

Spreading the wealth of St. Johns, one cash mob at a time

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It is indeed choice entertainment to watch "Portlandia" if you live in Stumptown. The home of John Reed and Louise Bryant. A frequent stop for Emma Goldman and where Joe Hill claimed membership in the Industrial Workers of the World Local. Amusing, I think, because while it captures the comic foil the self-involved politically correct set provide and the endless energy spent on parsing inanities, it misses the underlying generosity and political outrage at injustice, local and abroad. Moreover, instead of "one stripe fits all," there are various tribes here that stretch belief. Nowhere more than in St Johns, I would argue. A world apart from the rest of this fabled oddity called Portland.

An instance is the recent phenom called a cash mob. It's not peculiar to St Johns; it started in the East. In Cleveland, last fall.

But how it began in St Johns, and who stumbled across it and sent the word out, is unique. The story says a lot about the character of this neighborhood — my neighborhood these days.

While most other parts of the country are encrusted in cynicism and a vague sense that everything we know is dying, that Grover Norquist, Rush, and Roger Ailes and FOX News, the Koch Brothers, Adelson, Fries, and ALEC are winning, and everything precious, real or fantastic, that we think this country has been about is spiraling down the bunghole of history, Portland is thriving as a mosh pit of activism and idealism. It's willingness to challenge almost any injustice is indeed rare. And ripe for fun.

The New York Times recently fretted over the demise of Occupy Wall Street because it lacked leadership and direction.

Pret not you New York Timers! Those poor culturati in the Big Apple. They just don't get it. There is no pecking order that applies with Occupy. An example of how it's doing is better provided, for example, in St Johns. An example of viability here would be the explosion of activity around monthly cash mobs. Tip of the iceberg that says a lot.

By way of explanation, let me describe a piece of my day. I walked into Proper Eats, the vegan eatery and grocery, and stood in line as a customer talked with the fella at the register about Edgar Cayce and the Mayan Calendar. The counter guy's tattoos had prompted the conversation, which held up business for nearly half an hour. But the several of us in line said nothing. We didn't want to interrupt and miss something. In fact, I couldn't wait to get my turn to say I was from Virginia Beach and in the early seventies lived in a communal house including several people who worked in the

A.R.E. print shop. The counter guy was unimpressed...conversations like this apparently are nothing out of the ordinary. PD Ouspenski, Gurdjieff, Blavatsky, and their spawn — what's the deal? Show me something new!

I left with my broccoli and bananas and Hemp milk (chocolate) and made my way to Neena's bookstore, St Johns Booksellers. I picked up Richard Wright's book of Haiku that I ordered through Neena's store. The book was hand stitched in Tennessee and took a while to get here. I was browsing through it when someone came in and asked when the cash mob was scheduled. Last Friday of the month, Neena said. Same night as the St. Johns artwalk. Shame, the woman volunteered, I'll be in Costa Rica. She was a naturopath in a natural medicine clinic off the Costa Rican coast.

Now, this is nothing extraordinary in Portland, I don't suppose, but all this energy is concentrated in about 4 square blocks. And next door to what I've described is the old St. Johns, leaning or sitting in a stupor against a wall (mushroom faces, tadpole bodies, straight out of Lionel Rogosin's famous film "On The Bowery"), or wheeling in a chair back to the sing-room-occupancy hotel after a day's outing at Brad's (called something else this week from last and due to be returned to its former life as an old hotel. (Pictures of the old incarnation bring to mind something out of Deadwood, the town, or the HBO series.)

I browsed some more in Neena's store and picked up a book of poetry by Paulann Peterson. Come in to browse, and it's amazing what you wind up buying. Neena is co-administrator of the cash Mob (check out Cash Mob St Johns on Facebook) with Micah Perry. Both of them are totally in touch with community and buying locally and supporting new small businesses in the area. That's what this cash mob is about, essentially. Occupy local business and resist the corporate franchise octopus.

As you've no doubt noticed, I'm mixing Occupy with the old "buy local" effort and there's a reason for it. Occupy has moved on while the NYT'ers, for example, are wondering what they're going to do next. The reality is they're already doing it. Taking the country back, one neighborhood, one locale at a time. No ideology, no pretense or ego needed.

Take Micah Perry and HELD, his vegan belt shop just around the corner from Neena's bookstore. Micah doesn't do media. What he knows he is given from the people who come into his shop. Or who he sees on the street in various places. "If I don't hear it directly from another person I know, I don't accept it." (Take that, NYT!)

Having said no egos, I'll have to back up, because Micah's story and the short,



PHOTO BY JAY THIEMEYER
Micah Perry of HELD, one of the founders of the cash mob movement in St. Johns.

ongoing evolution of HELD is revealing.

Micah first had his shop on Alberta St. He was located very near the Alberta Rose Theatre. With a residence in St Johns, at the end of Syracuse, close to the fence separating the living from the pollution and immunity of Vigor Industries and Terminal 4 (there's a big sign for the relentless traffic of long-haul truckers directing them to the terminal outside his shop), Micah would ride his bike to Alberta Street every day. Even after his diagnosis for the Big C, he'd make the trek. Even after his first operation, he'd make the daily trek. However, Micah's routine changed when he realized he wasn't healing. His body wasn't the same. His head, where the cancer lived, wasn't the same.

So he rented a niche in St Johns. Next to the old wrestling arena, itself now transformed to an imported car repair shop. Occasionally I spy, since I live nearby, an old bow-legged wrestler walking past his old haunts, scowling at the Porsches and Volvos.

No sooner had he got his place than he was further seriously incapacitated by his inner demon. As he weathered repeated operations, recoveries, operation, recovery, etc., his shop, which was nothing but a space when Micah first entered his treacherous trek, filled up from handiwork of his many friends. As with Micah, their performance art is a 24/7 deal and is based in community, generosity, non-corporate kinds of things, a myriad of performance artforms, including music, visual art and now his shop. Micah's momentary setback, momentary dysfunction, did not kill the dream. His dream, of which cash mob is a recent aspect, is to have a shop where people can come in and make their own

belts, or repair old belts; where people can learn and develop a business of their own, a community hub. His belts are made from conveyor belts from dead factories. From dead inner tubes. The bench for the belts was built by a friend while Micah was in momentary disrepair, up on the blocks you might say, from an old grain silo in Eastern Oregon. Out where the antelope roam. He dispatches the belts ordered online in cut off Hemp milk cartons. And so it goes. Nothing wasted if avoidable. Simple economy.

In February then, roaming the Internet, Micah came across the topic of cash mobs, and the light went on. A way to give back after all he'd been given. He had not even completed his Facebook request for a response to his idea of a cash mob in St. Johns when he started getting multiple hits.

And so it came to pass. Last Friday of February, his friends on Facebook selected a shop — Etcetera — that had just moved into a new location across the street from St Johns Booksellers (and Brad's). And literally hundreds of folks descended on the place to spend, as is recommended in what are now roughly 200 cash mobs around the country, 20 big ones or whatever you can afford.

Micah, now in full remission, bought some soap made from biofuel derived from cooking oil.

Micah, let's be clear, is a non-violent sort of person and what surprised me was when he told me that all those long-haul truckers? Well, after driving repeatedly by the banner proclaiming the strongest belts in the world, a few have stopped to check his place out. One has already returned to get a new buckle (there are hundreds spilling off the butcher block-like workbench) for his belt. Micah offers exchanges free to belt purchasers. In fact, Micah encourages people to come in and make their own belts with his materials, at a discount.

One day when I was there, a young fella was making a belt with loops and cartridges and a small replica derringer for a buckle.

The future is golden for the HELD concept. Several other artists are displaying their T-shirts and scarves and hats (that look like baskets), as well as dresses made from free box fare. Very unique. Very DIY. All made by people with shops of their own in mind.

As a friend suggests, leave the stress to the NYT'ers. And don't believe all you read.

The people are doing great things somewhat off the radar. The people like folks in St. Johns and elsewhere in our fair city are, in fact, becoming the radar.

Check out 'strongestbeltsintheworld.com' and cash mobs St Johns on Facebook.

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