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VENDOR PROFILE

Melanie Mulkey

BY HELEN HILL
STAFF WRITER

Melanie Mulkey has been through some very hard times in her 30 years. Growing up, her parents were alcoholics and her mother was also a meth addict. At age 7 she was sexually abused by adults in the home. When she couldn't get anyone to believe her, Melanie began roaming the streets, smoking cigarettes and going down every wrong path she could think of in pain and confusion.

Eventually Melanie was taken out of her mother's home and sent to live with her father. Her life improved when he started playing drums at the Assembly of God, a Christian church on Alberta Street. "Church was fun," she recalled, "but school was still tough."

At age 10, she tried to tell the school nurse she was beaten at home, she had the welts to prove it, but there was no intervention. By fifth grade she was labeled ADHD and placed in a special behavioral class because she couldn't sit still. She was suspended repeatedly and finally expelled from high school. She started using meth at age 14, by age 15 she was on probation. She's been homeless since she was 18.

"I wish I could've had a different childhood. I wish they hadn't been married," Melanie said, "but my hard childhood made me the strong person I am today. Going through what I did built me up to be a better person. It was an eye-opener. I remember thinking I don't want to live like this, I want to do something with my life and be clean and sober. I tried to emancipate when I was 16, but you have to have a place to live and a job. They didn't

let me."

One of the bright spots in her childhood was when she was sent to live with her grandparents in Oklahoma. They were her best friends. Her grandfather, Abe Mulkey, was a famous country western songwriter and singer who performed with Lefty Frizzell, Merle Haggard and Buck Owens. He gave her a guitar and taught her to play. The guitar was a precious possession, but it was stolen when she returned to Oregon.

Melanie is currently staying at a shelter with her fiancé Aaron. After 12 years of being homeless, she has a deep knowledge of what it takes. "Safety is the biggest issue on the streets, that and having enough blankets. Any person is at risk. There are so many homeless people in Portland, and we all get judged. People assume we are all addicts, but don't judge me unless you know my story."

Melanie and her fiancée found out about Street Roots a few years ago, but she wanted to wait until she was clean and sober. "You have an image to uphold when you sell Street

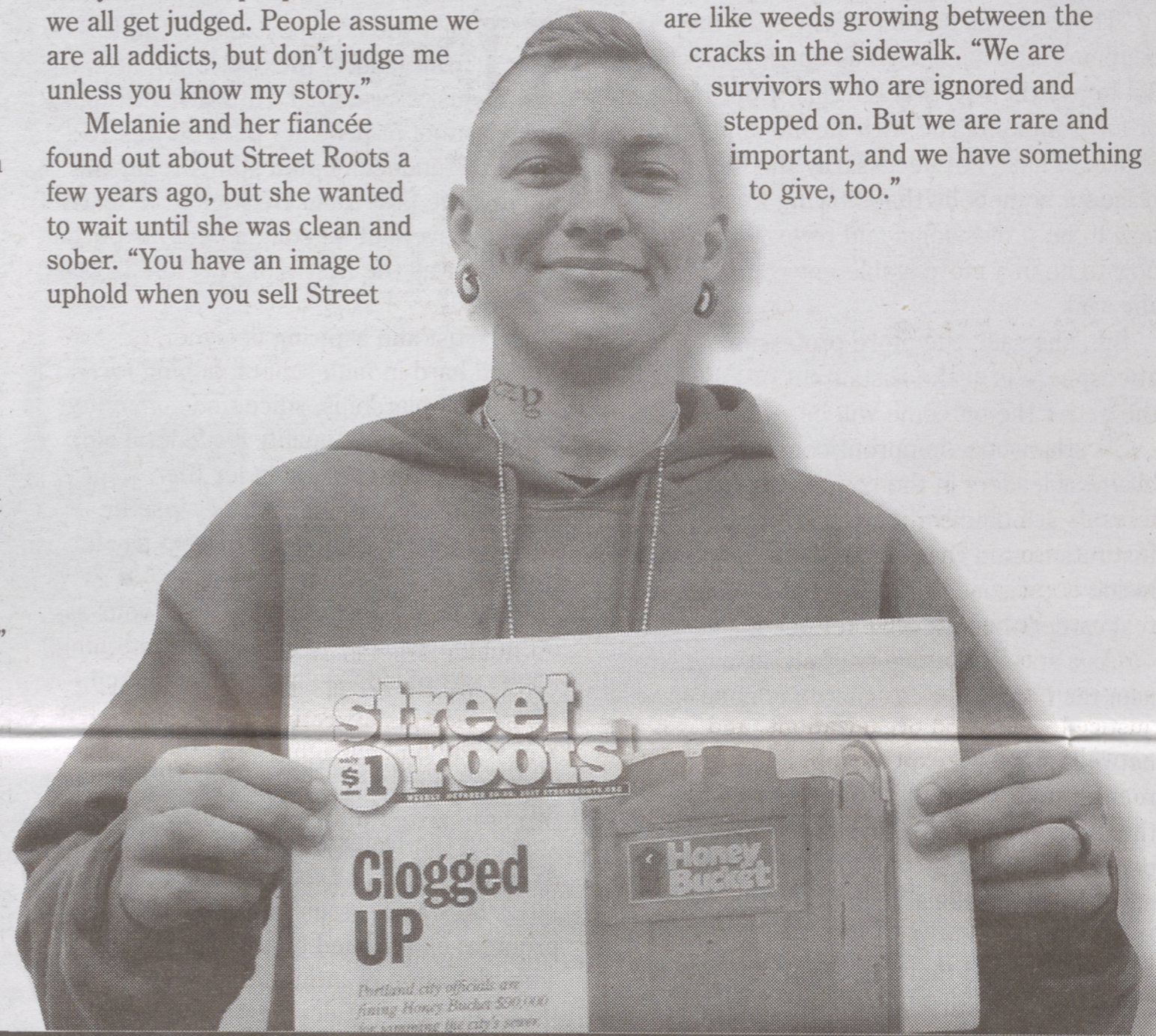
Roots."

She had been staying clean, but when her grandparents died, she relapsed. She got clean again by going cold turkey and she's been straight now for 11 months.

Melanie knows she needs to stay sober to stay alive. She's had a rough year with pneumonia and bronchitis, and suffers from a birth defect known as Chiari Malformation which causes intense headaches and dizziness. "I was bed-bound for five months. If I don't take care of myself, I could die."

Melanie and Aaron sell Street Roots at Peets Coffee at Northeast 15th and Broadway when they can. They love meeting new people and sharing stories.

Her favorite story is one she read in Street Roots about how homeless people are like weeds growing between the cracks in the sidewalk. "We are survivors who are ignored and stepped on. But we are rare and important, and we have something to give, too."



oneeproast

by Elizabeth Considine

