

From the Puget Sound Business Journal:

<https://www.bizjournals.com/seattle/news/2020/07/03/psbj-interview-sharon-lee.html>

Big ideas come in tiny houses: Sharon Lee pushes for more affordable housing

Jul 3, 2020, 11:30am PDT

Sharon Lee sometimes won't take no for an answer.

It was something she learned from Bob Santos, the late minority-rights activist, and it continues to fuel her work leading the Low Income Housing Institute, which she co-founded. For 29 years she has spearheaded the launch of some controversial projects, including Urban Rest Steps.

They're where homeless people can shower and do laundry, and initially they were opposed by most everyone.

Today there are three of them — in downtown, Ballard and the University District.

Santos, who was known as Uncle Bob, fought to preserve the Chinatown International District, which is where LIHI recently moved into its new headquarters building in Little Saigon. The office is at the base of the six-story, 69-unit apartment building named An Lac, which means tranquility in Vietnamese.

LIHI and faith leaders are calling on the city to build 1,000 apartment units in the Central Area, where rising rents have displaced a large number of people, many of them African Americans. Some people have told Lee to give it up — the area already has been gentrified.



LIHI

Sharon Lee, executive director of the Low Income Housing Institute

“I’m saying, no, we should be able to build affordable housing and bring people displaced back into the Central Area, (and) keep people at risk of losing their homes there,” she said.

In a May interview she talked about her work leading the nonprofit, which has built a portfolio of over 2,300 units of low-cost housing plus an expanding network of 12 tiny home villages.

When did you get interested in affordable housing? When I was in Hong Kong, I went to a private school where some of my classmates were really poor. It was unbelievable how poor they were. Outside the school homeless people begged for money and food. So at a very young age I became very conscious of class differences.

How did you end up in Hong Kong? My parents were not getting along, so when I was 3 my mother took us back to Hong Kong to live with her parents for about four years before we moved back to Philadelphia.

What was life like in Hong Kong? My family was very well off and we had servants. We owned an apartment building and my grandfather was the manager of a chain of department stores.

What brought you to Seattle? I was working in Boston and there wasn’t much opportunity. My sister was working in this beautiful place – Friday Harbor. I came for a visit and decided to move out. That was about 1983. My first job was with the city of Seattle.

One thing LIHI is known for is tiny house villages. How did they come to be? I got appointed to a mayor’s task force on tent cities, or sanctioned encampments. One solution we put forward was houses instead of tents. I met with then city planning director Diane Sugimura and asked what we could do. She said, “Sharon, just build them under 120 square feet. They won’t be considered dwelling units and you won’t have to meet building codes.” The light bulb went off.

Why do you think they’re successful? We have great success moving people from a tiny house into long-term housing, and it’s really important today with Covid-19. We have over 400 tiny houses. We just got everybody tested for the virus and everyone

is testing negative. They're not sleeping in shelters with other people so they're less likely, I think, to catch infectious diseases.

Why aren't more cities doing this? We took the mayor of San Jose, California, on a tour of the Lake Union Village at the end of last year and he recently announced the city would spend \$17 million on tiny homes.

How hard was it to start the Urban Rest Stop program? It took a long time to find the site for the first one, and initially we proposed the Glen Hotel on Third Avenue in the heart of downtown. The Downtown Seattle Association (DSA) and some neighbors took the city and LIHI to court to try to stop us. (Then-mayor) Norm Rice proposed a city property where the Municipal Court building is today up a steep hill. We said, no, no one is going to drag their laundry up that hill. Ultimately we struck a deal with the city and agreed to not put it in the heart of downtown but at Ninth and Virginia at the base of one of our apartment buildings. By the end, we even had DSA contribute capital to the project.

What is the state of homelessness here? We're so far behind it's embarrassing. When I was in college in Philadelphia they had a great ordinance that said if landlords have any housing code violations – even one – they cannot raise rent and cannot evict you. It was only a couple years ago that the city council put something like that together for Seattle.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Sharon Lee

Title: Executive director of the Low Income Housing Institute

Founded: 1991

Previous: Various positions with the city of Seattle, Fremont Public Association (now Solid Ground)

Family: Long-time partner Steve Rowland, an Evergreen State College faculty member; son, Chris Lee, who works in digital marketing

Neighborhood: Leschi

Education: bachelor's in urban studies, University of Pennsylvania; master's in architecture and city planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Fun fact: Her son Chris donated a tiny house as a Mother's Day gift. Each costs \$2,500. "I later got a call from a staff member who said your son donated again. I called to thank him and ask what was going on. He said, 'I just gave you my stimulus check.'"

On working from home

Like many others, Sharon Lee is frustrated with working from home.

"I've been like really cooped up with this stay-at-home order, and one thing I really, really miss is water exercise at the Seattle pools," said Lee, who prior to shutdown regularly attended classes at pools across the city.

To cope, she's been "cooking up a storm" and baking. "I'm hunting for recipes and trying new stuff."

Marc Stiles

Staff Writer

Puget Sound Business Journal

