

DRAWING BY MICHAEL VOTTA

Saying goodbye to a hero of Street Roots

Michael Votta passed away on Portland's streets last week. He was an artist and a friend to many people, inside and out.

For many, Michael's life represents the failure of a system to help thousands of people suffering to find stability and housing. They wouldn't be wrong. Saying that, Michael Votta's life was more than a political slogan, no matter how true that slogan may ring.

Haunted by the ghosts of mental illness and addiction, Michael's life was engulfed by homelessness, violence and trauma. He inhabited space in this world that was bigger than life. A hard and complicated man, Michael didn't let too many people close to him. Those who were able to get to know Michael understood that beneath all of the wreckage, there was a gentle soul.

Through all of the madness, Michael was a light in the darkness, bright and shining, who spent much of his life keeping the vampires at bay. In many ways Michael's role on the streets was to protect others. He did so with pride, despite all of the pain and suffering. If there was someone being abused or suffering on the streets, Michael was always the first to stand up to defend the vulnerable, even if it meant sacrificing his freedom.

Like many street fighters and others who have a complicated relationship with violence, it wasn't something Michael was proud of. It was simply a survival tool in a world that wasn't sophisticated enough to understand the path that Michael walked.

Some people on the streets knew Michael as "Scarface," a nickname he picked up from a scar that ran from the left side of his eye all the way down his face. He never did like that nickname,

telling me once, "I play the role I was given."

The headaches and voices in Michael's head pushed him to the brink on most days. Some days he struggled to string together his thoughts, existing somewhere on the edge of a world most people can't comprehend. Other days Michael was able to contribute to the world we've created with his artwork and by selling Street Roots and volunteering at Sisters Of The Road.

Michael and I spent almost all of our time on this earth smoking cigarettes and talking about his comic books and drawings. "I want to create a Street Roots superhero someday."

We would laugh together, coming up with different scenarios for his comics that reflected the world we had both come to know. A world where morals and everyday norms remain twisted and bent up, broken down and unmanageable. A world where there often isn't a storybook ending, but only a menu of hard choices and unfortunate circumstances. A world constantly crying out for something more. A world crying out for justice.

For those of us who knew Michael, we will miss him, and never forget his soft-spoken demeanor and wry smile, and his unconditional love for others, regardless of their circumstances. He did not live without truly touching other people's lives. He did not live without loving and being loved. In the end, isn't that all we can ask for?

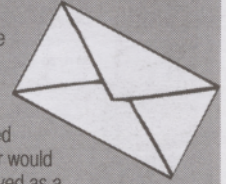
Here's to you Michael Votta, our superhero. I hope you're able to find peace in the next life, my friend. I know you brought a peace to mine in this one.



At top, artwork from Michael Votta, giving the "thumbs up." Above, the author with Michael earlier this year.

Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

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