

Armed With a Picture From God, This Woman Is Taking Back Portland From Principalities

Oregon ranks as the No. 1 state for homeless children and youth. But entrepreneur and minister Rhona Mahl is determined to equip those who come into her coffee and bike shop with the spiritual and practical resources necessary to break generational curses and cycles of poverty.

Named Braking Cycles, Mahl's shop is a piece of the kingdom located in Portland, Oregon. Mahl is the executive director of Transitional Youth and the founder of Braking Cycles. Transitional Youth, the umbrella organization over Braking Cycles, provides four homes for homeless youth where mentors teach them their spiritual value, as well as equip them with practical tips for parenting, vocational and educational training. At Braking Cycles, Mahl's team offers apprenticeship programs as well as tangible job skills and real-world knowledge that equip youth to be self-sufficient. Through Transitional Youth and Braking Cycles, thousands of people have been helped. That help is deeply needed, given the dark spiritual atmosphere around the city.

"We see a lot of demonized and demon-possessed young people and older people," Mahl says. "The truth is, the longer we give into the enemy's plans and tactics, the deeper those ruts of demon possession and control go. We definitely do see a lot of witchcraft. There's a spirit of arrogance in the air here. And we definitely have to be equipped and prayed up. We know that the strongholds we're dealing with are much bigger and more prominent than just the basic need of hunger."

Mahl says she receives prophetic words from the Lord about how He's moving against Portland's principalities. Her most recent vision was a graphic, deeply unpleasant one of how the enemy has been welcomed into the city and taken over territory.

"The Lord gave me a picture of our city," Mahl says. "It was a vivid and graphic picture of a boil-like blister forming a dome over the city of Portland. The blister was infected. It was murky, dark and diseased. Like [I would say about] any blister, I was just saying, 'Lord, how on earth can we penetrate the hearts of these young people with the gospel if we're living under such a cloud of disease like that?'

The Lord then showed her the boil had to be lanced.

"He showed me the sterile needle was the Word of God that is sharper than any two-edged sword, able to pierce between bone and marrow, soul and spirit," Mahl says. "So while that boil or blister may be over our city, we can stand in this place of darkness and disease, and we can be that sword. We can be the conduit of the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God able to pierce through that darkness."

Braking Cycles is one such tool that God is using to fight the darkness and hopelessness gripping Mahl's city.

The Need

Homeless youth flock to Portland. According to a 2018 WalletHub report that examined all 50 states and the nation's capital, Oregon tied with Nevada, California and Washington, D.C., for the highest population of homeless children and youth. The same report ranked the state No. 12 for the most underprivileged children, which alarmed state leadership as they contemplated how to solve the growing crisis.

In August, Kate Kondayen, a governor's spokeswoman, told the *Portland Tribune* they were taking the problem seriously.

“Oregon’s families need support to stay safely together, and the governor is working to bring more housing under development in the state pipeline as well as focusing on root causes that drive children into foster care, such as addiction treatment and recovery, access to comprehensive health care and domestic violence,” Kondayen said. “The governor is also supporting the Department of Human Services Child Welfare division as they work on right-sizing the foster care system.”

In 2018, an 85-page report by state auditors found that Oregon’s child welfare program is “inconsistent, disorganized and high risk for the children it serves.” Furthermore, the study found the government’s response to the crisis has been “slow, decisive and inadequate” at addressing the problems. While secular leaders scramble to find solutions, Mahl says she knows the answer is spiritual.

“Our young people in the city are caught in cycles of destruction through sex trafficking, drug use and hopelessness,” she says. “We’re sending a message that cycles can be broken through establishing and building healthy relationship. The truth is these kids come from all over the country. We hear all the time about youth that are given a one-way ticket to Portland, because they’ve heard that the services here for homeless youth are so robust.”

Mahl says the existing government programs meet the youths’ basic needs, like food and shelter, and may even provide a community by way of street family. Though these services may sound like an easy answer to Oregon’s problems, Mahl says they could actually be feeding into the enemy’s plan.

“We have to take a step back, look at the bigger picture and realize that there are powers, principalities and strongholds that are keeping systems and children in place, right in the enemy’s web,” Mahl says. “Robust services aren’t the answer. Jesus is the answer. If all we ever do is meet that basic need, giving a kid a meal or a sleeping bag, we are

contributing sometimes to the enemy's plan to keep them stuck there. It's so important to take a step back and realize that the enemy is at work in our systems."

The Answer

So if government systems can't solve the problem, what can? Through Transitional Youth and Breaking Cycles, Mahl believes she's developed a godly method of rehabilitating homeless youth.

"Our mission is really to reach these kids where they're at, and show them that their identity and their name is not on the streets of Portland, but it's in God's family," she says. "We speak truth and value over their lives so that they can enter a healthy community."

Mahl knows firsthand how both the problem and the answer work. She was once one of those homeless youth. At 12, she started using drugs. By 13, she was on the streets. At 14, she was pregnant, scared and high. Mahl remembers walking the streets of Portland when the voice of the Lord spoke to her. She sobered up in an instant.

"I think of it a lot like the Saul-to-Paul Damascus Road experience," Mahl says. "I heard the Lord say, 'This baby isn't going anywhere.' I didn't know where those words came from. I just know that they hit me like a ton of bricks. I could not ignore the fact anymore that I had a child growing inside of me. God knew exactly what I needed to hear. At that moment, I was instantly sober and instantly in my right mind. I knew that I needed to get off the streets as fast as possible to protect this baby."

When her daughter was born, she made a promise to herself: As soon as she was able, she would return to the streets to help kids just like her. Now, she's asking other believers to consider the "least of these" and rethink how they interact with homeless people.

"We have to ask the hard questions," Mahl says. "We have to have a completely different conversation."

Mahl says her ministry was the result of prayer and cultural trends intersecting to most effectively reach her city.

"I would start with prayer and ask, 'Lord, what would you have me do?'" Mahl says. "One of the reasons God called me to start a coffee and bike shop as a ministry is because coffee and bikes are celebrated cultures and venues in Portland. This is what we hold in our hand."

"One of the Scriptures the Lord put on my heart is the story of Moses, how God called Moses to set a nation free. And He said to Moses, 'What do you hold in your hand?', and Moses held a simple, humble shepherd's staff, and He used that shepherd's staff to set a nation free. It was the tool he had in his hand at that time. Coffee and bikes are like the shepherd's staff to set a nation of young people free."

In the same way, Mahl says believers in every city have a responsibility to use whatever is at hand to make a difference.

"I would ask, 'What do you hold in your hand in your city, in your community? What is your passion? What is your talent? What's your skill set?' Ask God, 'How can I use this tool that is in my hand right now as a conduit to set the nation of my sphere of influence free?'"

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