

## Vendors support each other with dignity, strength

As I prepared for my new role as executive director at Street Roots, a large group of vendors gathered to talk with me. One vendor named Brantley issued me this challenge: Work as a vendor my first day on the job.

I accepted Brantley's challenge.

Twice a week the vendor program hosts an orientation for anyone who would like to sell papers, so I showed up for a Friday session. The urgency of people's lives buzzed around me. "This time of year is hard," one woman said to me,

apologizing if she seemed short-tempered. Poverty makes the holidays more difficult.

I joined a group of about seven people to go through the orientation. We picked up a number of tips from experienced vendors by watching a custom-made training video, particularly an emphasis on courtesy and respect: "Say good morning." "Be courteous." "Remember to thank people."

Some vendors engage passersby with newspaper content; others take a more low-key role, letting the content and mission speak for itself. A number of experienced vendors talked about their relationship with customers in terms of not only selling papers, but also improving their customers' day.

My newly minted badge dangling from my neck, I set out on my bike to my assigned turf for the afternoon: a patch of public sidewalk by New Seasons in Sellwood. The day was cool but sunny, far easier than most winter days that the vendors brave.

As I prepared to sell, a swell of shyness waded over me. I stalled, convincing myself that if only I had a cup of coffee, it might be easier.

A cup of coffee downed, I had no more excuses. I propped my bag against my ankles, which seemed cumbersome until I reminded myself that I didn't have to lug all of my possessions everywhere I went.

I summoned the posture that I'd witnessed time and time again: I stood, the upper fold of Street Roots clearly visible clutched to my body. And waited.

People began to stop: *Oh I haven't bought my Street Roots yet. I love Street Roots.* Every single paper I sold was because someone already recognized and appreciated Street Roots. "On the shoulders of giants." That phrase kept waving through my mind. What was the origin of that phrase? I promised myself to look it up.

Finished for the day and biking home, I saw a rainbow-colored sign: "Street Roots, \$1." There on Southeast Milwaukie and Bybee was a Street Roots vendor, animated, smiling, engaging people, summoning admirable energy. I walked across the street to meet the vendor whose name, I learned, was Deb.

One of her regular customers was chatting with her and told me that Deb brings joy to each customer. I was reminded how important the vendor relationship is for all of us, not just the vendors. We have the opportunity to meet each other across our differences.

It was a few days later, when I was filling my cup with coffee in the vendor office and Mark, a Street Roots vendor who was there that day Brantley issued his challenge, asked, "How did it go out there?" I described how I felt shy, and several vendors sipping coffee nearby offered encouragement. I described how I realized that the only way I sold papers was because of the work of other vendors hitting the pavement every week.

"As Isaac Newton said, 'On the shoulders of giants,'" said Mark.

I looked at him, astonished. I told him how that exact phrase kept coming up in my mind. He kindly pointed out that it makes sense. After all, that is the strength of Street Roots. Each of us need not start over. When a person comes into the Street Roots' office for orientation, they are not starting from scratch. They are lifted up by the respect cultivated by hundreds – thousands – of vendors. Folks struggling with poverty and homelessness collectively help each other by adding dignity to the work.

Each morning, vendors line up at the Street Roots front desk to buy more



The author, center, with two new vendors after orientation.

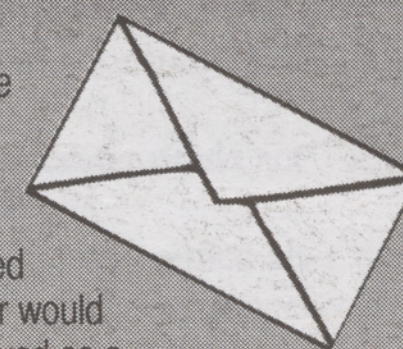
newspapers, and this is a moving scene. Some folks as of late have been adding holiday decorations to their outfits or bags to bring cheer to passersby. For some vendors, the mere feat of showing up each day is beyond impressive. They are braving disrupted sleep from the outdoors or shelters, health struggles, sorrows. Hardship tugs at the spirits of many, and they still manage to extend customers courtesy and respect. (For the record, all money made during my sales were donated straight to Street Roots' vendor program.)

Each of us passing vendors on the streets can remember the grit and courage it takes for them to sell newspapers seven days a week, 365 days a year. Please continue to let our vendors know you appreciate them.

And in these last days of December, please invest in our vendor program by making a recurring donation on Street Roots' website or a one-time donation at the Willamette Week Give!Guide. Thank you!

### Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Executive Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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