

street roots.org

CELEBRATING
A DECADE OF

Education • Dialogue • Independence

STREET ROOTS TURNS 10!

Read all about it in our
special section inside

Page 7



Women in Portland's sex industry document the world around them in a new photo exhibit

BY REBECCA ROBINSON
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Beer bottles reflecting the sunlight off a bar window. A pair of fixed-gear bikes, chained together to a rack, frayed tape on the handlebars. An old diesel Mercedes, parked in a pile of shriveled fallen leaves. A curvaceous woman in a sheer dress, clutching a pole onstage as she throws her head back.

It may seem easy to pinpoint which one of these images doesn't belong in a thematic photo exhibit. But the pole dancer and the frayed-tape fixies belong together: They are part of a photography project depicting the everyday reality of the women who created the images. The identity of the women behind the cameras is as noteworthy as the photos they take: all 11 photographers are sex workers, and their photos are part of the Visions and Voices Photovoice Project.

Each woman was given a basic 35 mm manual camera and 36 exposures of black-and-white film. Their only instructions: to document their everyday lives and aspirations.

Crystal Tenty, an outreach worker with the Portland Women's Crisis Line and coordinator of the Sex Worker Outreach Coalition (SWOC),

initiated the community-based participatory project with fellow SWOC advocate Moshoula Capous Desyllas both as a way of assessing female sex workers' needs and aspirations and a reaction to her discouragement with last fall's

number one, that the issues are more complicated than people think they are, and number two, here's what the workers themselves are saying. It's a way to promote critical dialogue in the community."

The project is not solely about sparking policy debates, however.

"It's also giving (the women) a space to talk about their lives, their aspirations," Tenty says.

"In July it'll be three years," says the woman who goes by the stage name Lady Purfection about her time in the sex industry.

"When I first got into the industry, it's because I got in trouble with the law. I was dating someone who was all bad for me, and he committed a robbery and blamed everything on me. I went to jail for a crime I did not commit. When I got out, even though I had everything to prove my innocence, there was no way I could get a straight job with a felony on my record.

"So, right after the Fourth of July (2006), I started dancing," Lady Purfection says.

She tried to look for other work, but then one night in December she "was approached by a guy in a club who wanted to take me home. At first I was kinda freaked out, but at the end of

See POSITIVE page 11



Above, Lady Purfection dancing in a shot she arranged for the Visions and Voices Photovoice project. At left, a sky scene taken by Jasmine. The works are part of an exhibit of photos taken by workers in the sex trade.

community "Town Halls" about increased prostitution on 82nd Avenue.

"Everyone was involved in the conversation except sex workers," Tenty says. "Sex workers themselves were mostly excluded, and some of them didn't feel safe coming to community forums. (This project) is a way for us to say,

proof glass, shouting tersely in Hebrew through crackling speakers. They disengage the locking mechanism of the creaking iron turnstiles, the light turns from red to green, the metal bars spin noisily for a quarter revolution, and a single young man squeezes through to be examined, searched and questioned.

It's a way of life here. The mechanics of containment have become completely automated; residents of Nablus wait hours to cross a line scratched in the dust simply to get to the next Palestinian town. They can forget entering Israel; it's 20 miles west and a world away.

Looking in, an imposing red sign warns Israeli civilians to stay out of Nablus under penalty of law. These young Israeli soldiers would seem to be guarding the

demarcation line between two warring societies, "us" and "them" held tenuously at bay in a deadly struggle. Yet this simple equation cannot account for the severed relationships between here and there, nor the flicker of hope still felt by many Israelis that they may one day reunite with old Palestinian friends imprisoned here.

I've opted for the line to the far right, the "humanitarian" line, denoted by a tragically misspelled sign nailed into the girder above us. Its sharp metal corners have been smashed inward to prevent further head injuries, chipping the paint and obscuring its intent. Here, the women, elderly, infirm and non-Arab benefit from a slightly expedited version of the same inhumanity. We don't have a

turnstile to contend with, just two soldiers rifling through our things, checking our ID numbers against their lists, scrutinizing our papers and permissions to leave Nablus.

I've resolved to be patient, to wait like everyone else, to not cause any trouble. I put on a pair of headphones and click my iPod around to a soothing soundtrack, doing my absolute best to ignore the scene unfolding around me. I wait as the morning sun creeps higher above us, raising the temperature of our cage. Forty minutes elapse without a single step forward. The sweat beads on my forehead and falls from underneath my arms, mixing with the strain of the 500 people

See BORDERS, page 5

COMMENTARY

Border crossings: A reflection on a life in containment

BY MARK TURNER
STREET NEWS SERVICE

We line up in deep order, shoulder to shoulder between metal barricades that fail to divide us from one another. Once I've found my place in line, there is no turning back; others have already filed in behind me, pressing urgently forward until we are packed like sardines. Above us, a porous corrugated tin roof with rusted edges is peeling up at the screws toward an abusive sun. We all face forward, but reaching the exit is more of an uncertain possibility than a promise.

All men under the age of 50 are corralled in four dense columns to my left, inching one by one toward dusty X-ray machines. Soldiers sit behind thick, blast-