

CORRECTIONS

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Vet extends
experience to
help othersBY ELIZABETH SCHWARTZ
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Jerry Ratledge arrived back in Portland Sept. 8 and paid \$218 for a six-day week at the Joyce Hotel. It was the only room left at the "inn," he said. He would have preferred something a little smaller and cheaper. His only income right now is \$1,000 per month from the Veterans Administration. I interviewed him outside the Street Roots office the next day. He'd purchased 40 newspapers with hopes of selling them to supplement his VA check.

Jerry had sold Street Roots and bartered work for food at Sisters of the Road from 2007 to 2008. Then he suffered a brain injury when a roommate attacked him. He was sent to a VA hospital in Alabama for a year of recovery. He's doing better now but

VENDOR PROFILE
Jerry Ratledge

is in a wheelchair because he gets dizzy easily. He seems upbeat and eager to get back to helping others even though the "Vietnam-era veteran has other serious health issues.

He loves to "fly his colors" in the form of a hat with a U.S. flag pin and the words "United States Navy." He enlisted late during the Vietnam War with hopes of becoming a helicopter pilot but ended up in a stateside office doing medical services paperwork and answering phones. He remains to this day a strong supporter of the armed forces.

Jerry is offering to help all vets, their dependents and their widows access VA programs and obtain benefits. "Lots of people don't know what's available to them." Jerry says he will personally take people seeking services to the VA facility on the hill to show them how to check their eligibility. All people would need is their Social Security number and a driver's license for identification.

Once eligibility has been determined,

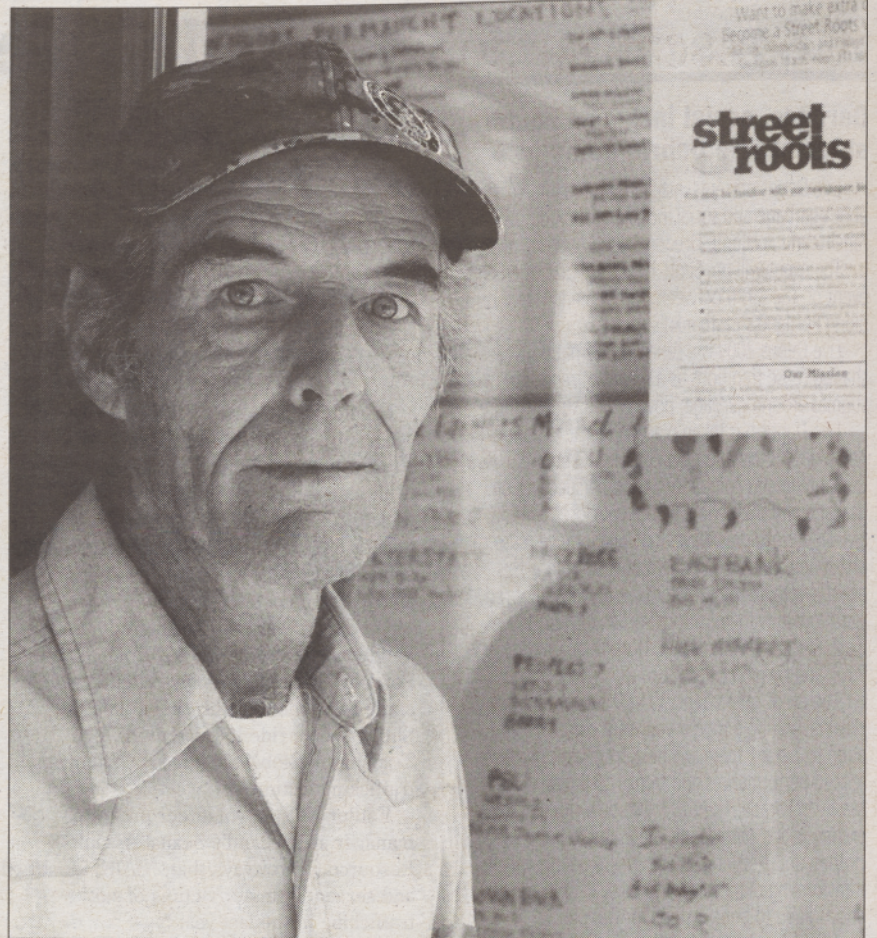


PHOTO BY ELIZABETH SCHWARTZ

Jerry says, he will help people go online and file a claim with the VA. Computer research, he says, is often more effective than talking to someone.

Jerry appears thin and fragile yet excited about getting on with his life. I kept trying to imagine this 66-year-old man sleeping on the streets if his money runs out. I did the math in my head. His entire VA check would not pay for a month at the Joyce.

I turned to the issue of housing during our interview. "There's not much affordable housing in Portland," I said.

"That's for sure!" Jerry said, returning to the subject of how he can help others for free.

"In Alabama I volunteered at a senior center to help people set up e-mail accounts and Web cameras so they can see their grandchildren." He told me he'd like to help people in Portland with those things, too.

We returned to the subject of housing.

"What would your ideal place to live look like?" I asked.

He'd like to find a room in a house with a private, wheelchair-accessible entrance. He could pay up to \$350 per month for the room. After his previous experience, Ratledge says, "I don't want a roommate again."

Jerry mentioned wistfully that some areas have VA-supervised homes for vets with special needs. They are more affordable because they are subsidized, he says.

I studied this frail-looking man. He sits in a Tracer 6 wheelchair given to him by the VA. It's the type of chair once used in sports like the Special Olympics, he says. He seems to have no difficulty traveling the approximate mile from the Joyce Hotel to the Street Roots office, using bike lanes whenever possible.

Jerry tried to reassure me. "I may be disabled, but I'm not helpless." He carries a sturdy cane next to him on his wheelchair.

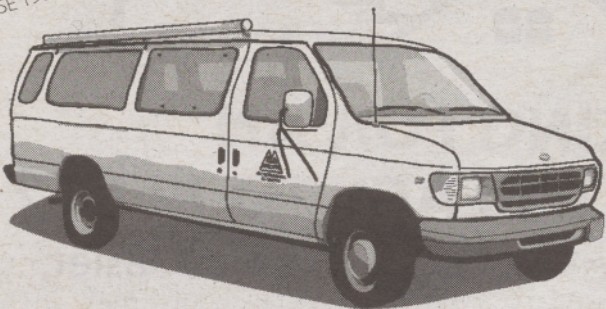
I think he'll be all right.

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