

LOOKING BACK TWENTY YEARS: JANUARY 13TH, 1978

THE PEOPLES MOVE

Twenty years ago on a cold blizzardy Friday night a momentous event occurred which has gone down in our Over-the-Rhine history as **THE PEOPLES MOVE**. The ShelterHouse Volunteer Group, operators of the Drop Inn Center ShelterHouse, consciously planned and organized a secret, “illegal” midnight move from its second home at 1324 Main Street to our current location at 217 W. 12th Street, which had been owned and not too long vacated by the Teamsters Union. This group decision of conscience was made deliberately to get out of a dilemma we believed to be inhumane. Our story unfolded like this.

Drop Inn Center began in 1973 as a volunteer people’s program in a one room storefront at 1711 Vine Street, a much needed place in our neighborhood of Over-the-Rhine for men who were homeless and suffering from the disease of chronic alcoholism. As numbers grew and government money secured to build a program and hire paid staff, Drop Inn moved to a five-room place at 1324 Main Street in 1974. In the following couple of years the program got into the hands of social professionals who were not based in our neighborhood and had different ideas about the direction of the program. The community was angered when a decision was made without community input to close the Drop Inn on weekends in Spring of 1976. We were angered further by talk of eliminating the overnight shelter and running a daytime program only. The winter hawk would soon be upon us and we did not want to see our people freezing to death out on the streets or in abandoned buildings. People had to be alive first before any hopes of recovery from chemical addiction. This pushed us into organizing a grassroots effort to reclaim our Drop Inn Center; we named ourselves the ShelterHouse Volunteer Group. We were determined to keep the shelter open on weekends even if we had to do it ourselves. And we ended up doing it ourselves with food donations we hustled and use of only two of the five rooms.

During that winter of 1976-77 the ShelterHouse Volunteer Group raised more grievances and these conflicts resulted in the professional staff quitting. On March 31st, 1977 the community, through the ShelterHouse Volunteer Group, took back control of the Drop Inn Center and have been running it seven days a week ever since. Those were hard times, for when we got control the funds were withdrawn and it took a long lobbying effort to get those state funds restored. From that day forward we would stand firm on the principle that housing is a basic human right and that neighborhood people have the right to staff and run their own shelter. We believe strongly that residents of the shelter have the right to participate and give their strong voice to the operations of their temporary home.

AND EVEN HARDER TIMES WERE TO COME

Within a very short time the Health Department threatened to close down the Drop Inn Center. They claimed our kitchen and building had 36 code violations even though this

very same kitchen two months earlier was approved for a food license. We were given no reasonable time to comply. Many of the major building violations were the responsibility of the landlord, Leslie Fox, who for years neglected the building and now in much need of repair. We were being blamed for the slumlord's neglect. We marched to City Hall and pleaded with City Council to not carry through with the close down orders. We were willing to comply with the orders, but we needed more time. The inspectors came in like storm troopers. When we had complied with all orders, new violations were cited. Inspection after inspection, and we still could not pass the test. It was clear to us that we were selectively being harassed by the Health Department. We would never pass inspection because the powers at be did not support community people running a community program at Drop Inn Center – we were not professional enough in their eyes.

By this time we were feeling the crunch of over crowdedness. We were getting nowhere with the landlord. And getting nowhere with passing inspections. Rat holes, water leaks, sewage backup were everyday problems. Conditions in the building were unlivable for person's homeless sleeping there, many on the hard cold floors. We could not see surviving another winter in this rundown place where icicles dangled from the walls in the back storage room. The requirements demanded of our shelter by the Health and Building Departments could never be met by the 1324 Main Street facility. We started dreaming of a better and bigger facility. We wanted a place big enough to house men **AND WOMEN**. We wanted a warmer, safer, dryer place. We wanted out from under this landlord who refused to do needed repairs. So we started scouting around the neighborhood for a building large enough to meet our needs. (We were not interested in going out to Lunken Airport where it was suggested we look. We were determined to find a place in our own neighborhood.) Of all the buildings we looked at, the former Teamster Union Hall at 217 W. 12th Street had the best possibility. We started negotiating with the Teamsters on a rental lease agreement. We kept the site quiet for we knew this location would be controversial, being one of the top spots for future profit-making development so close to Music Hall. But it was our top spot for a home for the homeless, and that was top priority.

We were not making headway fast enough with the Teamsters, and feeling the moral urgency to get out of the unsafe environment, we plotted **THE PEOPLES MOVE** for midnight on January 13th, 1978. We did not plan for the blizzard. Though the blizzard made the move more treacherous, it was a blessing in disguise. It gave us time to get somewhat settled in before the City discovered we were there. The City's reaction to our move was to wage a vicious campaign to close us down. On January 20th we were forced into court. The Building Department ordered our immediate eviction and our leadership was threatened with criminal charges. That day with 14 inches of snow on the ground and zero temperatures, the 120 homeless residents of the shelter were waiting with intense anxiety their fate as buddy gray on the witness stand defended our decision to "illegally" move into our new home. The prosecutors grilled him unmercifully. The Spirit moved with us that day. Judge Outcalt ruled on behalf of the homeless. It was a victory for the people.

THE PEOPLES POWER RAN THROUGH OUR VEINS THAT DAY

As I reflect on our courageous action twenty years ago I can still feel the peoples power that ran through our veins that day. It was no small feat to do what we did. Many people, including the residents, staff, neighborhood and community-wide volunteers, participated in the midnight move. We were taking control of our lives and determining our own history. We were actors, not victims. We were powerful, not powerless. We were hopeful, not despairing. We were risk-takers and not afraid to stand our ground. We stood our ground despite obstacles and determinedly weathered many torrential rains that came pouring down on us as a result of the location we chose and the City feeling threatened by our people's action. Inspired by the Spirit of our people's just anger I wrote this song during that tumultuous time in our history.

IT'S TIME YOU REALIZE THAT WE ARE ORGANIZED

**CHORUS: It's time you realize
That we are organized
And our spirits can't be killed
By your lies and underhanded deals**

**We've worked too long and hard
To have our program busted
By your cold encrusted...bureaucrats.**

**You claim you understand
But still it's NO to our demand
As you debated, studied more
Flooding waters drenched our floors.**

**Just look at where your money goes
To fix up stained glass windows
And you pay your Manager
More than double what we asked for.**

**Does this say that one man's pay
Can mean more to you today
Than a YES vote for a place
For hundreds of people to stay.**

**Now that Donaldson has staged
To care for animals in a cage
We know that monkeys in a zoo mean
More to him than homeless people do.**

**On a cold and blizzard night
We moved into an old union site**

**Our Peoples Move was bold and wise
Ha-Ha...we caught you by surprise.**

**You tried so many dirty tricks
To trap us by your code-stick
Your midnight raids and fire drills
Failed at the Board of Appeals.**

**Every move that you did make
Helped our cause, was YOUR mistake
Every plot that you designed
Brought more people to our side.**

**Your underhanded Master Plan
To force us folks from our land
It will never go your way
Cause we will fight you day after day.**

There are many more chapters to our Drop Inn Center story. My hope is that we continue to remember the fighting spirit that was a part of our beginnings...and never lose sight of that. The story and the spirit needs to be passed on so those who join our effort along the way can feel and claim in their own veins the power of the people and carry this struggle forward...so that someday all our sisters and brothers will be afforded a safe and decent place to call home. I believe to remember and honor our peoples history reminds us that where we are today was made possible by those who labored and loved before us. Our participation in this important work is our ticket on the Freedom Train, which has been going down the track for centuries. Once aboard we must continue to tell the stories of people seeking justice and freedom.

By Bonnie Neumeier,
One of the original members of ShelterHouse Volunteer Group
Long Time Over-the-Rhine Resident
(This story is dedicated to all those who gave their hand and heart to The Peoples Move.)

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