

A frank discussion about addiction and the streets

This note landed in my e-mail yesterday from a reader:

"It has come to my attention that some of your vendors are alcoholics and drug addicts. If this is true, I'm sorry to hear that. I was under the impression that buying your paper you were helping them. You maybe helping a few but not all and for that reason I will not buy your paper. You really should let

the public know about the people that sell your papers and the problems they have. The money they make is going to there addiction and not helping them."

Having an honest and open discussion

about alcoholism and drug addiction is always hard, specifically in the context of homelessness. It's even harder when an organization creates an alternative economic engine for people living on the streets, like a street newspaper.

Selling Street Roots is hard. There's no question that the individual sleeping under a bridge tonight or in a cheap motel, after selling Street Roots all day, has put in a hard day's work. There's a lot of ways to make money on the streets, and selling Street Roots is an honest one.

Why do people experiencing homelessness and poverty ask for your dollar, specifically Street Roots vendors? The answers are as colorful as the people that walk through our door. The short answer is survival, but there's more.

Some have been slammed by circumstance, the recession or an unforgiving health care system. Some of the new faces of homelessness have been baffled at the idea of having to sell a street newspaper.

One vendor, possibly in his 50s, recently told me he was terrified to sell Street Roots because of the humiliation it would bring.

He had grown up in Portland and worked most of his adult life here. "What if I see people I used to work with or old high school friends? It will kill me on the inside if I see these people," he told me with a cringe. I had no logical answer for the man.

One vendor has been on the streets since he was 14 years old. He's now in his 20s. Last month a Portland Police officer came to Street Roots to talk to me about him.

The police officer told me the vendor had become a nuisance downtown and had apparently said something smarmy to a precinct commander while trying to sell him a paper. We agreed that the vendor was out of line and that Street Roots would talk to him and let him know that's not OK. It's about respect.

What both the officer and I agreed on is that Street Roots shouldn't give up on him. He could still go either way. Would it be a life of hard knocks, or will this young man go on to chase his dreams someday? Time will tell.

Everyone has a different story. Some have been abused both physically and sexually and their adult life has been spent lost at sea – trying to capture some form of dignity they lost as a youth.

One vendor in his 20s has just come back from two tours in Afghanistan and is sleeping on the streets. You can see in his

eyes that he's dealing with things I can neither capture nor describe.

My point is, nothing is black or white on the streets; it's just different shades of grey. So when we talk about addiction and alcoholism, we have to talk about the atmosphere surrounding people's lives.

Are some vendors using or drinking? Yes. Are there reasons that Street Roots or Portlanders should judge this kind of behavior? Depends. Should we seek to get people the help they need? Absolutely.

Street Roots is not a direct service. We believe in helping people help themselves – both through selling the newspaper and socialization (relationships) and by providing individuals with the resources and knowledge that exist for people. (See www.rosecityresource.org)

For some, Street Roots doesn't work. It takes dedication and very hard work to day in and day out be at a specific location to sell the newspaper. We don't allow people to be aggressive and when they are, we work with vendors, business owners and readers to correct the problem.

We ask the vendors to be kind and courteous and treat people like they expect to be treated. We also ask that vendors do not use or drink while selling Street Roots. But we do not attempt to police their behavior once they are done selling the newspaper.

Should we? It's always been a tough question. The answer we've always landed on is no, we shouldn't punish a minority of vendors who may use some money made from the sales of Street Roots for drugs or booze. Here's why:

If a Street Roots vendor chooses to have a beer or smoke a joint after work, for either leisurely or medicinal purposes and is not on the streets because of their addiction, how does that make him or her any different than the average Portlander?

Street Roots is not a charity, but instead a method of work to earn an income. Why is a homeless person that works held to higher standards? We believe it's because people don't have a home. By default, drinking beer or wine is illegal. Does that make someone not worthy of working? We don't think so.

Street Roots vendors and people experiencing homelessness deal with the realities of the streets every day of their lives. Often times that means being exposed to hard drugs like crack cocaine or heroin. It's not hard to find.

At Street Roots, we call it living on both sides of the gun. On one side are the drug dealers and the drugs themselves, and on the other side are inhumane laws targeting homeless folks.

We tend to believe that if a vendor is using after selling Street Roots, it's better than the alternative. They are not stealing from anyone to get their fix and they don't have to hustle anything other than paper to be on the up and up.

It may seem twisted, but we would rather be able to engage a vendor who is using on a day-to-day basis than have that person be shoplifting or breaking into somebody's car to get money for a fix. (Such stories were highlighted in Tye Doudy's award winning column called Addict's Almanac that ran in Street Roots in 2008.)

The person dealing with a hardcore addiction has the opportunity to be

influenced by other vendors and staff in a positive way, while having to maintain the discipline of selling the newspaper.

We also encourage people to deal with their feelings and emotions by expressing themselves through art, poetry and opinion pieces in the paper. We also engage folks on the resources that do exist for help. It's more or less a harm reduction approach.

Do we always get it right? No. One Street Roots vendor and dear friend died of a heroin overdose in our doorway. Did we



Ted Jack, a regular Street Roots seller, has been sober for more than two years. He draws on his own experiences with addiction to help others in the same situation.

STREET ROOTS PHOTO

enable that person or not do enough? Should we have not allowed him to sell papers? It weighs on our minds.

On the flipside, dozens of vendors have gone from using to getting clean and sober while with the newspaper and with the help of our friends in the region.

What we do know is that the vast majority of our vendors use the money made from selling Street Roots to better their lives.

A handful of vendors with either criminal and/or eviction records pool their money every week for hotel rooms. Some use the money to buy organic food they can't find at many services. Some buy bike trailers and adequate camping gear. Others use the money to supplement medical costs or to rent a studio apartment.

So, are we honest with the public at Street Roots about drugs and alcohol? We believe so.

For every person dealing with an addiction on the streets it's a different road. For some people it takes a day to climb up the mountain, for others a week or month or possibly even a lifetime.

At the end of the day, without an adequate health care system, a supportive social network and ultimately a will to live, it's all for naught. Street Roots does its best and can never in good faith turn our backs on those who may be walking a thin red line.

It's a conversation that must continue.

This story was posted on our blog, www.streetroots.wordpress.com. Read people's responses on page 15

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