

Sharing a smile

Customers rally to restore a vendor's pearly whites

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It's been months since Raymond Thornton has felt comfortable smiling. "With my teeth missing or infected all the time, I was always guarded with my smile," says Thornton, who started vending newspapers for Street Roots in 2010.

But now, after receiving a brand new set of top dentures, he can't help but beam at every customer that frequents his familiar Northeast Portland street corner.

And it's not just because of his newfound pearly whites.

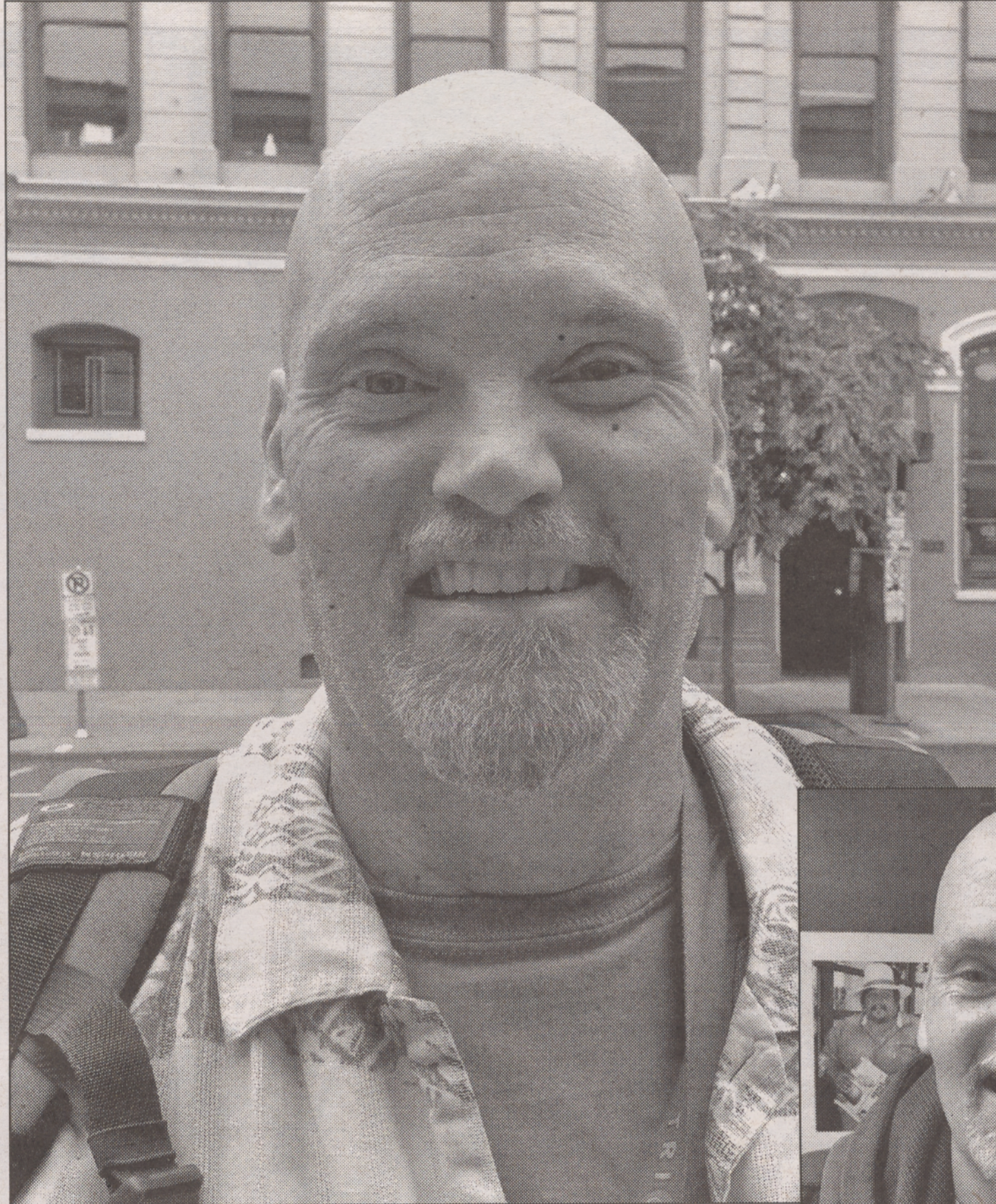
Over the past few months, Thornton's dedicated customers to his NE 15th and Broadway corner — right in front of Peet's Coffee — have been saving up an undisclosed amount of money to buy their ailing vendor a new set of teeth. By mid-July, Thornton had a brand-new grin.

"I found out I have an ego," Thornton admits. "Now that I have new teeth that resemble my old ones, I let myself smile a little and it makes me so happy I end up smiling huge."

Last year, Thornton, who lost his dental insurance in 2007, started leaving work early and fasting for days due to severe tooth pain caused by infections and untreated cavities. It didn't go unnoticed.

"Customers started asking me with genuine concern if I was OK and if they could do anything, which I ignored for a while," Thornton says. "As a grown man, I forgot how to ask for help."

Despite his silence, one customer in particular, Mary, urged him to get help.



Above, Raymond Thornton shows off his new dentures, courtesy of his customers, who pitched in for his dental care. Inset, Raymond after his teeth were pulled.

"She said, 'If I can get you a dentist appointment, and you don't have to pay, will you go?' And I said yes," says Thornton.

Within days, Thornton found himself in the Billi Odegaard Clinic, Multnomah County's newest dental center in downtown Portland, humbled and shocked by the level of treatment he was receiving.

"They did a complete examination and included me in each and every part of it, which was amazing," says Thornton. "The only thing I didn't have a say in was how much it would cost and when it would get paid, which was a little bit difficult for me.

But they made it clear, 'Your job is to receive this.' And that's something I'm still learning to accept."

During his month-long tooth extracting process, eventually resulting in a complete upper set of dentures, Mary and other loyal customers passed out financial pledge forms to other Peet's frequenters to help cover the end costs.

One of Thornton's regulars, Portland City Commissioner Nick Fish, pitched in \$40 towards the fund.

"Raymond and I talk regularly, whenever I buy a copy. I was more than willing to help,"

says Fish. "It's a great story. What if we thought of everyone in our community as an extended member of our family, like Raymond? Some people feel powerless when it comes to solving the bigger picture of homelessness, but it's really these small gestures that make change."

And small change may be the best strategy at this point. Thornton joins thousands of Oregonians with untreated and infected teeth due to being under or uninsured. According to a 2010 Department of Human Services study, a hefty 20 percent of Oregonians over the age of 65 have lost all their teeth to decay or infection. Additionally, a 2008 Center for Disease Control report showed that only 70 percent of Oregonians visited the dentist in the last year.

Thornton is still reeling from the big-heartedness of his small community, and trying his best to share his gratitude with those who helped.

"Over 20 people have helped pay for my

teeth, and many of them remained anonymous," says Thornton, who's working on getting "thank you" cards to each donor. "They didn't care about recognition. I think that speaks to the inherent good in people's hearts. It's completely selfless."

Dr. Beverlee Cutler, the Billi Odegaard Clinic's lead dentist, says that half of her job is replacing teeth or fitting patients for dentures.

"A lot of these people neglect their teeth for so long that it's the best we can do for them," says Cutler

Looking forward, Thornton says he has a new outlook on the generosity of Portland's inhabitants. Admitting he's grown a bit cynical with age, Thornton says he became OK with not trusting people anymore. Until now.

"I just figured I would lose all my teeth and that would be it," says Thornton. "People don't buy strangers teeth. But then, I guess, I'm not a stranger now."

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the homeless and/or offers too many services that attract people on the streets is a message being delivered to every mayor across the United States by business and tourism associations. It's an old hat.

The idea that homeless people are hurting the local business climate and tourism in Portland is utter nonsense. Is it uncomfortable or unfortunate, tragic even? Yes. Is it actually stopping people from visiting or moving to Portland? No.

Downtown, the Pearl, South Waterfront and neighborhoods surrounding the urban core are thriving. These bustling neighborhoods are so successful, in fact, that most working-class individuals and families have been completely priced out of the rental market. We have a growing equity gap both economically and racially in our city's core. That's a problem.

Blaming the homeless and panhandling for a poor business climate on the heels of a recession, even in the midst of a vibrant and growing downtown, is reactionary and dogmatic. It lacks any kind of real vision.

It's very hard to understand the issue of homelessness and all its complexities in a vacuum. When bad things happen on the streets, everyone ranging from the general public to special interest groups, political insiders and the media has an opinion on what to do about the problem. Rarely do those opinions address the big picture.

The big picture

The federal government's disinvestment in housing over the past three decades is well documented. Local city, county and state governments have been forced to carry the

burden on how to end individual and family homelessness.

Without real leadership and support from government and the private sector, we can't even begin to think about actually changing the climate of people experiencing homelessness in downtown environments.

It should also be the responsibility of the media to point out the lack of resources and barriers we face as a community, while spending more time highlighting solutions.

For years, Portland and Multnomah County have been battered by the economy when it comes to resources to address poverty. In some ways, local governments have found a way to hold a line on its investments, but that's not nearly enough.

Those investments have rarely increased and there still isn't a clear strategy on long-term resource development for housing. That's a big problem.

There's always talk of lobbying our representatives in Washington D.C. for relief, but it never amounts to much. Salem could prioritize housing around the state, but I'm not holding my breath. Local communities have more or less been left on their own to solve the problem of homelessness.

Some believe we need stricter sidewalk laws and more targeted enforcement. If that's the case, then we also need things like more mental health outreach workers, police officers who are walking the beat, and a strategic plan to offer our most vulnerable residents downtown housing. It's been proven time and again, you can't simply criminalize the homeless and have any real effect on the problem.

The argument then comes back that

Portland doesn't want to criminalize the homeless, but they want to target certain behaviors, like harassment and violence. I couldn't agree more. So let's do that.

Clearly, we should have targeted enforcement against street violence, regardless of an individual's housing status. People on the streets would welcome this as much as anyone else. Violent crimes against the homeless are very real and sometimes deadly.

We need officers downtown that have the resources to tackle street crime, and we need an array of services and housing for the majority of individuals and families experiencing homelessness who aren't committing crimes.

The issue of downtown homelessness is bigger than any isolated incident of violence or how panhandlers might annoy certain segments of the population. It's bigger than a camp being swept in front of City Hall or under a nearby bridge. It doesn't matter how many homeless camps or sidewalks you sweep, people are still going to be homeless.

We need more innovative ways of addressing street homelessness coupled with more resources to get the job done. Stricter sidewalk laws or targeting panhandlers simply doesn't get us there.

What to do?

Will there be a stricter sidewalk law proposed? Will the city risk lawsuits from civil liberties groups and push forward with targeting panhandlers? Will there be a more aggressive approach to sweeping camps? Possibly the mayor won't go in any of these directions and will decide on a harm reduction approach.

It's anyone's guess on what happens next. The following list offers a prescription to ease the pain downtown:

- \$1 million dollars for rent assistance to target hard-to-reach populations, including homeless families and youth downtown.
- Additional outreach workers to support JOIN and Janus Youth to provide harm reduction approaches to working with people in camps and on sidewalks.
- Additional mental health outreach workers and housing vouchers to target people experiencing mental illness on the streets downtown.
- A committee to look strategically at increased, on-going revenue to support housing and homeless services in Multnomah County.
- Providing resources for two to four police officers to walk the beat in the city's central core to develop relationships and to target/deter violent or harassing behaviors.
- Create an organized and central line of communication between police officers, private security, park rangers, outreach workers and local businesses experiencing problems downtown.

The list above might not be the only answers, but it's a start. Without an aggressive strategy to actually solve the problem, we're simply spinning our wheels and moving from one incident to the next.

For seasoned advocates, people experiencing homelessness, law enforcement and local businesses — we understand this problem isn't going away anytime soon and someone needs to take the bull by the horns.

There's no better time than the present.