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The Oregonian

Peace and charity, one room at a time

Thursday, April 03, 2008

The Oregonian

John Brown says the seed of Rooms for Peace was planted in 1970.

Today, that seed finally is hitting the ground.

Back in 1970, John was "hitchhiking around Europe with a girlfriend. We were picked up by a family in Portugal, and they gave us a place to stay and entertained us."

When it was time for John and his girlfriend to leave, "We were wondering how we could repay them. They said, 'When you get home and get established, you give strangers a place to stay.' "

John did that a few times, informally.

Then, in 2004, John went to a conference in Berkeley. "I didn't want to stay in a hotel," so he networked and found "a woman in Oakland who had a spare room, who was happy to let me stay there. I said to her, 'I'll contribute money to something that's important to you.' "

She agreed. "It was a wonderful experience," John says.

In 2005, on a trip to Vermont to visit his daughter at college, John networked and found a college employee willing to open his home. "I got a connection to the school I wouldn't have had any other way."

On his flight home to Portland, "all the basics" of Rooms for Peace "just showed up on my notebook."

He's been working on a plan ever since, for a nonprofit organization that will hook up travelers and hosts willing to open their homes. Travelers will pay a fee for the lodging; a percentage will go to a charity of the host's choice, a percentage will go to a charity of the traveler's choice, and a smaller percentage will go to Rooms for Peace, to keep the service going.

The donations won't go to just any group. Charities will be screened, explains Rooms for Peace board member Jae Allen.

But money won't just be going to anti-war organizations.

"The 'peace' we're speaking of goes far beyond merely a political idea that conjures images of demonstration marches and anti-war activism," Jae says. "It includes protecting the environment, supporting youth, having shelters for battered spouses."

The organization is a nonprofit, on the verge of getting its 501(c)(3) designation. Its Web page is up, at www.roomsforpeace.org. By this summer, John says, Rooms for Peace should be up and running. Right now he and board members are focusing their efforts on the Portland area, looking for organizations to include on the list of charities to receive funds.

And they're looking for hosts.

"We're only asking people to do this four nights out of the year," John says. "We're not saying, 'Turn your place into a charitable bed and breakfast.'

"It's just a form of hospitality."

Hosts won't handle money; all payments will be made to Rooms for Peace.

Hosts will designate a range of fees for their guest facilities.

"It might be \$25 to \$50," John says, or it might be more. "It depends on the area and what the room has. It might be a suite with a kitchenette and hot tub and a view of Mount Adams and Mount Hood. That would cost more than somebody's couch."

Rooms for Peace will connect travelers and hosts, who then will "make contact with each other, to see if things will work out," John says. They'll discuss whether rooms are nonsmoking, if pets are allowed, if the locations are close to bus lines. Things like that.

As the kickoff approaches, and the board of directors plans its first and what it hopes will be its only fundraiser -- a metaphorical barn raising, April 27 -- John is "thrilled and anxious."

He says it's like waiting for a baby to be born. "Will it work out? Will all the toes be there?"

Word has spread in the last year, and already he's had inquiries from people as far away as Europe. "I've realized this will be global, quickly," he says.

Wherever he travels, John asks groups of people if they'd be interested in traveling in this way, or in hosting others. He says he always gets enthusiastic response.

"A lot of times people will say, 'What a brilliant idea.' I say, 'At this stage, it's just a clever idea. When we redirect a million dollars to the organizations that support our values, then I'll be willing to say there was brilliance in it, but not because of me . . . because of lots of people working to make it happen.'"

At this point they're all volunteers, but John hopes that soon there will be offices, computers and staff. That's what the "barn raising" will be for.

In the long run, John hopes many travelers and hosts "will connect, and that stereotypes will dissolve, as they recognize there are a lot of people who have hearts like ours. We don't have to be like-minded, we don't have to think the same, but we feel the same."

John says nearly everyone knows people who say, "When I make my fortune, I'll make a difference.'

"I'm more excited about the idea of grass-roots philanthropy. Together each of us doing something small can really make a difference. That's what this is all about."

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