

EDITORIAL

Working together, we can find a place for us all

It's sometimes hard to find a place where you fit in. Our cover interview, John Waters, is no stranger to being the square peg in an industry of round holes. But he's charted his own course and established himself as a pioneer, exploring far, far beyond the beaten path. No compromises.

Johnny No Bueno, also in our pages this edition, put his life to poetry, and took a craft he discovered on the streets all the way to the stage. As an urban artist, Sean Aaron Bowers — Johnny's given name — is now carving a new course for himself, one he hopes will take him to the front of the class to help others find their passion.

All across Portland, people are creating the world in which they want to live. It's not always an easy task, and the goal seems to always lie just beyond the horizon. But on any given day, in a nonprofit organization anywhere in Portland, you will discover a

community of people doing, helping, creating, and changing their social environment for the better; volunteers, asking for nothing in exchange but to be a part of a better future.

Each year, the Willamette Week's Give!Guide (www.giveguide.org) lights a fire in the philanthropic hearts of the 35 and younger crowd who step up and support the amazing projects that keep the city in motion.

The same is true on the streets. We see random acts of kindness on a regular basis, from vendors giving a helping hand to others in greater need, or lending a shoulder in hard times. There's a mentorship that develops between people who have been to the bottom and have found the way back, and those clinging to a life line to stay afloat.

The holidays can be a difficult time for some people. It's a time that amplifies both the joyous and the sad. But through it all, people are making a difference. Susan Emmons, the executive director of Northwest Pilot Project, has been on the front lines for decades in the war against poverty and homelessness. Her organization has housed thousands upon thousands of men and women who have nowhere else to turn. She emerges from the trenches by putting one step forward, every day, with the outlook of a Portlander who is not alone in her vision of a better city where no one suffers for want of a home.

We all share that vision, and we can all be a part of getting us there. Because that is not a dream that lies beyond the horizon, always out of reach, but one that we have the capacity to make a reality. We shouldn't compromise on creating a permanent housing network that has a place for everyone and a labor market that lets those who can, do more. We shouldn't compromise on having shelter space on rainy nights or homelessness prevention efforts to help families over a rough patch. We don't have to be conventional, but if we're smart, we will find a place where all of us fit in.

Imagine you were homeless

Imagine for a moment that you were faced with the experience of being homeless and had nowhere else to turn.
Where should I go?



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DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

You find a local shelter, but a woman half your age at the counter lets you know that the shelter tonight is full. She takes your name and says to check in tomorrow and maybe something will come available.

"I have no place to go," you tell the shelter worker. "How can there not be enough shelter beds?"

"Right now, we're dealing with a large number of people sleeping outside, ma'am," the shelter worker tells you. "We're doing everything we can."

The woman offers you a blanket. You take it.

You knew that times were tough. You wouldn't be in this situation if you hadn't known that, but the idea of literally not having a place to call home is more than a little overwhelming at the moment.

You have everything you own on your back. Everything else was either thrown out in the eviction or you left it with your sister, who as hard as it was to do, also asked you to leave because there simply weren't enough resources for you to stay there any longer.

You walk.
Should I sleep in plain eyesight of people, or should I tuck myself away where it's hidden?

You find out quickly that sleeping under a bridge near the river feels unsafe and means sleeping with rodents. This is unacceptable, you think to yourself. You can't imagine how anyone could stand it. Rats. It gives you chills just thinking about them scurrying in the park.

If I sleep downtown I will feel unsafe. If I sleep in the neighborhoods, I will have to sleep on someone's property. I may scare people. How can I scare people? I use to be one of those people.

You begin to realize the noise. It never seems to stop. You wonder where one goes just to find some solace and to collect their thoughts.

Should I sleep alone, or with a group of people? I don't know anyone.

You begin to panic and your heart starts to race. The anxiety that has overcome you over the past several months as you were losing your home has returned. You have to sit down and simply breathe. You feel a panic attack coming on, but now's not the time to be paralyzed by fear. Your thoughts are racing so fast it's hard to even concentrate. Your entire body is tense.

Should I spend my last \$50 on a hotel and think this through? What if the hotel isn't safe? I'm sure it has bed bugs.

You start to lose daylight. You walk near an abandoned business where you see several other people bedding down. You ask if it's OK to sleep there too. No one seems to mind.

You ask if there's a restroom around. Someone hollers, "Four blocks down, but sometimes the gate is locked."

You go to the restroom. Thank goodness, it's open.

A stainless steel sink and toilet with no seat

cover stares back at you. The narrow concrete walls feel like they are closing in on you. There is no toilet paper.

Given the circumstances, you do your best to navigate in the small restroom with your backpack and blanket. You change into your last pair of clean socks and underwear. You decide to throw the others away. You clean your hands and face with cold water and walk out into the night. The cool air hits your face. You still feel dingy.

You bed down. You're lucky to have found an awning to shelter you from the rain. You try to sleep, but the concrete, your backpack for a pillow and the blanket you have are little comfort. You slip into an imaginary state, dreaming of better days, even as you wake up and acknowledge every single sound.

Groups of people walk by, laughter ensues. You remember a time when life was carefree and simple. You hear the moans of the man sleeping closest to you. They terrify you. The moans last all night. They will stay with you.

The sounds of cars and trucks driving by keep you awake. It's almost impossible to sleep given the circumstances. The late hours of the night bring large crowds of people coming and going from local bars until closing time. You feel vulnerable.

Someone makes a sideways comment about all of the bums downtown. You feel small.

You estimate that on your first night sleeping outside downtown that there was around two hours of silence, between the time when the bars closed and when the sounds of the delivery trucks started to arrive. You wake up slowly. Your back hurts. Your feet are tired. You are exhausted. The day is just beginning.

By noon, you notice sleep deprivation setting in. If you were thinking clearly before and panicked about the circumstance that you found yourself in, now you are just a walking shell of yourself. You become disoriented. Dehydrated.

Possibly you've been able to maintain your hygiene; possibly you've let it go. A group of people near the Greyhound Bus Depot tell you where the soup kitchens are, what places may or may not have a place to shower, and where you may go to find some help. You go back to the shelter and ask if anything has become available. Nothing.

You feel hopeless. You realize that the living hell you find yourself in may not end anytime soon. You start to feel disconnected from everyone and everything around you. You think about asking a stranger to borrow their cell phone to call a family member, but what would you say. Everything is surreal.

The thought of actually taking your own life enters your mind for the first time.

I couldn't.

You walk through the city alone. You go to the library but people clearly don't want to have anything to do with you. Some people are kind enough to say hi and show compassion. You catch the eye of someone walking out of the library.

"Sir, do you have a dollar or two to spare. I just became homeless and I really don't know what else to do."

You remember the time when your father took someone a lot like yourself out to eat at a local café. You remember feeling

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WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Send letters to the editor to the Street Roots office, 211 NW Davis St., Portland, OR 97209, or e-mail to joanne@streetroots.org

Our mission

Street Roots creates income opportunities for people experiencing homelessness and poverty by producing a newspaper and other media that are catalysts for individual and social change.

Street Roots publishes every two weeks, launching on Fridays, and is available exclusively through our street vendors or by subscription. We are proud members of the North American Street Newspaper Association and the International Network of Street Papers.

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Street Roots Rose City Resource

Street Roots publishes the Rose City Resource, a comprehensive booklet of services for people experiencing homelessness and poverty. To inquire about getting guides, call 503-228-5657. Resources are also available online at www.rosecityresource.org.

Vendors

Street Roots vendors buy the newspapers for 25 cents each and sell them for \$1, keeping the 75 cents in profit for themselves. In order to keep the cost low to our vendors, we receive additional support from donations and in-kind contributions.



75¢
goes directly to the vendor who sold you the paper

25¢
goes toward printing costs

Vendor orientations are at 1 p.m. every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at the Street Roots office.