



## Living in the shadows

*Nikki Pons lives out of her car, struggles every day, but still takes time out to help others*

Photo 1 of 5 | [Zoom Photo +](#)



Nikki Pons, 42, takes a break from the crowd inside Central Point's Calvary Temple warming station in January. Despite graduating with a bachelor's degree in sociology from Southern Oregon University, Pons has found herself without a job and no place to live.

Bob Pennell

February 14, 2010

he phone has been ringing all day at Help Now! in Medford, where Nikki Pons, a petite, 42-year-old woman with a warm smile, works as a volunteer. On this stark January afternoon, when the temperature is just above freezing outside, a grandmother calls the nonprofit advocacy group frantic for help: Her family is being evicted from a mobile home park because there are too many people in one trailer.

"The grandmother owns the trailer and the landlord of the park is saying this young couple and their 8-month-old baby can't stay there," Pons says, a look of recognition and sadness washing over her face.

"So they're going to be out on the street."

Pons knows too well what that means. Though she graduated from Southern Oregon University with a bachelor's degree in sociology in 2008, Pons lives out of a 1996 Pontiac Bonneville.

### Women without a home

More women are joining the ranks of the homeless as the recession deepens, jobs become scarce and families lose their homes. ACCESS Inc., which provides emergency food, housing and other services for low-income Jackson County residents, reports that women among the homeless have risen from 26 percent last year to 43 percent now. The percentage of homeless families has increased even more dramatically, from 3 percent last year to 43 percent now.

Pons has looked for jobs in her field, but the cash-strapped social-service agencies aren't hiring, she says. She worked at a pizza parlor for a time, but the business closed. A stint at a coffeehouse ended when she lost the apartment she had struggled to keep.

"It's hard to get called in and be reliable when you can't shower, and they can't get a hold of you because you couldn't afford cell phone minutes," Pons says.

She volunteers at Help Now! on Central Avenue to put her schooling to good use.

"I pretty much discovered I could get lousy work that would pay OK — and I get to resent I can't use my schooling — or I can get work I love and not get paid," Pons says.

A weekly unemployment benefit of \$115 from her pizza parlor job is all she has to buy food, gas, cell phone minutes and dog food for her 6-month-old retriever-rottweiler mix, Elsha.

### Putting others first

Pons flips through her binder of resources, looking for ways to help the young couple and their baby. Though Pons has her own troubles, she doesn't share them with clients.

"They were dealing with their own stuff and they were absolutely terrified," she says. "Talking about your problems minimizes what they're going through."

Larry Kahn, who founded Help Now! six years ago, says Pons handles some of the agency's toughest cases.

"She has not once asked for help," he says. "She knows what we do better than anyone, but she focuses on helping others."

Pons says she'd like to travel to Portland to see Dignity Village, a camp for the homeless, and learn whether such a resource could be duplicated in the Rogue Valley.

But with expired tags and limited gas money, Pons must stay put. When her shift at Help Now! ends at 4 p.m., she heads to the Pontiac to give Elsha a walk downtown. "This dog has kept me from going suicidal," she says.

They walk for more than an hour in 36-degree weather. As Elsha lunges ahead, Pons corrects her, then stoops to pluck a half-smoked cigarette from the sidewalk.

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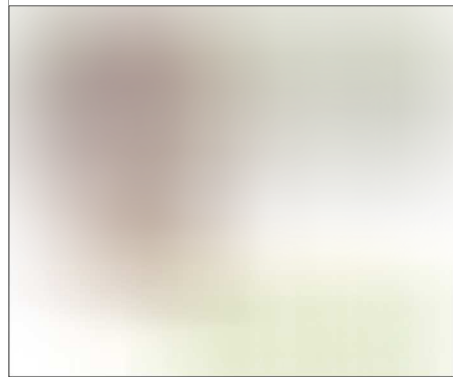
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