



Israel Bayer and Rebekah, outside of the Street Roots office.

Finding a way to heal by helping others

Rebekah's story, like those of so many people that come through the door of Street Roots, is a story of trying to find redemption against a backdrop of poverty and tragedy. Abuse. Trauma. Human suffering.

Death. It can be overwhelming.

The ugly circumstances of poverty often are both cruel and unforgiving. Witnessing people continue on, against all odds, blows me away.

At 59, Rebekah, a diabetic, survives monthly on \$650 disability assistance plus \$115 in food stamps.

After rent, paying for utilities and purchasing food for herself and her two cats, she has little to nothing to survive on.

"My cats are my soulmates," Rebekah said.

Besides chronic pain in her spine from a skydiving accident and her diabetes, Rebekah deals with severe depression. "I just find a way to keep going."

Rebekah said that being a diabetic and surviving on a fixed income has been almost impossible. "I can't provide myself with a healthy diet with food stamps. Living on things that many poor people are forced to survive on, like ramen and macaroni and cheese, would kill me, literally."

Rebekah said finding Street Roots has given her the opportunity to find both a community and money to help her balance her diet.

Paulette, another vendor living on a fixed income in Rebekah's building, introduced her to Street Roots. "We are a team out there. We talk to one another and support each other. We are friends, something I don't take for granted."

After reading my column this month about the death of James Michael Bostick, who died homeless in Portland earlier this year, Rebekah came to me with tears in her eyes. "My only son, Shawn, also died homeless on the streets," she said, showing me a picture of her son. Rebekah said she carries the photo with her everywhere she goes.

"The truth is, both my life and my son's life was horrific," said Rebekah. "I wasn't able to give my son the life I dreamed of. I grew up in an abusive home. My mother was an addict and never had more than a seventh grade education. We had nothing. I was a latchkey kid that had little to hope for. I became an addict at 12 years old and then a teenage mother. I wish I could go back and do it all over again."

With tears rolling down her face, Rebekah continued. "My entire life I was told I was stupid and not going to amount to anything. It wasn't until I found recovery and got clean in 1988 that I realized that I was a human being and could contribute to the world."

After getting clean and sober, Rebekah started taking classes at a community college. Over the next decade, Rebekah pieced life together, one day and one week at a time.

Working any job she could find, while going to college, eventually she would earn both a bachelor's degree and then a master's degree in conflict resolution.

"It was all for naught," she said. "It was too late for my baby boy. I did everything I could, but in the end it was too late. His death haunts me every single day of my life."

Shawn died homeless of a heroin overdose in Portland in his early 20s after struggling with homelessness and addiction.

"He was a beautiful boy," says Rebekah, "It's just that we never had a lot and he was hard to handle. I did the best I could to provide for him, but in the end, that wasn't enough."

Pausing, Rebekah told me the only way to continue on was to try to help other people. "I began getting in touch with my native roots and learning about providing care for the sick and the dying. I also made a vow to stay clean and sober. It's not been easy," she said.

Today, Rebekah sells Street Roots at the corner of Southwest Ninth Avenue and Taylor Street outside Starbucks every Friday, where she said the store manager, employees and customers have adopted her. "They are so good to me."

"I suppose our jobs in life are to find our own purpose and to do the best we can regardless of all the pain we might go through," says Rebekah. "My goal in life today is to continue to help others, even if that's as simple as sharing a hot meal with someone on the streets. I try to see the goodness in all people, regardless of the pain. We can never completely heal from all of the tragedy in our lives, but we can connect with one another and do right by our fellow human beings when possible."

True that, Rebekah. Thank you for sharing your story and giving us all hope. Despite all of our triumphs and failures, both big and small, in the end, it's the best we can do.



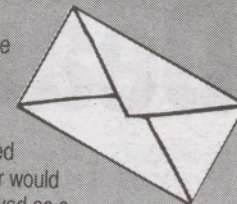
DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

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Write in

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