

# WORD ON **1**davis street.

Street Roots practices what it preaches —  
spreading advocacy on the streets of Portland  
while putting money in people's pockets.

written by **REINA HARWOOD**  
captured by **JULIA PAGE**



*After helping all morning with greetings and passing out food and supplies to vendors, Lee Vaughn stands outside of Street Roots headquarters with the latest issue.*

# I

In the center of northwest Portland's Old Chinatown, the Street Roots newsroom starts to perk up. Lee Vaughn lifts herself up from her wheelchair as a batch of nearly 5,000 newspapers is dropped off at the doorstep of the Street Roots building. She carries a stack to the office desks inside, the still-wet ink staining her hands.

Vaughn sets out a plate of freshly baked cookies, brews a pot of coffee and reads this week's front-page headline. A group of 20 vendors begins to line up outside — just in time for the Wednesday morning “print day” rush. Anxiously waiting to restock their backpacks with this week's edition, they're ready to start selling papers on the streets of Portland. As they wait, the smell of rain, ink and burnt cigarettes floods the sidewalk.

Street Roots is Portland's award-winning weekly street newspaper, known primarily for its reporting on the city's social and environmental justice issues. Each year, the organization hires over 800 people who are experiencing homelessness as vendors to sell the newspaper.

“Welcome in,” says Vaughn, who was once a vendor but now volunteers at the front desk. Vaughn's smile is the first thing vendors see when they enter the Street Roots building. Most days, Vaughn's Pomeranian, Natasha, follows her around the office, hopping on three legs or sitting on Vaughn's lap in her wheelchair.

Vaughn prefers to stay in her wheelchair most of the time. She worries about having a seizure, a side effect of the severe back injuries she suffers from. When Vaughn experienced her first seizure seven years ago, Natasha was on guard to alert her — and she has been ever since. The daily commute as a vendor became too much for Vaughn to handle in her chair, so she is now working her way up to a paid office position.


Of many turning points in Vaughn's life, finding Natasha and Street Roots are among the most influential. “In 1997 I took a 22 and I shot myself in the head because of depression. I've got a bullet lodged behind my eye. My depression just got out of control. I battle with it every day,” she says. “But [Street Roots] is helping. This is helping a lot.”

Among the people she greets is Scott Mattson and his dog, Indica.

“I'm a happy millionaire!” Mattson shouts after exchanging a wrinkled \$10 bill for a stack of 40 papers. Mattson and Indica leave the building, fueled by the



Gary Barker, far right, the Lead Ambassador for Street Roots, stands outside to chat with the vendors as they wait to purchase newspapers and check their mail.



**Gary Barker** *has been with Street Roots since 2019. He is the leader of the organization's Mobile Journalism Initiative, which focuses on people experiencing homelessness producing media. "It's about giving back to where I came from," said Barker. "Even being home, I'll always be a street person."*

energy that comes with working at Street Roots.

This routine repeats itself every Wednesday morning, as it has for the past 22 years.

In many ways, Street Roots operates just like your typical alternative city weekly newspaper; it's filled with local journalism and in-depth reporting. However, the unique organizational structure of Street Roots allows it to go beyond the coverage of homelessness issues. The separate non-profit advocacy side of Street Roots provides people experiencing homelessness with a way to earn a stable income.

A vendor employed at Street Roots will complete an orientation process and begin with 10 complimentary papers to sell. Moving forward, each vendor will pay 25 cents per paper, selling them to customers in Portland neighborhoods for \$1, pocketing 75 cents and tips in profit.

Street Roots co-founder Bryan Pollard previously worked as a photojournalist at Portland's Burnside Cadillac. In 1999, he became editor and transformed the Burnside Cadillac into today's Street Roots. The paper has always focused on housing issues affecting Oregonians, but its coverage of social and political issues has increased over the years.

"We became a platform for those voices and started showing the human side of the issues," says Pollard. "We made sure people understood there was a human toll to have such wealth inequality and profound poverty right in front of the faces of everyone who thought Portland was this shiny beacon of liberalism."

Gary Barker is proof of the Street Roots mission. Barker, 62, sold newspapers for Street Roots when he was homeless. He was eventually promoted to a full-time position as one of the paper's lead ambassadors. He now does outreach work and coaches new vendors.

"[Street Roots] provides opportunities to individuals who are willing to take the chance," he says. "They gave me stability."

Prior to his acceptance into the Street Roots Ambassador Program, Barker battled a crystal meth addiction. Sober for over a year now, he says he wouldn't

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be where he is today — living in an apartment and owning a car — without the support of his family at Street Roots and his newspaper clientele.

Barker says that the organization builds a bridge through journalism, allowing unhoused individuals to feel understood and human again. As a vendor, Barker says he would often sell to the same Portland clients each week. Some would pay up to \$40 for a single newspaper or supply him with gift cards. His clientele empowered him to get back on his feet.

“I like the fact that they believed in me. It helped me build my confidence up for me to believe in myself,” Barker says. “Street Roots gave me a purpose. They gave me some value in my life. Being homeless was only a condition; it ain’t me.”

Street Roots reports on social justice issues, legislative decisions, local movements and more. Outside of the news operation, Street Roots advocates against the criminalization of homelessness. “It seeks to be a voice for the voiceless,” says Emily Green, Street Roots’ managing editor. “I’m so grateful every day that I get to do this work.”

Although a nonprofit newspaper sold by people experiencing homelessness is far from traditional, the articles are often written by professional journalists, community organizations and private citizens and are edited by an experienced newsroom staff.

Street Roots’ journalism and advocacy tend to overlap when the editorial board publishes

editorials. These pieces will often advocate for different causes. Case in point: Last April, Street Roots published an editorial pushing for the transformation of empty hotel and motel rooms into long-term affordable housing. In the editorial, Street Roots’ editors said it was a necessary step in addressing the housing crisis in Portland. At the time, 87% of Portland’s 15,800 hotel rooms were empty due to the pandemic. The editorial requested that Oregon Gov. Kate Brown take action to protect the unhoused community.

“There’s such a disconnect between policy-making, politicians and people on the streets. It’s hard to bridge that,” Street Roots Executive Director Kaia Sand says.

Ultimately, more than 409 hotel and motel rooms were reserved for unhoused people seeking affordable shelter. Further, the Oregon State Legislature Emergency Board decided to give private groups \$65 million of general funds to purchase financially struggling motels around the state.

In addition to news and opinion, Street Roots publishes poetry written by vendors. One former vendor who contributes her work is Tina Drake. Drake found Street Roots around 2011 and underwent her gender transition in the years that followed. After selling newspapers for eight years, she became a paid Street Roots staff member.

Last year, Drake was diagnosed with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). She was scared of becoming fatally ill from a weak immune system

*Tara, a Street Roots vendor, grabs a handful of newspapers. Workers for Street Roots can also receive toiletries, clothing, snacks and a hot cup of coffee.*





*Fun decorations and signs like this one adorn the walls and desks throughout each room of the Street Roots headquarters.*

and from common sicknesses like the cold. This fear manifested itself. “I got very depressed, to the point of almost ending my life,” she says. “I was like, if I got this, then why should I even go on?”

Street Roots staff members became Drake’s family and helped her find housing. They also helped assure Drake that she could handle her diagnosis.

“The people I know here helped me understand that it’s not a death sentence. It changed my outlook and saved my life,” she says. “I wouldn’t be who I am or where I am today without Street Roots.”

After living on and off the streets for over eight years, Drake qualified for housing fewer than four blocks from the Street Roots office.

It’s past noon on this chilly Wednesday in February, and Lee Vaughn is rinsing the coffee pot and putting away leftover toiletries. As she neatly piles extra papers from the day, she is surrounded by the laughter and positive energy that is ever-present in the Street Roots newsroom. Gazing through the window, she sees Gary Barker with a group of vendors chatting outside. She steps out to say hi, with a cigarette hanging between her lips. “You got a lighter?” she asks him. “Of course I do,” he replies and covers the warm flame with his hand.

Vaughn walks back into the office where her wheelchair is parked. She finds Natasha spread out peacefully in the seat. Vaughn picks her up. “Time to go, honey,” she says.

She sits down and takes a deep breath. Putting her beanie on, she rolls out of the Street Roots front doors and looks over her shoulder.

“See you all next week!” she says as she passes the tents set up along Davis Street. 📍