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Portland Nonprofit Empowers Homeless Youth with Community and Hope

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In the heart of Old Town Portland, a small nonprofit is quietly changing lives. p:ear, an organization devoted to helping young people experiencing homelessness, offers more than food and shelter; it provides belonging, purpose, and the chance to dream again.

At p:ear, the mission is simple but powerful: build trusting relationships so youth ages 15 to 25 can see themselves as capable of more than surviving. Program Director Tony Camacho Martinez has seen firsthand how this approach makes a difference.

“We use education, art, wilderness recreation, and workforce development to deepen our connections with the youth,” he explained. Four days a week, young people can come into p:ear’s welcoming community space for breakfast, lunch, and a safe place to rest and connect.

Each day is full of opportunities. One morning might start with a warm meal and a chat with volunteers. Later, youth can join workshops ranging from art classes to boxing lessons or receive free medical care from visiting nurse practitioners and chiropractors. These simple acts create stability in lives too often marked by chaos.

Volunteers are at the heart of P:ear’s work. Jennifer Black, who began volunteering after retiring, spends her mornings preparing meals in the kitchen. Though she never considered herself much of a cook at home, she finds deep satisfaction in feeding young people who rarely have enough to eat.

“When I first started, I was a little nervous,” Black admitted. “But the youth are polite, grateful, and kind. They thank us every day.”

Beyond meals, volunteers help with everything from cleaning and organizing to leading outdoor adventures. Whether it’s rock climbing, hiking, or running with the p:ear running club, these experiences build confidence and show youth a world beyond survival.

p:ear also operates a bike shop and a community garden in partnership with other local groups. These projects offer hands-on training and a sense of ownership, critical steps toward independence.

The real impact of p:ear is not just in providing services, but in offering a sense of worth. When youth see that adults care, show up consistently, and treat them as full human beings, something shifts. They begin to believe they deserve stability and have the power to shape their future.

“What that gives is agency,” Camacho Martinez said. “It tells them they can do whatever they want, and there’s a community here that wants that for them.”

Through mentorship, compassion, and simple acts of kindness, p:ear is proving that homelessness can be just one chapter, not the end of the story.

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