

Conference of street papers digs into challenges, opportunities

BY COLE MERKEL
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VENDOR COORDINATOR

Greece's economy is still in shambles as the country faces record unemployment amidst austerity cuts. But in Athens, one street paper is serving as a life raft of employment for more than 140 men and women, some who have been unemployed for four years or more. Shedia was founded less than a year ago and already has a waitlist for vendors who want to sell the newspaper.

Earlier this month, in Munich, Germany, I sat on a panel with Chris Alefantis, Shedia's director. It was the International Network of Street Papers' 17th annual conference and we were discussing which vendors we serve and why. As the only representative from North America on the panel, I was discouraged to learn that criminalizing homelessness is not unique to Portland and the United States — that many European street papers are facing the same issues.

But I was empowered to connect with more than 100 men and women who publish street papers, and over the course of a year, empower more than 14,000 vendors to work their way out of poverty. From Serbia to Malawi, Canada to Taiwan, the importance of street papers is only deepening as we become more integrated in the fabric of our local communities and the impact of our work spreads.

In the era of 24-hour news and citizen journalism, the challenge for any newspaper is to maintain relevance. Daily newspapers no longer publish quickly enough to compete with the speed of digital news and the proliferation of free content on the Internet makes getting paid for quality journalism difficult. Street papers are poised to not only provide unique news commentary, but to create positive social



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE INSP
The author speaking on social media during the 17th annual conference of the International Network of Street Papers in Munich, Germany.

impact by facilitating conversations and relationships across socio-economic lines through our vendors. Street Roots, in particular, has never been shy about reporting what is difficult or uncomfortable, and at any time we have 80-100 vendors selling the paper, making a dignified income and building relationships with their customers in the community.

Street Roots has taken street journalism a step further by launching news.streetroots.org and vocally increasing our presence on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. As often as possible, we tell the stories of the streets through the voices of the men and women who live on them every day. As a

contributor to Street Roots' social and digital media team, I was proud to see our work highlighted many times over, and to present an overview of our recent social media campaigns at the innovation exchange on the second day of the conference.

Many papers are using Facebook pages, some are on Twitter, but few have employed social media to create change to the extent that Street Roots has through our advocacy campaigns and Twitter reports. I returned to Portland energized to continue using the power of social media to communicate with our readers and continue telling the stories of our vendors in new and creative ways.

At 25, I was the youngest delegate at the

Founded in 1994, the International Network of Street Papers supports and develops more than 120 street paper projects with a combined readership of 6 million per edition. Street Roots, along with its sister papers across North America, join members from 40 countries in 24 languages. Street papers are independent newspapers and magazines that operate on a social enterprise and self-help model to provide an innovative solution to urban homelessness and unemployment. In addition to employment, many INSP street papers offer their vendors ongoing social support and training opportunities.

conference, but not by much. I was amazed at the many young faces — I'd guess at least one-third of the delegates were under 35 — and passionate energy in the group. Many of us are stepping up in our roles at street papers that are well established with a tradition of strong editorial content and, in the case of Street Roots, nearly 15 years of vendor empowerment.

While our careers and media systems may be new, my generation will constantly learn from the tried and true methods of those who started the movement before us. As we take up the mantle, we will continue to ensure the regular delivery of high-quality content and, most importantly will continue to give a hand up, not a hand out. Vendors will always be the heart and soul of the street paper movement and at Street Roots, our vendors are the hardest working women and men I have ever met. They inspire me daily.

Surviving homelessness in the mountains of Austria

The following column won top honors among vendor essays at the International Network of Street Paper Awards 2013 in July. It is written by a vendor with Street Roots' sister paper Apropos in Austria.

BY ANDREA HOSCHEK
VENDOR, APROPOS, AUSTRIA

I'm going my way. What is this day going to bring? Somebody buys a street paper from me. I also get tipped and I'm happy about it. These days I have less to worry about.

I was living on the Kapuzinerberg (mountain) for a long time in a small cave. The water used to drip on my face despite the tarpaulin that I had covering the walls. It was one that painters use; I didn't have the money for anything else.

I wasn't physically fit enough to meet the conditions imposed by social services. I eventually gave up my flat and stopped getting social benefits — they had already been cut anyway. That situation lasted for a long time — much longer than I wanted it to. I would get up in the morning and go down the hill. Sometimes I would meet others that lived there and we would beg on the Staatsbrücke (bridge). They were also homeless and needing money. Well, I never had to beg because I was selling the street paper. Many people helped me with my problems and supported me. Like other homeless people, I was just grateful to have any place to sleep.

At the beginning I stayed at a friend's place. I didn't have to pay rent. I sold Apropos and cooked for him. But I couldn't stand his drinking.

In the camp, I had a hard time sleeping and that started to take its toll. I looked for a doctor nearby because I wasn't able to go to the city in the state I was in. I was

hoping he could help me get back on social benefits again. All he said was that I should go see an expert and that I shouldn't sleep outdoors without a sleeping bag. And that valerian would be good for my wisdom tooth. It grows on the mountain, thank God. But how could I afford a sleeping bag, especially a good one? My mother was unemployed also at the time and couldn't help. An ad in the newspaper and a personal connection however worked wonders: After two years I finally got a good sleeping bag and a military tent. It was a nomadic lifestyle, but it was bearable.

I will never forget my first winter in the cave. I tried to tell myself that snowflakes were 'romantic.' I covered myself with expensive fur coats that I got from the collection of old clothes at Saftladen (Social Enterprise). Unfortunately they never had any sleeping bags. Once at a construction site I found some thermal insulating material and I took it to sleep on so that I wouldn't get sick. "I'll return it soon," I thought to myself. Because the cave was in danger of collapsing — and also because of the noise — I moved to the other side of the mountain. I was still unable to sleep.

Every week we used to get treated to a free concert, because we could hear the music from concerts at the Residenzplatz (main square in Salzburg). Today they actually give a cultural pass to poor people, with free entry to the cinema and other events.

The basic income support payment that I get now is a little bit higher than social benefits I was on, but sometimes I'm still afraid that I won't ever be able to have a "normal" life. My council flat is a salvation. There needs to be a better system to deal



Andrea Hoschek

with homeless people. At the moment there can be four psychologists working on one case yet the people end up on the streets after a couple of months anyway. A shelter should be provided until people have found their own place to stay.

I like to think back to the beautiful time that I spent in the great outdoors, in touch with nature. Sometimes I even feel like I was living in luxury because of the beautiful things that I was given. I am very grateful for the clothing donations. That's how I got a camelhair coat; it was always my dream to own one. I used to wear it when I was sitting outside the cave.

A friend of mine from Upper Austria used to come and visit me twice a week to bring me organic products and arnica tincture. In return, I made him mountain tea on the campfire to help with his

circulation. Another friend used to bring me a special natural medicine from Germany (made from valerian, lemon balm, hops and St. John's wort). One time when I was ill another cave dweller brought me food that he got from the monastery. We would go to the monastery to get food every day (except Sundays); sandwiches, sometimes homemade cakes, fruit, and always friendly conversation.

I used to take food from rubbish bins and in the tent I would hang kilos of bananas, organic breads and other groceries for days so the mice couldn't reach them. I even covered the walls with a Persian carpet that I found in a bin. People throw away the most beautiful things. When there was enough to eat I didn't have a lot to worry about, but there were times when I was almost starving and the rubbish bins behind the supermarkets were my only rescue.

I've had my own flat for five years now. It's nice, but can be stressful because of the crime in my neighborhood, which never seems to end. I want to work again. That's why I started taking courses at the Public Employment Service (a cleaning course and a computer course).

When I'm feeling bad, I go back to the mountain, to the cave that I decorated with a mattress, a beautiful Persian carpet and other bits and bobs that I got from Sam, a painter friend that also lived on mountain, who has now sadly passed away.

Everything is so peaceful and quiet there, just like it used to be. I can pass the day there and feel grateful for everything that nature gave me.

My friend Sam used to say: "I'm not poor, I'm rich."

www.street-papers.org/Apropos, Austria