

ASPERGERS from page 7

"I'm a real human being with a learning disability. I'm human. I make mistakes, but I've come so far. Five years ago I was living in squalor and didn't give a crap about no one. I actually was obsessive and manic. I was a no man, I was greedy and only wanted 'me-time'. Now, I'm learning about life. I had to grow up, but maturity was a bitch for me. I used to be scared of failure. But what's the worst of it? All you can do is try again."

Right: Thomas lives alone in low-income housing in the Pearl District in Northwest Portland. He pays \$562 a month in rent. Below: Thomas has been on and off pills since he was 18, but says he has faithfully been taking medication for four years with good results.



Above: Thomas' routine includes weekly family dinners with his sister Candice, shown above and at right and her husband Jason. His sister, he says, is a huge part of his support system.

"My sister is the backbone of the family. Our mom and dad would always fight and so she became a parent (to me) at age 16. I think that's why she is so successful and strong. She says she learns things from me all day long, every day. I just don't get what she learns."



Thomas says he has daily, "fits," which is when his anxiety flares up and, as he puts it, "My Asperger's runs away with me a bit." The fits make him feel anxious, needy and vulnerable and can be caused by anything stress-related, from a school paper, to an overcrowded ride on the MAX or even messing up at karaoke. But Thomas is learning to control his anxiety and knows that the feeling is fleeting. "Those things suck, I try to check them at an hour because I don't want to mess up my whole day."



Above: Thomas has worked at the Goodwill for about a year, his first real job ever, where he makes about \$360 a month working 15 hours a week. "I feel privileged that I am part of society rather than sitting on my ass not doing anything. It's great having a job and my own money," says Thomas, who loves the responsibility, structure and the fact he learns something new every day.



Right: Thomas got his high school diploma in 1995 and now takes Adult Basic Education classes at Portland Community College to improve his reading comprehension. For his future he is focused on having more adult responsibilities, having a credit card, and maybe a better apartment and a computer.

Photos by Leah Nash

Thomas says that although he has never had a girlfriend, he is trying to find the right person. "My condition is kind of holding me back. I think it is something that scares off people I like, relationship-wise. I don't know how to do it." Here Thomas contemplates asking a girl to dance at a Mt. Scott Community Dance, a monthly event for people with disabilities.

