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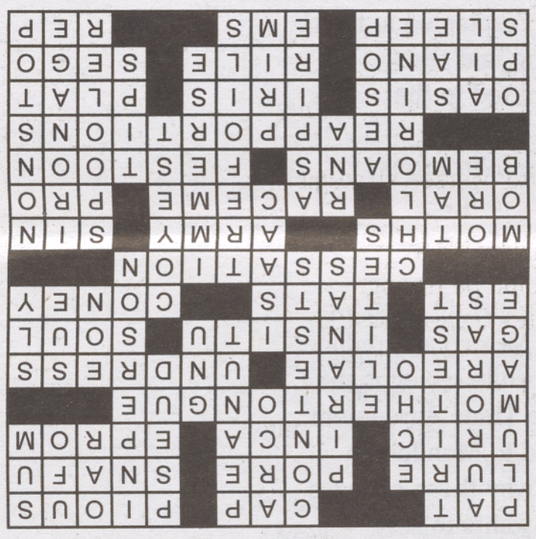
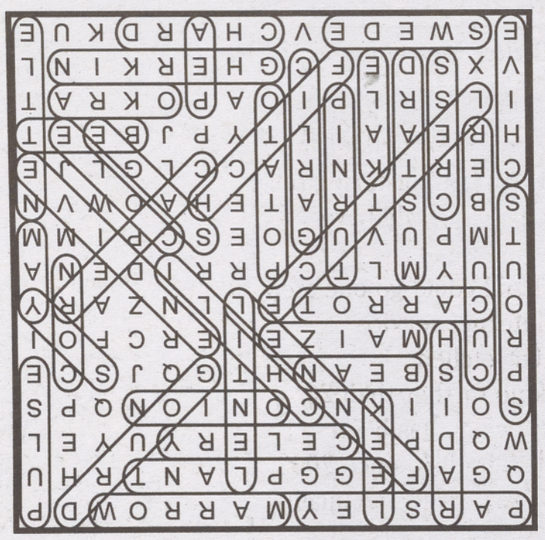
Answers to Page 15 Puzzles





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3	2	7	9	8	6	4	1	5
2	3	4	7	9	8	1	5	6
5	9	6	4	1	3	2	7	8
7	1	8	2	6	5	9	4	3

VENDOR PROFILE

Barbra Weber

BY HELEN HILL
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Barbra Weber describes herself as a tiny person, but she has enormous compassion, intelligence and an activist's dedication to improving the lives of people who, like her, call the streets home.

Barbra was born in Kellogg, Idaho.

"I had the odd couple for parents," she said. Her mother was bipolar and eventually placed in long-term treatment, while her father, who had high-functioning autism, served in the military. He worked as a machinist, repairing brain boxes in helicopters.

"He had really small hands," she said.

Barbra describes her upbringing as a bit of a dysfunctional rodeo.

"I took on a typical hero role. I had a brother who died at 7 weeks and another who I raised. I changed every diaper," she said.

The family moved constantly throughout the U.S. and Germany.

"I was in six different schools in first grade, and I flunked second grade."

Barbra's grandmother provided a sense of stability during her childhood.

"From the time I was born," Barbra said, "she would read the Bible every day to me. She got me a little Bible of my own. I could talk by the time I was 2. By the time I was 3, I could read and write. I owe that to my grandmother."

Barbra was 6 and her brother was 1 when her mother suffered a nervous breakdown. Her family was living in Germany at the time.

"She wasn't dangerous, but they put her behind bars," Barbra said.

Barbra was allowed to visit her, "a memory indelible in my brain."

Her mother was transferred, along with the rest of the family, in a cargo plane headed back to the United States. Barbra remembers being allowed to sit beside her mother, who was put in five-point restraints.

"She talked me into undoing her restraints, and they didn't let me sit beside her after that."

After her mother was placed in treatment and her brother went to live with an aunt, Barbra's life became unmoored.

"I lived with various family members," she said. "I felt like a sack of potatoes they kept passing around."

She ended up in foster care and lived for a time in Columbia Villa, a housing project that became a dilapidated Portland ghetto rife with violence and concentrated poverty. She remembers hearing gunshots often.

Barbra began to connect with homeless people she met in downtown Portland.

"I felt safer on the streets," she said. "I'm so tiny, I stick out like a sore thumb. Homeless people were very supportive."

She was sent to another foster home in Beaverton, and then to the Open Meadow Alternative School, but she felt safer with her homeless friends. By the time she was 14, she was on the streets of downtown Portland, with the supportive community she'd found there. Asked if she was ever afraid, she replied, "I've moved around so much, I know I can survive anything."

Barbra is the mother of three children. Her son Michael was born when she was 16; her daughter, Stephanie, was born a year later and her son James the following year.

It hasn't been an easy road. Stephanie was born with non-communicative hydrocephaly and required massive care until her death at age 3. Both her boys still struggle with bipolar disorder and autism. And Barbra herself said she was recently diagnosed with a brain lesion in her speech center, after experiencing narcolepsy, balance issues and difficulty regulating her emotions.

Through the ups and downs of a dramatic and full life, Barbra has nurtured her big heart and altruistic spirit.

"I really want to be an advocate and learn how to give back," she said.

She serves on the board of Homeless EcoVille, a visionary community based in Virginia that seeks to create safe housing through gardening and the construction of tiny solar-powered homes. She lived in Virginia before returning to Portland last year.

Barbra is also active at Sisters of the Road, where, as part of the Hygiene Huddles, she gives presentations to organizations about access to hygiene for people on the street. She also volunteers with Right 2 Survive as a media point person, using her skills and experience with marketing and social media.

Barbra found Street Roots last fall, encouraged by her partner, Bryant King, a Street Roots vendor and frequent contributing poet. Together, they sell papers at Fourth Avenue and Morrison Street.

"I like being in the special Street Roots club. The only thing you need to belong is a badge. It's friendly, like a little family," she said. "Street Roots vendors are not overly needy. We share cigarettes, camaraderie and encourage each other not to use and drink."

Barbra is passionate about changing the public view of homeless people.

"I wish we were treated better, with respect as a community. We are looked at like a problem that needs to be fixed, but we aren't the only ones with addictions," she said.

"There are people who are *really sick* outside, lying out in the rain. I want to help change the view of homelessness. I want to help create safe spaces."

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