonder [about the president], where did this man come from? He came along and turned over everything we've worked for. Is he a reptilian alien prototype? (laughs) A T-1000-Rex, put on flesh and walk and talk? New Orleans is still under curfew. It's dark, no lights. My pop said, "son, if you go there, you will die, literally." There are youths with guns, living in graveyards and gas stations, fending for themselves. The National Guard is just protecting tourist areas, not neighborhoods; there's still looting. Now, this is the city, the suburbs are ok. But my pop says the city is like a smaller version of Iraq, and he has to go to the insurance companies' offices downtown and go to war with them to get his home fixed. It got put on the back burner, but it is still going on.