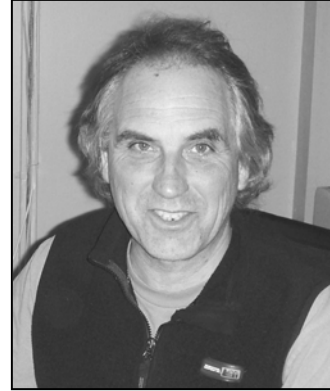


Landing on My Feet

by Michael Burgwin, Sisters' staff May 2008



My pocket jingles as I reach for the key to unlock the door to my new cave. It's an efficiency studio on the sixth floor with a view of the West Hills overlooking my old campsite near PSU. The distance between that concrete slab with its canvas roof and sleeping bag, and this self-sufficient dry, heated space with its stove and oven, bathroom, nearly full-sized refrigerator, and bed is much more than the four blocks and the elevators that stand between them. They are so far apart that they might as well be in two different worlds.

Getting to my new comfort zone was both easy and hard. I had to be "proactive" as my caseworkers advised, push the process on my behalf. Once off the streets and in shelter, Bill at TPI got the house-hunting process rolling by making some suggestions and a few calls; arranged for me to get cheap bus rates so that I could get around. When TPI moved me to Clark Center, Geri ably assumed the support and encouragement reigns, including apartment application fees. However, despite the "system's" best efforts to guide me off the streets, it was a chance acquaintance on the streets with ever observant Scott that led me to this affordable, clean and fully functioning habitat.

The danger in committing to changing one's circumstances is that the business of helping those without houses (or apartments) is not a seamless process; and for a person living on the streets the energy, patience, and overall durability necessary to deal with the interminable waiting lists and those making the decisions about our fate can be emotionally expensive. A burst of frustration rubbed one apartment manager wrong and the next best thing turned out to be \$100 a month higher up the rent-eating food chain. Case managers and apartment managers, bless their hearts, are often overloaded and anemic, if not downright depressed.

While my age – over 55 – seemed to preclude my getting a job until I found Sisters (or Sisters found me), it did finally become an asset insofar as Northwest Pilot Project is concerned. Once I had finally conquered the three-month waiting list, Chris, with Deedee's excellent encouragement (the flowers were way worth it), quickly pulled some assets together to cover the security deposit and first month's rent, both huge necessities for returning to the land of the fully functioning.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without an income. The real miracle in my story is Sisters Of The Road and the excellent reputation that drew me to them. Bartering for my meals helped me get back on my worldly feet and positioned me for one of the occasional job-openings that avail themselves to those of us living the streets. With money in my pocket, caseworkers and apartment managers returned a more favorable gaze, and found a person with a better-than-average chance of staying off the streets with the help they could give.