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Advocate For The Homeless Starts New Venture

Summary: Chuck Currie, a tireless activist for shelters and affordable housing, will attend divinity school in St. Louis

As a child, Chuck Currie thought he might some day want to become a minister.

Currie's life took a different turn. Now 33, he has spent nearly half his life as one of Portland's leading champions on behalf of the homeless.

At last, Currie is fulfilling his childhood imaginings.

Tuesday, he'll leave First United Methodist Church in Southwest Portland, where he runs Goose Hollow Family Shelter and staffs the church's social justice committees.

On Jan. 1, he'll marry Liz C. Smith, a children's advocate whom he met in 1994 and started dating a year ago after they teamed for six years teaching a once-weekly, evening leadership class for high school students.

On Jan. 20, the newlyweds will move to St. Louis, Mo., so Currie can begin three-year studies for a master's of divinity at Eden Theological Seminary.

Portland, like other cities, has alternated between compassion and police action in its dealings with the homeless. It is a city that allows a campground named Dignity Village to take root on city-owned property, at the same time that it uses a city anti-drug ordinance to roust homeless people out of a church-owned park in Southeast Portland.

Currie, who for 16 years has been a constant prod to the civic conscience, sees the connection between his present and future lives.

"I've always said, from the first speeches I ever gave on homelessness and poverty, that what we face as society is both a spiritual crisis and a political crisis," he said. "And until you get a handle on the spiritual side of things, the political crisis may never resolve itself."

His sometimes abrasive and confrontational approach, balanced by engaging and reflective moments, has earned him a begrudging respect that has helped him win important political battles.

"You could never please Chuck Currie," said Mayor Vera Katz, once a political activist. "His job is to annoy us and push us and get us to always have (his

issues) on the radar screen, and to do more and more and more. I used to do that, too, but I was a little bit nicer."

Indeed, Currie even has sparred even with people who are homeless.

Ibrahim Mubarak, spokesman for Dignity Village, said Currie -- a vocal critic of the city's anti-camping ordinance -- speaks only to those for whom society is most sympathetic: families and people who've lost their jobs.

"Does he go on the street and talk to the families that's in the streets and say, 'Come on in'? No he doesn't," Mubarak said. "He doesn't go in the trenches, in the aggressive, oppressed and depressed environments like we do here at Dignity Village. He doesn't meet those people head on and talk to them. . . . I guess you have to be of a certain homeless status."

Despite his critics, Currie's passion for political activism on behalf of the homeless has seemed boundless. He was key in helping overhaul the city's and Multnomah County's shelter system. He also joined housing advocates in getting the Portland City Council to provide \$30 million-plus from the city's general fund, through the Housing Investment Fund, for affordable housing projects.

"Chuck, in the mid-'90s, was really pivotal in getting that housing funding," City Commissioner Erik Sten said. "He was at the top of his game. He was really pushing."

Round-the-clock efforts

Currie still pushes. But partly at prodding from Smith, public policy director for Children First for Oregon, he also pulls back and unwinds, too.

"Instead of watching CNN 24 hours a day, he now watches 'The Osbournes' and 'Sex In The City' with me," Smith said, amused.

"There is another side to him. He's not somebody who's 'on' 24 hours a day."

It just seems he is.

At the Goose Hollow shelter, where he has worked since 1997, Currie has overseen a four-fold increase to 800 volunteers. Donations have doubled to \$50,000 annually.

From September through March, the shelter and his church office -- equipped with accommodations for his dogs, Hazel and Hugo -- are a de-facto second home.

One night early this month was typical. Currie started work at 7 a.m., before some shelter guests from the previous night were awake. At 8 p.m. Currie's demeanor was calm, his wit sharp.

He joked and fielded calls from his seemingly always-ringing mobile phone.

He juggled the storage needs of one family and the financial concerns of another.

He conversed with a precocious a 2-year-old shelter guest who was testing mommy's patience.

"You've got to listen to your mom when she talks," Currie said in a soft, playful voice. "I still listen to mine, and I'm 33 years old."

His phone rang. It was his mom.

"I was just talking about you," he said, laughing at the timing.

Holds to Southern roots

Currie was born in North Miami Beach, Fla., but raised through third grade in South Carolina. The state flag that hangs in the Southeast Portland house he owns speaks as much to family ties as Southern sensibilities.

His mother's family's South Carolina roots predate the Revolutionary War, and Currie visits every summer and sometimes more, spending time with his maternal grandparents.

The family moved to Alabama and New Orleans before his late father, Steve, brought the family to Oregon in 1979 to work as a producer for KOIN-TV.

There were always religious influences. His mom was Southern Baptist and his dad Lutheran. The family sometimes attended a United Methodist church, where a second cousin is a minister. As a teen, Currie and his mom attended a Unitarian church.

Currie was 17 and a junior at Beaverton's Sunset High School when he started volunteering at Baloney Joe's, a since-closed inner Burnside-area shelter and service center. Baloney Joe's was led by Michael Stoops, a charismatic and high-profile advocate who had spoken at Sunset when Currie was a sophomore.

He remains an unapologetic disciple of Stoops, who left Portland in summer 1988, disgraced and his reputation damaged amid allegations that he used his Burnside Council position to lure underage boys from Baloney Joe's to have sex with him.

Stoops, Currie says, greatly elevated the homeless cause in Portland and nationally. Stoops is now director of community organizing and civil rights for the National Coalition for the Homeless, a Washington, D.C.-based organization. Currie is a board member.

"Everybody in life makes mistakes and sometimes mistakes can be big," Currie said. "But I don't think, for a minute, that Michael was guilty of anything that was alleged. And I remind everybody that police investigated it; there were no charges that were ever filed. There was no evidence that could be brought to a court."

Bottom line: "Michael has been my friend and always will be my friend."

Currie joined the board of Burnside Community Council, the nonprofit that ran Baloney Joe's, in fall 1987. He was an 18-year old student at Pacific University in Forest Grove. Stoops resigned soon after, and Currie continued as a council board member and volunteer at Baloney Joe's until the shelter closed four years later.

He then co-founded Burnside Advocates Group, a grass-roots group that pushed for affordable housing and issues of homelessness. Currie also worked at Outside In and Transition Projects, downtown-based agencies that serve the homeless.

His frustration with government has remained a constant. Still, Currie gives government leaders the same begrudging respect that they give him.

"I can tell you that Portland is the national model," Currie said. "But that only shows how bad off the rest of the country really is. . . . We have great programs, but they can't even begin to address the large numbers of people who are seeking services."

Currie -- for a while, at least -- will be leaving both the political fights and his tight-knit family. His mother, Judith Bright, and younger twin sisters, Heather Currie Medders and Jennifer Currie Bertrand, and their families live in the Portland area. He talks to or sees all of them weekly, sometimes daily.

"When he leaves for Missouri this will be the first time he's lived away from his family," Smith said. "It's going to be an interesting change for him to be slightly out of reach of his relatives."

Whatever awaits Currie in St. Louis and at seminary, the unfinished work he leaves here won't disappear from his rearview mirror.

"I want to go away and read for a few years and write for a few years and think about these things for a few years," Currie said, "and then come back to the

community and resume the type of work that I've been doing in maybe a little bit of a different way."

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