

Drinking to Oblivion

By Jay Thiemeyer

late on sweating nights
one summer in Virginia
a guest who slept on my floor,
just "home" from Vietnam
where "home" was those days
he wondered and wondered aloud.
Just like the crickets.
We couldn't tell and he would joke,
if their chirping was inside,
or out. All those nights and
we never got an answer.
The crickets quiet on the subject.

He was a Southie
recruited underage in Boston, sent
some place he'd never heard of-
for his own good, the judge said,
and the good of the community:
"Jail or the Marines,
your choice." The judge said
he was a Marine, "there are no ex-Marines."
My guest went into the Army.
The recruiter was right next door.

We would drink till way after dawn;
the nights never ended.
The nights when the air was
crowded with emptiness;
nights when the booze poured
and his voice percolated up
with the poison. We'd sit on the floor,
like we were at the beach, stretched out,
basking in the nonstop bullshit,
the bottles lining up beside us.
One question always hung about us:
What next? A life?
After what was left over there
was all that was left?
My guest hadn't a clue. No
theories, no lessons from school.
He had memories and in his
brain, he was convinced,
the CIA had implanted something.
He could feel it right over his ear. I told him
maybe it was the war.

Working his way back to normal

BY ANN-DERRICK GAILLOT
STAFF WRITER

When I meet Shawn Saunders he explains he is at a point of transition. For the past six months he has been selling Street Roots and now, just coming up on his first anniversary of his release from prison, Shawn admits selling the paper is the only thing keeping him financially afloat. "How good my day goes depends on how generous people can be," he tells me. "Even if they walk by and look you in the eye." He is visibly weary. The methadone he is prescribed to help him cope with heroin

VENDOR PROFILE Shawn Saunders

withdrawal plus his reserved nature make our interview especially tiring for him.

Shawn has been without a permanent home ever since his release and is now taking the important, yet perhaps most difficult, first steps to healthful self-sufficiency. He hopes to claim a bed at an addictions in-patient treatment center within the next couple weeks. Originally from Bakersfield, Calif., Shawn moved to Portland in 1999 to escape the violence of his hometown. And with this fresh start came new experiences, including his first exposure to heroin. "I was addicted before I even knew it," he remembers. "Until one day I just got tired of it and didn't do it ... And then I got sick." Now Shawn is trying to get back on his feet, not only for himself,

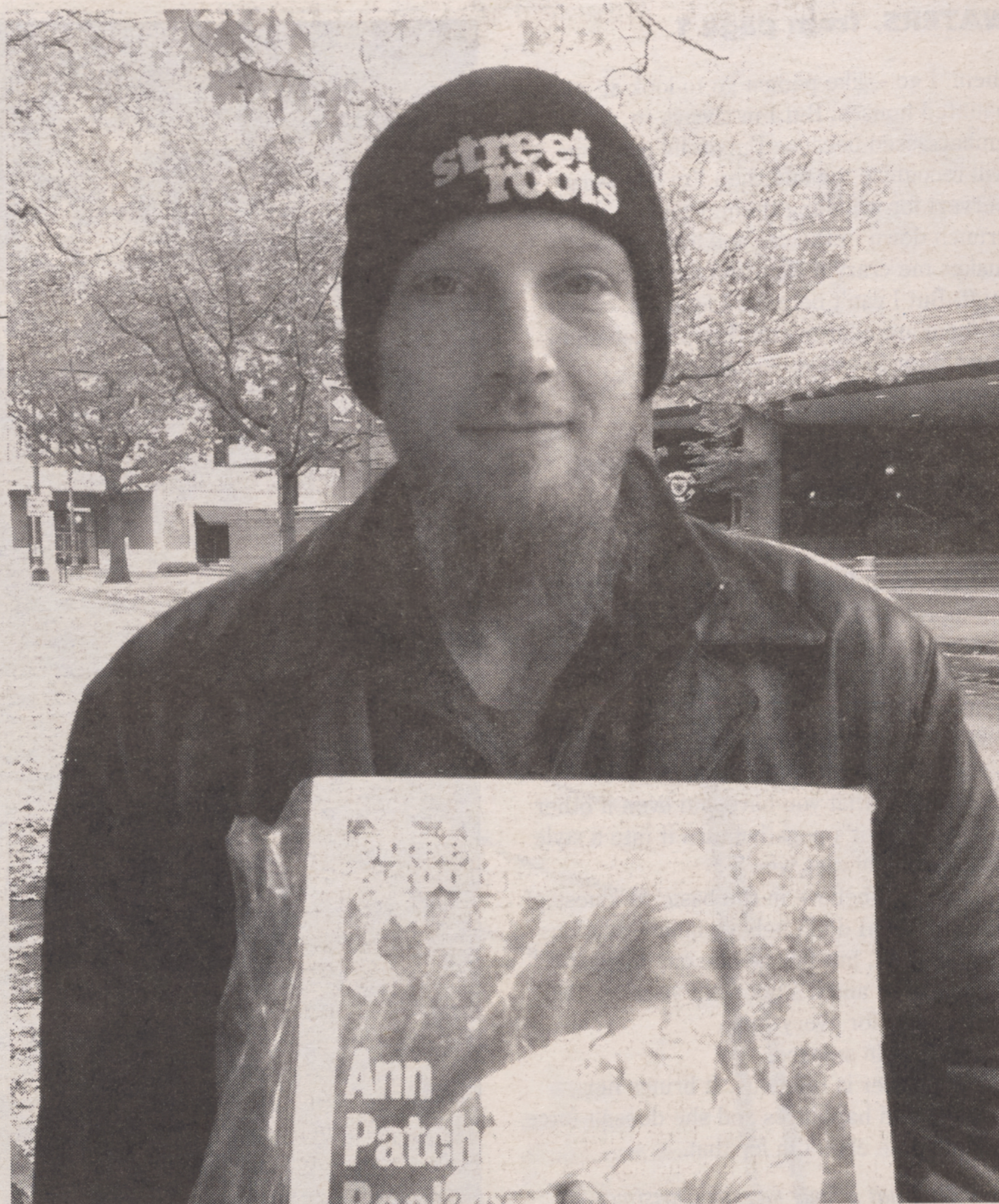


PHOTO BY COLE MERKEL

but for his two children. "I just really don't want to hurt people anymore, you know?" he says. "I'm just trying to do the right thing for once. And it ain't easy."

In the past, Shawn worked as a veterinary technician. He now misses having the influence of animals in his life. "It was just therapeutic," he says, "being

around animals all day. I just love animals." I wonder if he sees himself ever working with animals again, but before I can ask, Shawn shares his vision of his future with me. "As far as the future I'm not planning anything. Later, when I push him further about his hopes, he relents, but just a bit. "I just want a normal life now. Nothing too fancy."



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Answers to puzzles on page 15

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