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VENDOR PROFILE

Dirk Benson

BY LEONORA KO
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When Dirk Benson sits down in the Street Roots office, his priority is to plug in his aging cellphone.

There's no electricity in his hut at Dignity Village, and the phone is a lifeline to the two most important things in his life: his faraway family and a search for a job.

"I used to be one of those guys they look for in the Lexus commercials, nicely appointed cars for well-qualified buyers," Dirk says. "I owned the house and two cars and had the kids and dogs."

Back then he was living in Alabama and producing motion graphics, copywriting and animation for television and the NASA-TV space flight center. Then, Dirk says, "what happened was bad choices as with most of us around here. I did it to myself."

Needing a change of scenery, Dirk left Alabama and a failed marriage. He has been in Portland for almost three years. His unemployment ran out, and it has been difficult to get a living wage.

"I'm one of those people that you read about in the paper and who's been out there looking. Eventually, if you don't have the income and you can't pay rent anymore, you're out pretty quick. It's a whole new world out there."

Dirk has frostbite on his feet from his time on the street.

"It's not a walk in the park — pun intended," he says.

For the moment, Dirk lives at Dignity Village and has a roof over his head.

"I've got a tiny dog and a tiny life; I don't need much space. My goal is to get enough money to actually build my own tiny house on a trailer. The springboard is a job. Everything hinges on that."

So every day, Dirk hits the Internet, shops for jobs and carries resumes in his bag. He has worked in many restaurants, but his current bout of psoriasis, a noncontagious skin disease, excludes him from those jobs. He hopes his new treatment protocol in a research study will clear up the condition.

As for an ideal job, Dirk says, "copywriter appeals to me the most. I have an affinity for it. I'm good at it. I've done it for years."

When Dirk gets freelance jobs, he completes his work at the Independent Publishing Resource Center, a nonprofit organization on Southeast Division Street.

In between jobs and when things get dire, Dirk sells Street Roots in front of Walgreens on the corner of Northeast Grand Avenue and Northeast Weidler Street.

"When you've burned your life down to the ground," he says, "Street Roots is the last house on the block with the door still open. And that means a lot. I'm just treading water, but it's keeping me upright. It's giving me some hope. I'm still trying."

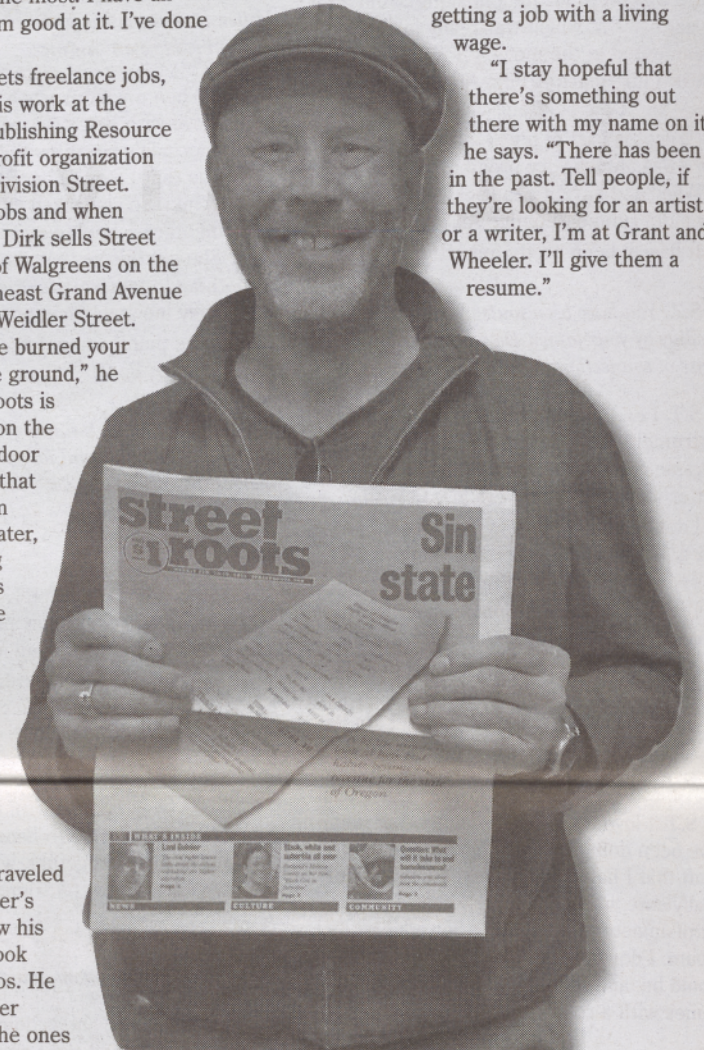
His 14-year-old daughter is another reason for trying to improve his situation. Last year when he traveled east for his sister's wedding, he saw his daughter and took cellphone photos. He says his daughter deftly deleted the ones

that she didn't like, and he said, "No, no! Honey, any picture of you, to me, is precious. Please don't do that. That's 14 for you."

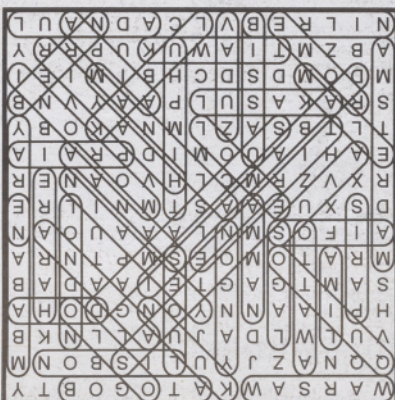
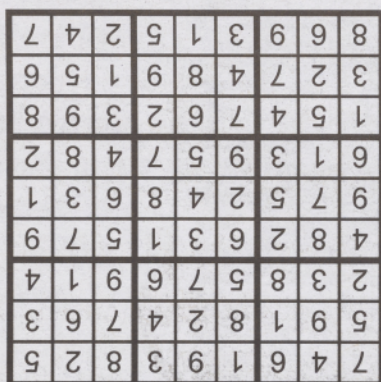
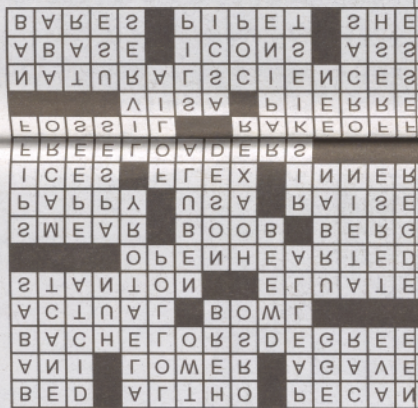
He adds, "I don't know how much my daughter knows about my current situation. I just want to get back to that point where she can be proud of me, and that means getting out of where I'm at."

And Dirk knows that means getting a job with a living wage.

"I stay hopeful that there's something out there with my name on it," he says. "There has been in the past. Tell people, if they're looking for an artist or a writer, I'm at Grant and Wheeler. I'll give them a resume."



Answers to puzzles on page 15

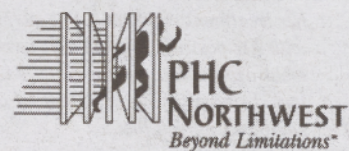


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