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Thursday, February 20
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A smile goes a long way toward a better day

BY ANN-DERRICK GAILLOT
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When I first meet William, downtown was shuttered by a snowstorm. Despite having slept outside in the cold the night before, William is in a good mood.

"Today is a good day," he says. "Sympathy day." For William, it seems bad weather makes for better sales; everyone's temporary discomfort, as they go to and from home and Starbucks and work, sheds a small light on the hardships William faces every day.

VENDOR PROFILE
William Howard

PHOTO BY COLE MERKEL

"I'll sell in the rain, snow, windy weather," he says. "Because it beats doing nothing."

Every morning William commutes from where he stays near the airport to his downtown selling spots. From 8 to 11 a.m. and then from noon to 1:15 p.m., William sells at the Starbucks at Southwest Third and Jefferson Street. In the afternoons he serves as an alternate vendor at the Safeway at Southwest 10th Avenue.

When he is not selling papers, William can be found at the library or at the Pioneer Square Starbucks. The gift cards his loyal customers give him buy him coffee and a place to relax after a long day of selling.

"I ain't been at this long, but I do pretty good," says William. He has been with Street Roots since Jan. 25 and says he's already sold about 300 copies of the paper. In that time he has also built up a loyal customer base and support group. "If I wasn't there the day before," he recounts. "The first thing they say is, 'Where were you?' It was kind of cold and I had to take a day off. But they really missed me. Wow, that made me feel good."

Though William has only been with Street Roots for the past few months, years ago the Bronx native was a part of street newspaper history. In 1988 he began selling Street News, one of the first street newspapers in the country.

"Street News was the first homeless newspaper," says William. "And it was for the homeless by the homeless." William began selling the paper at its beginning and continued to do so for the next three years, outside of Penn Station, Grand Central Station, and on the subway. "In New York then you could go down in the subway and sell on the subway and on the platforms. It was around for almost 10 years, and now it's no more."

William arrived in Portland in October after having hitchhiked his way across the country. Former vendor profilee Michelle Sapp first introduced him to Street Roots. "She brought me. It took a couple times because I had other things to do. But she brought me and I stuck."

Now, on the verge of becoming 61, William plans on making Portland his permanent home. "I kind of like it out in this part of the country," he says with a grin. "It's a city with small town feel ... I'm getting old. I'm tired. I done traveled all over the United States hitchhiking, living on the street. It's something I got out of my system and I'm ready to be done. I'm ready to stick now."

The deciding factor on whether William will stick here or not is veterans and seniors housing downtown having an opening. Patiently he waits. For William, an opening in veterans housing may be the most concrete sign of acceptance the Vietnam War veteran has received since returning from war nearly 40 years ago.

Enlisted at age 17 and off fighting in Vietnam at 18, William says the war is no longer hard for him to speak about.

"It's been over 40 years since I've been back, and I put it behind me. It's water under the bridge, so I don't dwell on that... It's just a part of my life that was lived there. I left it there. I didn't bring it back here, so I can keep on going on with my life, looking ahead instead of looking back. So now it don't bother me to talk about it."

Indeed, William has an upbeat, optimistic attitude that is as contagious as it is inspiring.

That optimism paid off on Feb. 25. After six months of waiting, living homeless since September, William received the keys to his new apartment. William got his apartment with the help of the Veterans Administration. "Street Roots saved my life," he said. "By selling Street Roots it kept me away from drugs and alcohol."

"The type of person I am, smiling, outgoing – they'll tell you that," says William, speaking of his much-loved customers. "When they see me out there smiling and selling my papers it makes them feel good." And judging from the overwhelmingly positive feedback he receives from his customers, William has touched more hearts than he knows.

VENDOR WORK ADS

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Answers to puzzles on page 15

6	3	8	7	9	5	2	4	1
9	1	2	3	4	6	5	8	7
5	7	4	2	1	8	3	9	6
4	9	3	6	7	2	8	1	5
2	6	7	8	5	1	9	3	4
8	5	1	4	3	9	7	6	2
3	4	5	9	6	7	1	2	8
1	8	9	5	2	4	6	7	3
7	2	6	1	8	3	4	5	9