Life's Quiet Heart Beating

By Jack Armstrong, Jr.

Life is very short with time.
Love is even shorter every day.
Hate needs a second, to be forever.
Sleep gives relief, our happy dream.

Life can be, too long with pain.
Walking, all alone, can be torture.
Sharing a meal, brings heartfelt joy.
Death of a partnership, makes cold tears.

Life shall glow with justice, be kind.
Holding someone's hand gives both hope.
A kiss, like butterflies, flows nose to toes.
Where does greed take our humanity?

Life for a homeless being–hurts all.
War has too many loser–just everything.
Peace is water falling, flowing always.
Be kind. Find it's enlightenment, now...

Finging inspiration among new friends

BY ANN-DERRICK GAILLOT
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

It is not hard to find Johnny Williams and Paula Ramirez at their spot across the street from City Hall. Johnny joyfully calls out greetings and jokes to passersby beside his partner Paula.

We sit inside the Starbucks just off of Southwest Fifth Avenue and Main Street, across from City Hall as Johnny and Paula share their experiences of losing their homes, being without shelter in Portland, selling Street Roots, and looking for employment.

PHOTO BY COLE MERKEL

VENDOR PROFILE

Johnny and Paula

Like many Americans experiencing poverty, Johnny and Paula find that homelessness and joblessness often feed one another in a seemingly inescapable cycle.

"AT&T: The three things you need to get a job," Johnny tells me, "Address, telephone, and transportation." Johnny is full of such phrases and aphorisms that keep me laughing throughout the interview. The two have an infectious positivity and spirit that no doubt keep them afloat during rougher times, such as when the stigma of poverty threatens to demoralize them.

"When we used to keep our stuff on his walker," says Paula, "covered by a tarp, sometimes the MAX wouldn't even stop for us because it would look like a shopping cart, even though we have a pass." Paula, a short, shy, bespectacled woman bundled up against the winter chill, often acts as caretaker and a source of quiet strength for Johnny, a jolly Southerner with a salt and pepper beard and hair, and ever-smiling eyes.

Johnny was born with a physical disability, which – he shows me – causes both his knees to bend completely backward. While they both admit that times have been hard lately they also say that finding one another has been a blessing.

The two met in September while waiting in line for a spot at the Right 2 Dream Too, the tent refuge at NW 4th and Burnside. Paula had just moved to Portland from Aurora after her home had been foreclosed on when she met Johnny, a Texas transplant who had already been experiencing homelessness for almost two years.

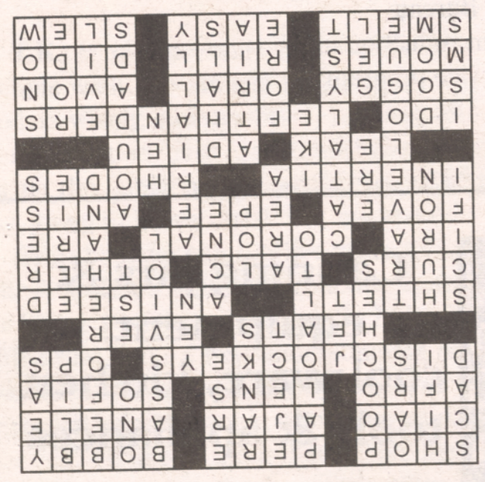
"He started talking to me," Paula says, "We've been inseparable ever since." They draw on one another's incredible strength and spirit. Johnny had resigned himself to living from shelter to shelter indefinitely before he met Paula, a poet previously published in Street Roots, who told him that she was determined to get back into a permanent home. Her determination encouraged Johnny to adopt the same resilient attitude.

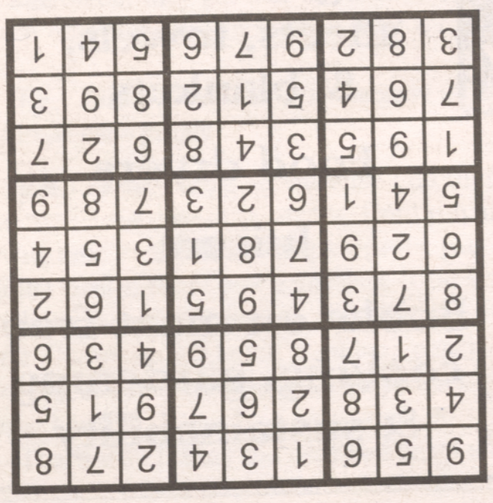
"She inspires me to keep going," says Johnny. The two share a romantic glance. Since being together they have managed to move from staying at shelters and Right 2 Dream Too, to having their own place at Dignity Village, a transitional encampment located near Portland International Airport. There they have access to a propane heater, a commons room with a television, a sundries store, and a secure place to keep their things while they are out during the day so they no longer have to carry it with them on Johnny's walker under a tarp.

Selling Street Roots for the past helps them pay to stay at Dignity Village, a welcome reprieve from sleeping under bridges and nightly trying to find a spot at a shelter that has space for them, is handicap accessible, and will accept them. Often, Johnny and Paula found themselves turned away for being a couple or for attempting to use resources meant specifically for individuals coping with substance abuse and addiction. Unfortunately, there are few shelters specifically available for clean and sober couples.

For now Johnny and Paula are focused on selling Street Roots to make ends meet and finding Paula a writing opportunity. However, if all goes well, in the future they will be living together in a home of their very own. Johnny shares one last saying with me, a Jessie Jackson quote he lives by. It's about having the spirit to pick oneself up and continue on even when life's circumstances have gotten you down. Though the exact quote escapes me, Paula and Johnny no doubt embody the sentiment in their own lives. They, rather than Jesse Jackson, managed to move and inspire me that day.

Answers to puzzles on page 15





CORRECTIONS

Street Roots strives for accuracy, but we're human. So we also strive to correct errors in our paper whenever possible. Please report any errors to our managing editor, Joanne Zuhl, at 503-228-5657, or write to joanne@streetroots.org

VENDOR WORK ADS

Available for light work, cleaning, and shopping. Assignments will get done! Contact Essie at 503-901-9594

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