

Empowered Voices puts cameras in the hands of the homeless

BY MAX CHESTER, GARRETT MUTCHLER, CHUCK LACHICA
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

"If you've never been homeless, how can you tell the homeless what they need?" asks Jason Kersten, tapping on the table in rhythm with the words. A 41-year-old, formerly homeless veteran, Kersten has so far made two videos for the Empowered Voices Media Project (EVMP), a personal documentary program where the films are shot and edited by members of the homeless community. Kersten believes the program provides a powerful tool for homeless individuals to discuss issues in their communities and tell their stories in their own words.

"EVMP allows anyone to tell their story," says Kersten. "It's about changing the housed perception of the homeless."

The Empowered Voices Media Project was started in 2010 by Sisters of the Road and Portland Community Media, and receives funding from the Multnomah County Cultural Coalition and Neighbors West Northwest. The project has its own YouTube channel — EmpoweredVoicesMedia — with more than 20 videos already uploaded. The videos are short films which discuss a wide-range of issues that affect people living in the streets, and gives people experiencing homelessness a chance to discuss the issues in their own words, while highlighting the issues homeless people face living in Portland.

"Empowered Voices is a program that not only educates the homeless, but educates people about homelessness," says Kersten, who's been working with the project for

nearly a year. Kersten's first video was autobiographical, addressing his on-and-off life on the streets and previous struggles with drugs and alcohol. "I love it, it's a program I've supported from the beginning."

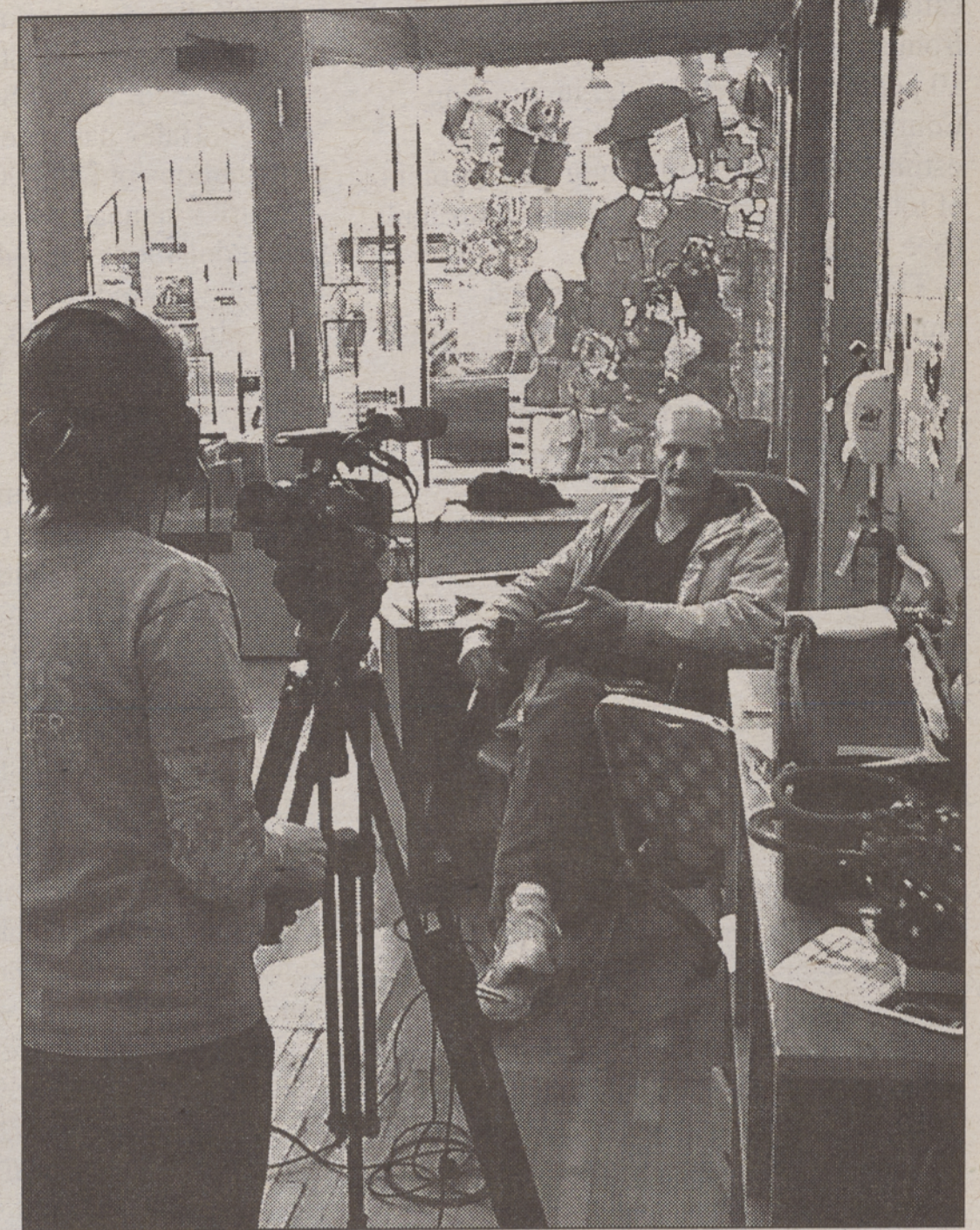
Those who wanted to work on the project received digital training in videography from Portland Community Media, which consisted of classes on shooting techniques, video-editing software, and other tools to help produce films. Training took place over the course of three weeks and served as a crash-course in filmmaking.

Founded in 1979, Sisters of the Road has fostered a reputation of not only serving people who are homeless and living under the poverty line, but functioning as a hub for community organizing and empowerment

Jeannie Lawer, a staff member of Sisters of the Road, aims to record stories to counter the misleading stereotypes and misconceptions about individuals who experience homelessness.

"None of us are professionals," said Lawer, who is a contributor and organizer for the Empowered Voices project. "We're just figuring it out as we go along. ... Every video we produced has a special quality because individuals who have first-hand experience with homelessness film it."

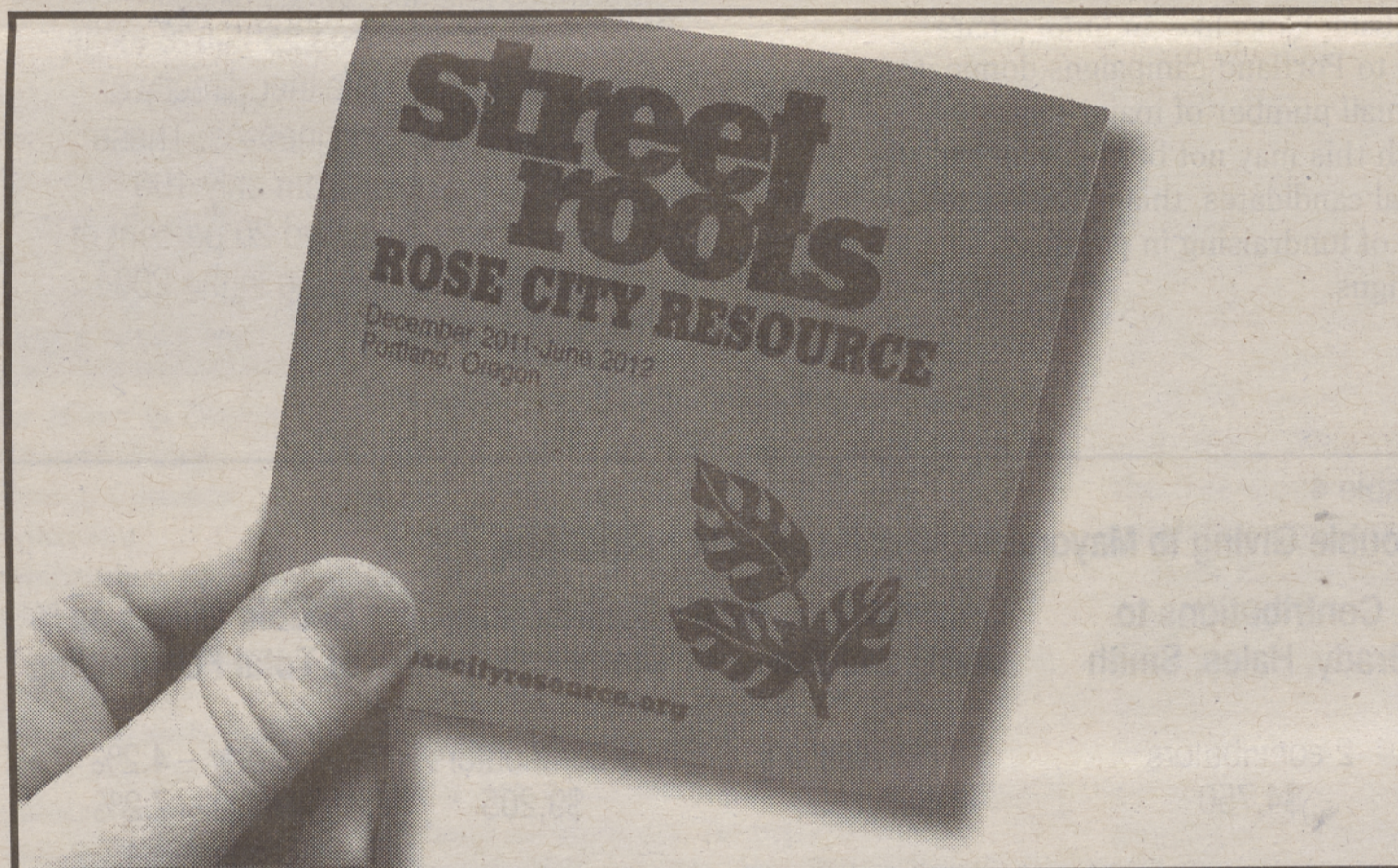
Individuals new to the program are expected to make at least one film vignette after completing film training: either a personal story of their own life, or a story highlighting issues of social and economic justice in their community. Some, such as Kersten, choose to work on multiple films



(his second dealt with the 2010 Sidewalk Management Plan in Portland). Kersten now serves on the EVMP's committee at Sisters of the Road, which makes decisions on new videos and organizes an annual film festival.

Check out their short films at EmpoweredVoicesMedia on Youtube.

Jeannie Lawer videotapes an interviewee for the Empowered Voices Media Project.
PHOTO BY CHUCK LACHICA



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