

Local Spotlight: Getting to Know **Cass Sinclair**

## “Celebrating Ashland’s Culture of Caring” at the OHRA Center

By **Jordan Pease** - October 2022 Issue of **Locals Guide Magazine**- Ashland, Oregon



**Cass Sinclair** has been part of the Ashland community for nearly 30 years. Recently, she was promoted to Executive Director of **OHRA (Options for Helping Residents of Ashland)**, a “low-barrier” Residential Shelter and Resource Center for under-served Ashland residents. In September 2021, OHRA relocated to the former Super 8 Motel property on Ashland Street near I-5 exit 14. The property is still under renovation, and Cass and her team continue to expand their services while managing the construction project.

**Thank you for sharing about yourself and your work with OHRA here, Cass. Please tell your “how I got to Ashland” story?** I first visited Ashland in 1991 when I came to see the plays at OSF and to hike Mt. Ashland and raft the Rogue River. I fell in love! Two years later, I moved to Ashland. The rest is history! Ashland is where my two boys were born and raised.

**Please explain the short version of how OHRA came to be?** OHRA began in 2010 as group of concerned Ashland community members who wanted to help our under-served population, and a Board of Directors was formed in 2012. Then in February 2014, the **OHRA Resource Center** was opened. When I came onboard in October 2019, we had five staff members and a budget of \$250K per year. A group of volunteers were solely operating the **Laundry and Shower Trailer**. Volunteers stayed the night at the **Winter Shelter** every night, and faith-based organizations were providing meals every night at the winter shelter. Volunteers helped run the Resource Center.

When the **COVID Pandemic** hit in March 2020, we lost all our volunteers. At the same time, we started to pass through federal funding to help our community members that were losing their jobs due to COVID. We started hiring more Resource Navigators to help with the flood of people seeking rental and utility assistance. We were also helping families to get newly housed. We kept our doors open at the Resource Center and were seeing 80-90 people a day when COVID hit. We also started to look for a permanent shelter and Resource Center home. More to follow on that!

**What are the services that OHRA provides now?** Currently, our three main programs are:

**The OHRA Resource Center:** We serve anyone who walks through our doors. We are open 9am-2pm Monday through Friday. We help our community members, living at or below poverty stay housed, and we help people get housed. We work to get people their birth certificates, driver’s license, health insurance, Section 8 Housing Vouchers, VA Services, SSDI Benefits. And much more. We also get folks connected to other programs and services in the valley. We serve as a primary mailing address for people experiencing homelessness.

**The OHRA Emergency Shelter:** OHRA operates a low-barrier, 24/7/365 shelter. We have 52 shelter rooms. We work alongside our guests to help them remove barriers and to get them permanently housed.

When we are done renovating our building with an elevator, a brand-new fire suppression system, and more ADA accessible rooms and bathrooms, we will also be providing space for **La Clinica Health Center** who will provide behavioral health and medical health services to community members accessing our services through the resource center, and to guests staying in our shelter. Furthermore, we are providing space for community

partners to come into The OHRA Center on a rotating basis to get folks connected to the programs and services provided in our community. The opportunities are endless as we continue to broaden our social services hub.

**The OHRA Laundry and Shower Trailer:** Our shower trailer operates twice weekly and provides about 40 showers per week to folks experiencing homelessness.

**Please explain what “Resource Navigation” is, and what distinguishes OHRA’s approach to homelessness?** Underlying all OHRA services are Resource Navigators; professionals who work with guests to identify and resolve barriers to stability so that the guest can move forward. The core components of our approach are delivering trauma-informed services, building relationships of trust and respect, providing unlimited appointments, evoking from the guest what *they* would like to work on, *not* what *we* would like them to work on. We come alongside the people we serve.



**What is Project Turnkey, and can you explain how OHRA partnered with them to renovate the new Center?** In 2020, the **Oregon Legislature** created **Project Turnkey** in response to the state’s homeless crises [for the purpose of acquiring motels/hotels for use as safe shelter for people experiencing homelessness, at-risk of homelessness, or displaced by wildfires.] OHRA received a capital grant to pay for the purchase of the former Super 8 Motel property on Ashland Street to serve as a shelter and resource center, serving our community. The OHRA Center is a human service hub offering emergency shelter and services to any unhoused, housing threatened, or other economically stressed families and individuals of **Jackson County**.

**What are the qualities of Ashland that you appreciate most?** I appreciate the large numbers of community-minded people here. Ashland is full of folks who seek all sorts of ways to take care of our under-served community members. From OHRA’s caring staff members, to our amazing OHRA board who volunteer their time, to the volunteers who serve our entire community, and to our donors and everyone who supports the work at OHRA- we are so fortunate to have the culture of caring in our community.

**What advice do you have for community residents who are concerned about the homelessness problem? How can we best help?** I always suggest to those who want to learn more to visit the **National Alliance to End Homelessness** website and avail themselves to the causes for, and the solutions to end homelessness. Then, get involved through volunteerism or financial support of organizations in your community who are working on these solutions. Two major responses to end homelessness are emergency shelter for our most vulnerable community members, and navigation (case work) to help them remove those and barriers to getting housed. It takes all of us!

**What’s a thing people would never guess about you?** Along with one other person, I sailed in a 34’ sailboat from **Anacortes, WA**, down the Pacific Coast through Oregon and California, down around the tip of **Baja, Mexico**, and then up into the **Sea of Cortez**. After sheer terror at some points, and lots of seasickness at other times, I got my sea legs, and I became a sailor.

**Please tell a story about a life-changing incident, or can you recall a life-changing epiphany?** I had the most amazing mother! She was my person! To be loved by her was a gift! She passed unexpectedly. I was devastated. It was soon after her death that my young self truly understood that I too would not be getting

out of this life alive. This was life changing for me. Since then, I've sought to love and cherish my family, my friends, my colleagues, my community, and my own life more deeply.

**Please share about a public figure or personal mentor who's inspired you?** Since I was 10 years old, [African American poet and civil rights activist] **Maya Angelou** has been and remains my hero.

**What's a favorite book or movie that you like and why?** "I know Why the Caged Bird Sings" by Maya Angelou. Racism, Survival, and Resilience.

**Have you ever had any paranormal experiences?** There was a night, years ago, when I watched a hovering craft in the sky over Ashland. It was like nothing I've ever seen before or knew existed. I don't know if it was paranormal, but it was certainly abnormal!

**Please fill-in-the-blank; "I'm having the time of my life when I'm [blank]."** With my family, kids, or friends- or any combination thereof, on any beach!

**What advice do you have for the young people in our community?** You never know where you'll meet your teachers. We all want to feel acknowledged, heard, and seen. Leave space in your life to notice when you have an opportunity in front of you to meet a teacher or acknowledge, hear, and see another person's story or point of view.

Learn more about OHRA: [www.HelpingAshland.org](http://www.HelpingAshland.org)

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