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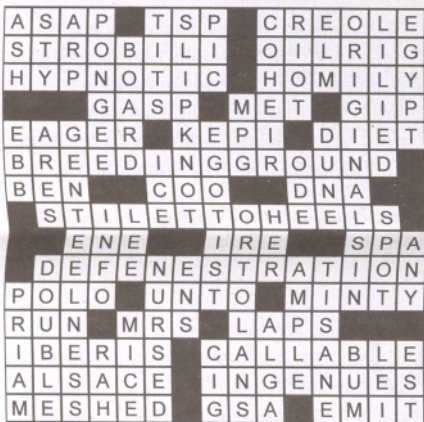
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VENDOR PROFILE Dennis Chavez

BY LEONORA KO
STAFF WRITER

Dennis Chavez is an Army veteran with a different kind of mission: finding permanent housing and a steady job.

He was born in Orange County, Calif., and joined the Army as a Chinook helicopter mechanic, serving during the conflicts in Central America. He flew between Nicaragua and Honduras between 1986 and 1990.

He was shot at once, on what he was told was a training mission.

"We were down there supporting the Contras," he said. "So I'm flying over triple canopy jungle and all of a sudden my Chinook helicopter, which is normally very dark (inside), is getting brighter and brighter. Somebody down in the jungle was shooting at us (making bullet holes). I shot back. It's the only time that I ever shot at anybody. I hope I didn't hit anybody. Just trying to stay alive."

Dennis served his four years and then took advantage of the G.I. Bill to study political science at Washington State University. He followed a rigorous work and class schedule, delivering the campus newspaper in the predawn hours, attending classes until noon and working at another job in the afternoon.

"I was a 27-year-old freshman, was married and had a daughter," he said. "I worked 40 hours a week the whole time I was a full-time student."

After graduating, Dennis got jobs in the state of Washington, first as

an employment counselor for dislocated loggers and fishermen and then as a caseworker to help families get off public assistance. The government ended funding, and Dennis, along with 60 others, was out of work.

In 2003, Dennis moved to Portland because he thought job prospects would be better. He found a good position with a business research company called Marketing Strategies and developed successful relationships with customers. But in 2009, the company moved to Arkansas, and he said that's when his downward spiral began.

For the past three years, Dennis has been on and off the streets, depending on whether he can find a job.

"There's really not a lot of work in this town other than call centers, going door to door, selling something. I look every day," he said. His most recent job was knocking on doors and

soliciting donations for an organization. He said the job was "a nightmare. If you didn't make enough money you were in trouble. ... My last week that I worked there, I worked six days (and only) brought in for myself \$17."

Now, Dennis said, he can make that much in a day with Street Roots, and his relationship with the community is more fulfilling. He sells the paper at a spot between the Portland Art Museum and the YMCA near the corner of Southwest 10th Avenue and Southwest Main Street.

Even though Dennis has sold Street Roots for a short time, he has quickly made friends with customers and museum employees. When a new security guard ran Dennis off of his selling spot, other museum staff stood up for him.

"One of the head maintenance people said, 'Oh Dennis, I'm glad I found you. We had a meeting about you. You're fine, you can come back over here.'" Dennis recalled, "Other security guys came by the next day to say, 'Sorry it happened. This is a public sidewalk. You're just always out here smiling, talking to people. No problem.'"

Dennis chuckled, "I actually kind of felt honored."

Things are looking up for Dennis. He now stays at the downtown Peace Shelter, which he described as a "really nice facility." The shelter was made possible by the prominent real estate Menashe family, who donated vacant space in their building and partnered with Transitions Projects and the city of Portland to quickly erect the shelter in January.

His next goals are to get an apartment and a job with enough income so that he can support himself. He is working with Transitions Projects to get housing and spends two hours a day at a library computer, looking for a job.

Dennis has been on both the helping and receiving end of social services and said he hoped his story would help others.

"Don't ever give up. It's not worth giving up because there are good people out there, and you've just got to connect with them. Stay strong. Believe that things will get better. And then they will."



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