

Tackling health care and community in East Portland

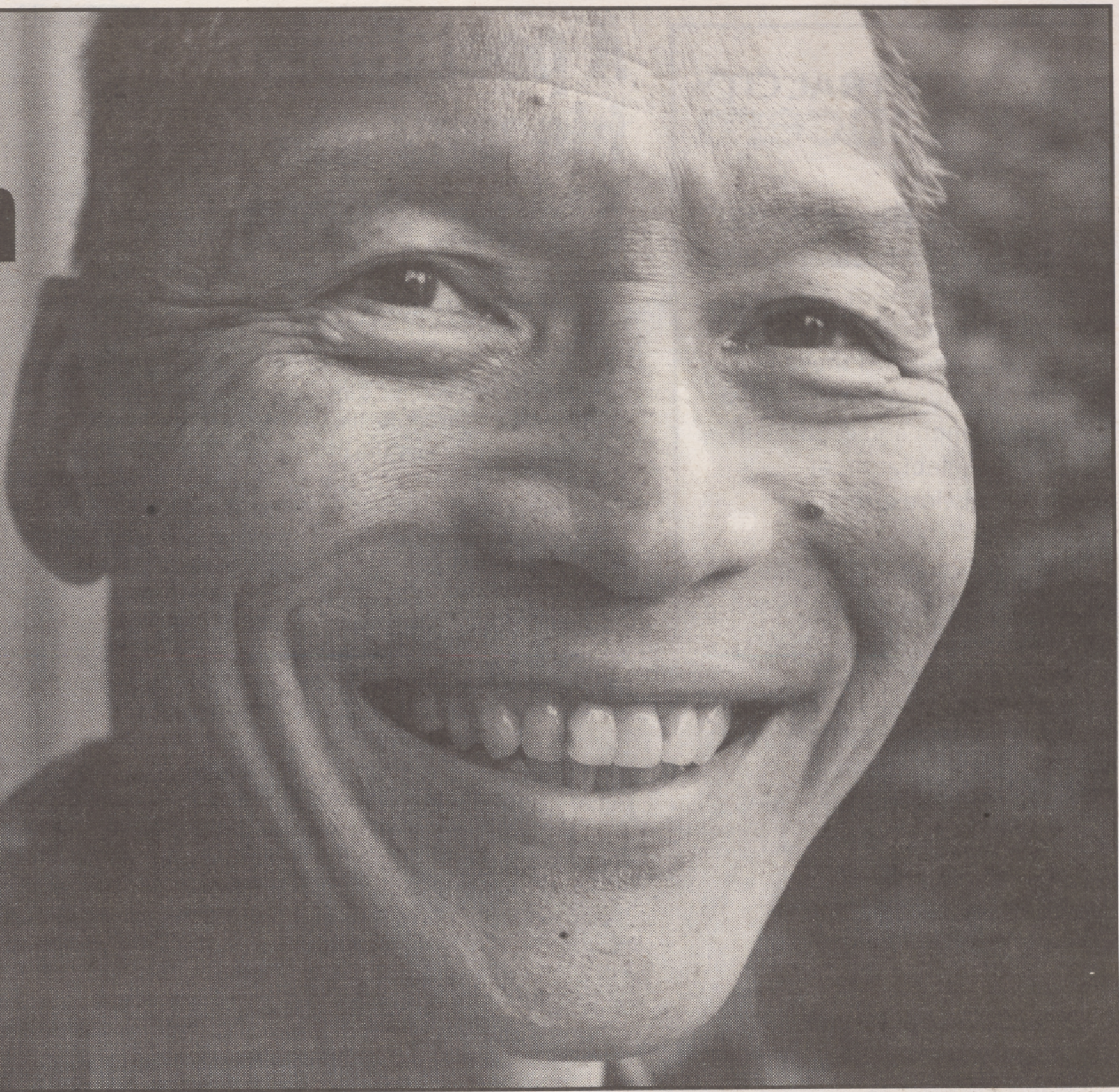


PHOTO BY KRISTA WRIGHT

Dr. Bob Sayson's journey has brought him around the world to serving Rockwood's residents

BY ALEX ZIELINSKI
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

It's midway through lunchtime at the Good News Community Health Center and Dr. Bob Sayson has yet to take a bite of his sandwich. "Here, take my seat! Are you hungry? Thirsty?" Sayson asks one of the center's board members who stopped by unexpectedly to chat.

Minutes later, the routine is repeated when a patient and volunteer cheerfully peek their heads into the lunchroom. "Sandwich? Coffee?"

This selfless attitude is the fuel the center runs on. With only four paid staff members, not including Sayson, the volunteer-driven low-income health center is a beacon of hope in one of the poorest and most neglected neighborhoods in Multnomah County.

It couldn't come any sooner. After 15 years at his Gresham practice, Sayson, 63, was ready to leave the United States and return to one of the impoverished countries he had provided medical assistance to before settling in Oregon.

However, Sayson soon found a community in need of medical aide mere miles from his home in Gresham's Rockwood neighborhood, and quickly set up shop.

Rockwood is situated within the small strip between SE 162 and 202 Avenues along East Burnside, edging Gresham. Out of the 40,000 residents, almost one-quarter of the neighborhood's families are below the

poverty line, and nine out of ten students split between the community's two schools are on free or reduced lunch plans. The only food options in the neighborhood are a run-down Plaid Pantry and a Taco Bell. Before Good News opened its doors in 2007, there were no options for low-income health care.

"We started as a walk-in clinic, but the need was so great that we started taking in regular patients," says Blake Peterson, the center's director. "We've continued to expand."

With an estimated 6,000 patients who speak a combined 57 different languages, the center now offers mental health care, foot care, and diabetic consultation along with basic medical services on a sliding-scale pay range. If the patient can't pay, medical help can be exchanged for volunteer hours.

In addition, the clinic offers prayer and spiritual support to any patients who request it. Peterson stresses conversion isn't the center's goal.

"There's a stigma that goes along with faith-based practices like ours, which is a shame," he says. "People assume that the only reason we're offering these services is to push faith on our patients—which is the last thing we do. Faith is merely the reason we as individuals are doing this."

Peterson says he hopes the center can provide that sense of community support that's been long neglected in Rockwood.

"We're trying to not be an isolated island

out here," says Peterson. "It's an uphill battle that really takes the whole community's effort."

Which is exactly what the center has ignited.

Since the health center opened, aid has come from all corners of the neighborhood and has helped get it off the ground. From administrative work to counseling — community members have gone out of their way to contribute to the center.

"It takes a certain caliber of people to just serve without pay," says Peterson, who was born in Rockwood. "It's amazing what kind of volunteers we've found in this community — it really shows how driven these people are to turn their neighborhood around. We're fed by the community as much as we feed them."

One of the many dedicated volunteers, Marv DeVore, says the center saved his life.

After falling on financial hardships, the once-middle class Rockwood resident found himself on the streets with little will to live. After visiting the center, he never looked back.

"What kind of place pays for your antibiotics out of pocket and lets you stay in their back (parking) lot for months?" says DeVore. "This is more than just health care, this is community."

DeVore says that before the health center opened, he had to save \$50 to visit the nearest clinic for a check-up that took less

than ten minutes.

"The doctor barely even talked to me," he says. "Here, you talk to real people who want to find a real solution, not just a quick fix. I feel respected."

This sense of respect and community is exactly what Sayson sees missing in the country's current health care system, especially compared to other communities he's visited.

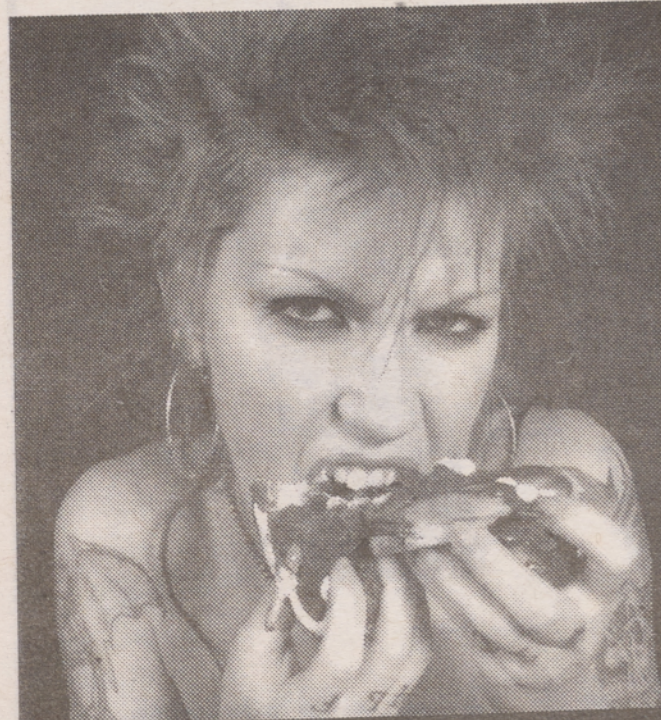
"I think the root cause of the problem stems from the lack of strong relationships and broken families in America," says Sayson. "We no longer value or respect the family and community structure in the U.S. It's all about the individual, which leaves so many behind."

Sayson says that he's seen many doctors become discouraged and drop out of the field after discovering it's no longer what they want to contribute to.

"It's less about helping, more about greed," he says. "Whatever happened to 'Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses. I thought that was what America was founded on.'"

Back in the lunchroom, Sayson energetically chats with other staff about volunteering to paint a local elementary school while passing a bowl of cherry tomatoes around the table.

"We've got to give back as often as possible. The best thing we can do is give our community a sense of hope," he says, finally taking a bite of his sandwich.



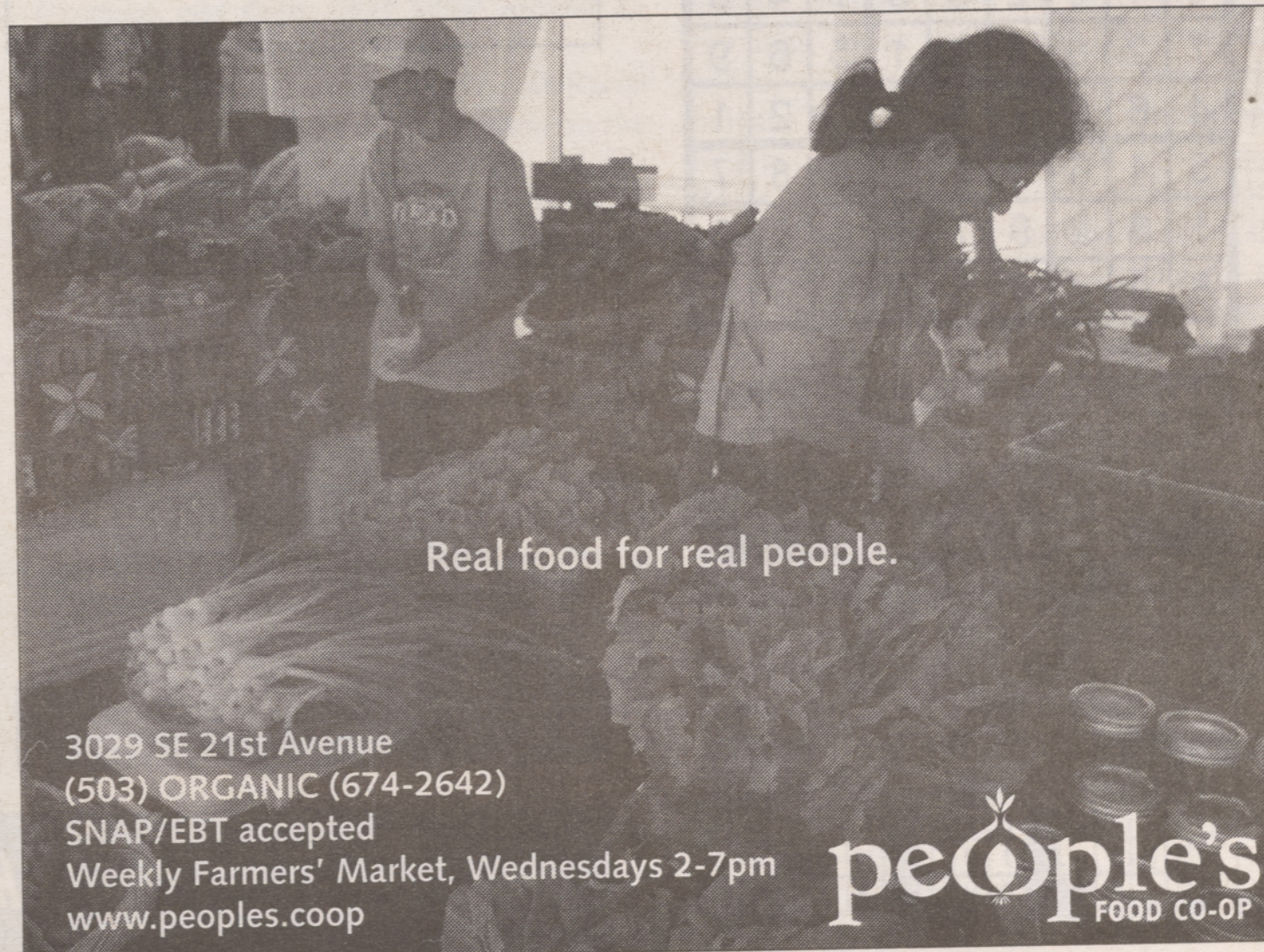
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