

KEYNOTE, from page 10

I became that lady. Across the aisle, a normal lady was watching romantic comedies on her iPad and avoided eye contact with me, which was probably the kind thing to do. At that point, I wanted to put the story away, wipe my tears and get a bad bloody mary from the train dining car, but by the grace of something, I kept reading.

And it was impossible to read the story without being awestruck by the courage Sherri possessed to face down her own death. To prepare herself and her family for a time when she could no longer control what happened to them, the courage to ask for help, the courage to let go. And on the other side of the camera, the courage of Llewellyn Gannon, the woman and mother who volunteered to accept part of Sherri's pain as her own, to document her final journey despite the emotional cost to herself.

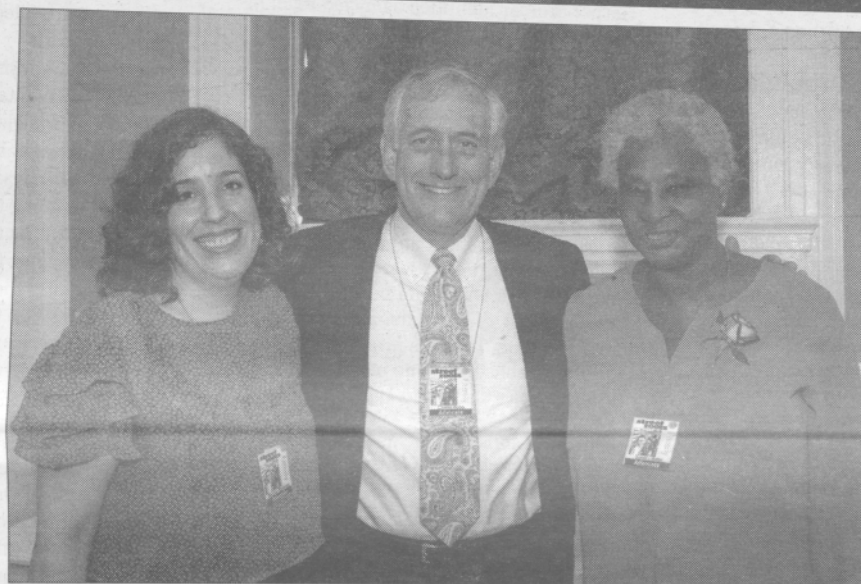
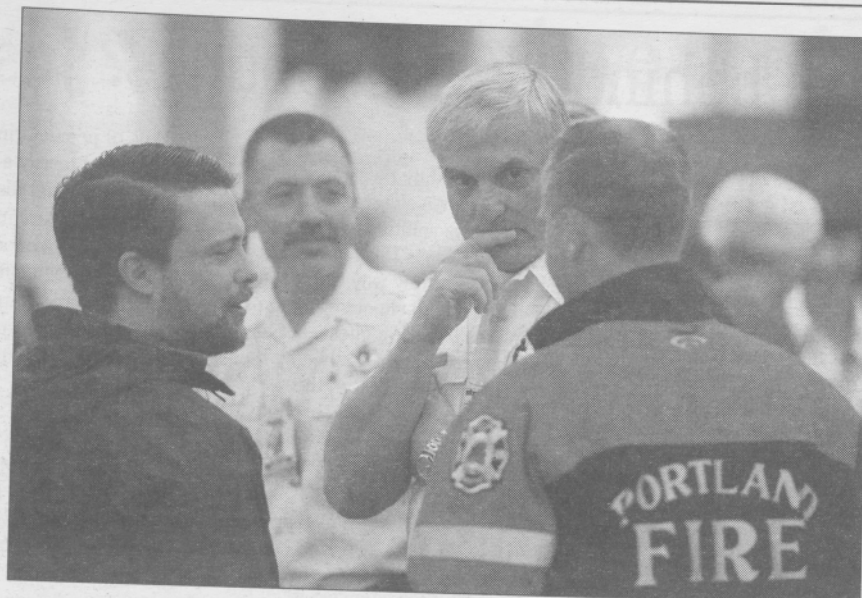
Llewellyn wrote this about Sherri's decision to end her life on her own terms: "It wasn't an easy way out; it was the best way out. I watched her say goodbye with hope in her eyes, not defeat. I learned so much about bravery and love in the short time that I shared and documented for her, and I learned more about strength than I have in all of my life. She succeeded in creating a beautiful community. I'm fortunate enough to be part of it."

When you read a story like this, or when I did, it melted away the shallow and insignificant concerns of the ego. It challenged me to question my own courage. Afraid to cry on the train? Pffff. What nonsense. I consider myself a relatively tough and resilient person, but I wondered, could I be that brave? Could I lead my family that way, with that grace?

There is a sort of famous guy named Marty Linski who writes about leadership and he says, rather coldly, that there are no leaders. You can exercise leadership, but there are no leaders. Like writers, you are only as good as your last story. Whether he's right or not, I think that's the aspirational standard to have for ourselves if we want to lead at the bleeding edge. He also says, by the way, that because there are no leaders, anyone can exercise leadership — no matter where you are — because it's about what you do with what you have. Are you on the edge of your authority and influence, or are you safely within the boundaries of your role?

If you're being truly courageous, not just speaking with confidence or machismo or simply exercising your authority, it's quiet. It's lonely. It's probably uncomfortable. And if you, like me, are tired of the headlines and tired of the suffering around us, we need to get uncomfortable. If we're interested in helping our neighbors who aren't just uncomfortable, they are unsheltered and unprotected, turning into their pain and feeling unsettled is the least we can do. It can't be harder than getting the kids ready for school and sending them off in an envelope of love when your rent just went up \$500 overnight. It can't be harder than maintaining your dignity when people go to further lengths to protect their street parking than they do to protect you.

The other thing Sherri's story illuminated for me was the lack of courage in our national discourse. Which of our national leaders, or would-be leaders, facing



Mike Boyer with the city of Portland talks with members of the Portland Fire Department at the Street Roots Family Breakfast. Above Portland Mayor Charlie Hales poses with Marissa Mardrigal (left) and Street Roots vendor Sandra Hahn.

decisions that are just as dire, just as life-and-death, are exercising the steely courage and grace of a young mother saying goodbye to her son?

Because it's not solutions that are lacking — it's courage. There is no shortage of ideas, there is no shortage of answers. In this age of information, the salve is at our fingertips, a Google search away. But, there is a drought of courage and kindness. Our society chases the easy way, instead of the best way.

My parents couldn't be here today, but they had high expectations of me, and for that I am grateful. I was not allowed, ever, to leave my potential on the table. But, I was allowed to make mistakes. And it was when I made mistakes, and tearfully confessed them to my parents, that they were the kindest. And it was that kindness, that forgiveness that allowed me to pick myself up, shake off the guilt and learn from what I did wrong. So, kindness is not something that we should guard, or withhold or dole out in dribs and drabs. Kindness and love is what we should

give whenever we can, and is even more valuable when we don't have to, or when it is not returned to us, because it heals in ways that endure.

If we are going to find the way to navigate our community and our country through

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this housing crisis, through the impacts of climate change and xenophobia and deadly racism, we need to be kinder. We need to, right now, forgive each other for our past mistakes, slights and oversights so that we can work together. It's easier not to. It's easier and safer to be

cynical and expect the worst of each other than be disappointed, again. But I suspect you're here because that's not how you really feel deep down. No one says, "I hope to wrap myself safely in cynicism when I grow up!"

Did you know that the primary cause of dysfunction on a team is a lack of trust? And do you know how humans build trust? By being vulnerable with each other. And on a team, one person, *one*, who is invulnerable can poison the entire thing. Just stop it cold.

So, Street Roots family, forgive someone today, even if it's just in your heart. Tomorrow, be vulnerable with someone — could be a stranger, no one needs to know. Saturday can be a rest day. Sunday, be nice to someone you're not sure deserves it. It costs you nothing, and it gives you everything. Make kindness and vulnerability a daily practice, and do it in service of your community, no matter who you are.

And when it gets hard to do, because it will, dream about what our state would look and feel like if we agreed together to have courage and be kind. Courage to tell the truth — that we aren't going to solve all our problems in one four-year term, or even two. Courage to talk about the trade-offs and sacrifices — political, economic and otherwise — we have to make for it to happen. Courage to support a good idea for the good of the people, even if it's not yours, especially if it's your opponent's. There's this dreamy capturing of dignity and civility that is possible if we all try.

So are we in this room, myself included, doing things, writing things, saying things that scare us when we know it's the best thing to do for others? Because, the rest of the country be damned, I know, in my buoyantly hopeful moments that if any community can make things better, we can. If any group of people gathering to break bread and plot the revolution can do it, it is this group, this family. Street Roots staff, vendors and supporters, you are badasses. You are unflinching and electric.

Collectively, the people in this room have already done so much. Big things, like going weekly and advocating for and committing tens of millions of dollars in funding to house and shelter people. Little big things like telling the stories we might never hear, remembering the people we've lost who live on in our hearts, stopping to listen. You are leaving things better than you found them. You've done a lot, but we can do more.

Anyone sitting now in this room, thinking about the thing they wish they'd done, wish they'd said, wish they'd committed — there is still time! This room — I'm speaking for you now, room — is behind you. We can't let what we've never done before, or what we wish we'd done, keep us from doing what we need to do now. We forgive you; now let's move on.

So, after I blubbered on the train and searched my soul for signs of courage and strength, I was quiet. And I was thinking about Sherri and her birthday cake, staring out the window and steeling myself to fight on, and there, on a little puddle of asphalt at a railroad crossing in nowhere Washington, stood four grown humans laughing and smiling, jumping and waving at the train, hoping for an acknowledgement by the strangers inside. Oh, humans. You aren't terrible. You're pretty wonderful. In this vast universe of dust and stars and probably aliens, this is the meaning of life.

Connection. Small joys that are over in the blink of a cosmic eye. Moments when we look into each other's eyes, really look, and open ourselves to whatever we find there.

Earthly Street Roots family, let's have the courage to be vulnerable in our hope. To love and be loved. To look really silly. To wave and smile at strangers. To turn toward the pain, instead of away from it, and learn everything we can so we remember it when we need the courage to do the best thing. And then let's do it.

PHOTOS BY ADAM BACHER