

Writer, artist, vendor; a contemporary classic

STAFF REPORTS

Darren Alexander moved back to Portland in 2003 after two years away. Only it wasn't the same town he left. It was, as he said, a little bit meaner. There had been the murder of a homeless woman on the Steel Bridge. There had been the death of Kendra James at the hands of police, and a feeling that things were simply less friendly than when he had left just two years before.

So Darren works on his own world, the world of an artist and a writer, a volunteer in his community, and an avid reader and student of his surroundings. And, when he's not doing all of the above, you'll find him selling Street Roots at NE 15th and Alberta at the Alberta Co-op.

But the arts are his first love.

"I'm still working on artwork, taking art classes on Tuesday mornings and Thursday nights," Darren says. "I've dabbled in it for years. When I was growing up, I wanted to be an architect, of all things. I drew buildings."

Several of Darren's works were featured in a 2008 exhibit at Warner Pacific College from artists at Julia West House, the homeless day and counseling center where Darren volunteers monitoring the shower schedule and computer use. It's also where he takes his art courses. Some of the work sold, but what he'd really like to do is make money off of his writing — television screenplays for dark comedies and dramas. And he diligently keeps a daily journal.

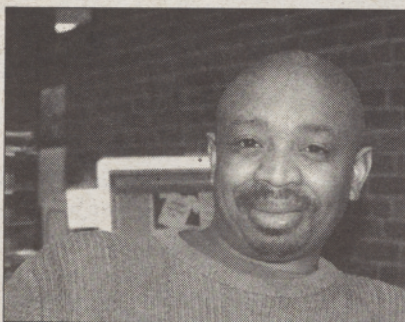
"Most of it is what's going on in my mind, and some it's planning — for the day, for the month; future plans like attending film production classes. I want to work behind the scenes."

This past October, Darren joined a group of volunteers with the Presbyterian Disaster Resistance and traveled to New Orleans to help in the ongoing recovery of the neighborhoods there. He worked with a crew helping replace a roof on a resident's home.

"Five years after the disaster, people are still trying to get things together," says Darren, who used to live in New Orleans and found the return rewarding. "It was starting to look better, it's still a work in progress, obviously."

Times are tough here, too, as Darren has

At right, one of Darren Alexander's print images. Below is one of his works published in Write Around Portland's 2008 anthology.



VENDOR PROFILE Darren Alexander

experienced firsthand. Temporary work and selling the paper help get him by, but there are nights outside as well. And there are always the new faces at Julia West House and Street Roots.

Not long ago, Darren attended the Humanity in Perspective program, run by Oregon Humanities and Reed College. It's a full academic year studying the Greek classics in the fall and contemporary American figures in the spring.

"One of my favorite pieces we did in the fall was read 'Antigone,' plus I watched the play at Reed College's Cerf Amphitheatre. I came away learning that I could do my part to help make things better, and also have a better appreciation of the classics."

Venice on the Scioto — 2010 version

BY DARREN W. ALEXANDER

Rosa holds her accordion high above Bicentennial Park. From where I sit, it looks like it levitates over the Columbia Gas of Ohio building. The accordion looks like one of those cigar boxes I have at home, the one with the Plymouth Indians smoking Cuban cigars.

I stare at her as she plays. Suddenly, I'm in a trance, and in this trance-induced world, I'm on a gondola. Perhaps I'm in Venice, though in the distance, I see the Lincoln-Leveque tower and the Santa Maria replica by the Broad Street Bridge. As we pass the Santa Maria, Rosa sings this beautiful aria, and even though she sings in English, I hear these love songs in Italian.

In the midst of this dream, I'm transported to Gdansk, Poland, except in the city center are Cleveland's Terminal and Key Bank towers. Polka music blares, and it reminds me of that much-hated Rotary Club in Parma, where my parents forced us to go every weekend during our youth. The dancers wore plastered smiles, and the conductor looked like Lawrence Welk made in Satan's image. I dance along, even though I hate polka with a passion. As I dance, water from Lake Erie and the Cuyahoga River flood the room. I'm 10 feet

underwater and drowning even further. Gondolas swim overhead while I sink further to the lake floor as I sway to this stupid Frank Yankovic music.

"Rosa, stop this crazy music," I scream, but she keeps segueing into Drew Carey's "Moon over Parma."

Rosa finally stops and I awaken from this dream.

"Love it?" she inquires

"It was lovely," I tell her as I stifle a sigh.

"Shall I play more?"

"No," I say as I rise up. I give her a peck on the cheek, then walk north on Civic Center Drive, past the 50 state flags, to Broad Street. At the bridge, I look north toward the confluence, where the Scioto and Olentangy meet. Gondolas race past the Long Street Bridge toward the Santa Maria. On one of them, the accordion player sings, though I can't tell whether he's singing Italian stanzas or paying homage to Cleveland's answer to the late John Candy's polka-playing character, Yosh Shmenge.

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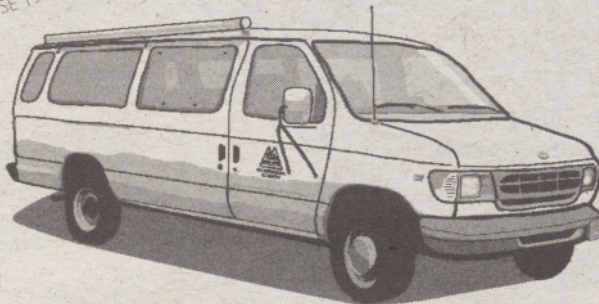
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