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VENDOR PROFILE

Loretta H.

BY LEONORA KO
STAFF WRITER

Compassion is a basic value for Loretta H. And now that Loretta is facing struggles herself, some of that compassion is returning to her through friends, her sister and Street Roots.

"We've had people live with us for months when they were in a difficult situation," Loretta said. "That was a value growing up and in our family."

Loretta and her husband, Andy, lived a comfortable life in Los Angeles for 25 years.

"We are both from middle-class families," Loretta said. "My husband is an aerospace engineer, retired. I have my degree in nursing. I was a registered nurse, but I haven't done that in decades."

"But then 10 years ago, my husband got cancer. We did a lot of alternative medicine, which was not covered by insurance. So we put thousands of dollars in alternative medicine, and he's alive."

They moved to Redding, Calif., to be near a treatment center.

Medical bills were put on credit cards. The credit cards were paid out of their 401(k) retirement plans.

"We lost a lot of money," she said.

After going

through bankruptcy, Loretta and Andy found a job co-managing a business in Vancouver, Wash. But the 96-hour workweeks became too stressful, and they went back to Redding. They were taken in by friends and Loretta's sister but left both places, not wanting to overstay their welcome.

"We decided that we would travel to figure out where we would go, but neither of us thought it would be nine months," Loretta said. "I say we were homeless. My husband says we were 'on the road.'"

They traveled up and down the Interstate 5 corridor from Mexico to Canada. Most nights were spent at rest stops, and they slept in their Toyota van, which also carried their remaining possessions.

"It was very obvious to look in the van and know that there was more going on than just driving," Loretta said

with a laugh. "It's been a good van. I call her Esperanza - it means 'hope.'"

Loretta and Andy practice both Christian and Jewish

rituals. While on the road, they made a special effort to observe Shabbat on Friday evenings, the beginning of Judaism's day of rest.

"It's a way of keeping faith that things will get better," Loretta said. "That we're not 'under' our circumstances, no matter what. The way I see it, I'm a spiritual being, I have a soul, and I live in a body. And it is well on the inside - no matter what's going on on the outside."

Loretta's first brush with Street Roots was meeting vendor Marlon Crump.

"I had just a five-minute conversation with him," Loretta said. "He talked about Street Roots as a possible job. He told me a little bit about his life. But I just remember his compassion."

"He was the face of Portland's compassion to me."

Since then, Loretta and Andy have found a caretaking job that comes with an apartment to live in.

And recently, Loretta began selling Street Roots and has been mentored by Marlon and another vendor, Saoirse.

Selling papers is "very, very humbling," Loretta said. "Some people look down at you with their eyes and body language. And it's OK. It really is OK because it doesn't define me. Then there are other people who are so kind. And those are the ones I choose to remember."

Loretta also chooses to look at the positive aspects of her life.

She said: "We've been married 32 years, and I would say that on the road, we really got to know each other as a couple, after kids. Our lives have been difficult, but I feel like a stronger person."

Loretta says her next step is figuring out what positive impact she can have for her new community.



Answers to Page 15 Puzzles

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by Elizabeth Considine

