

Looking back, as a milestone approaches

Opening a box packed and sealed for 20 years, I lifted out issues of Burnside Cadillac foxed with age, my byline on the front pages. The mastheads included a sketch of a shopping cart containing a bedroll, homage to what was colloquially referred to as a "Burnside Cadillac."

I dug out cassette tapes of interviews, a fax

(yes faxes!) to a city commissioner, city documents and phone messages from Burnside Cadillac editor Sharon Pearson sending me off on assignments.

I am in my second month as executive director of Street Roots, but my tenure with the newspaper arcs back 20 years earlier when I was a staff reporter for the Burnside Cadillac, the street newspaper run by Sharon Pearson that transformed into Street Roots in 1999.

In my mid-20s, while I worked a mix of jobs – waiting tables, serving coffee – I was always writing. I had been raised by two journalists: my mom, a Salem correspondent for the Oregonian; my dad, Salem bureau chief for United Press International. I joke now that journalism was my babysitter. After school, I watched news crawl over the wire in the state capitol basement where my father filed his stories. I tagged along while my mom conducted interviews. I sat next to courtroom artists and sketched witnesses while my mom covered trials.

News was something that was always happening, made all over the world. It was up to us to tell it. Who do we listen to? How do we know how to listen? How do we tell the stories of our times?

The Burnside Cadillac introduced me to the news of the streets. I remember Sharon Pearson as warm and tough. She absorbed me quickly into the Burnside Cadillac masthead as "staff reporter," and sent me off on assignments – police oversight, illegal camping, criminalization of homelessness, affordable housing, a union contract for farmworkers. I remember the office on Southwest 12th Avenue and Morrison Street as smoke-filled, but I'm not sure if pressrooms from movies cloud my memory.

I look back over some of the stories I wrote interviewing folks who were homeless, which frequently involved their experiences of sweeps. One man accounted for items a fellow camper lost: "He had bicycles, he had a bunch of antique coins, just everything he had accumulated for years." Another man

described the exhaustion of moving on while coping with disabilities – a familiar description two decades along. And in yet another interview, a Burnside Cadillac vendor told me she was selling papers outside Powell's to purchase a new tent after losing everything in a sweep. Criminalizing homelessness has long exhausted and traumatized people on the streets.

Late in 1998 I moved to the East Coast to study poetry with a mentor, Carolyn Forché, who connected my loves of poetry and investigative journalism. She had written a collection of poetry, "The Country Between Us," that, through lyric poetry, bore witness to the civil war in El Salvador. Most of the subsequent two decades, I have lived out my aspirations as a poet, always with an investigative bent, which has looped me back to topics of homelessness and economic injustice through my poetry, art and community organizing.

In 1999, Street Roots continued the work of the Burnside Cadillac in the same office at 12th and Morrison. And in the poetic history that comprises Street Roots, one of Israel Bayer's earliest roles was that of "resident poet."

Now, after Israel's long tenure as director of Street Roots, I come back to it – still a street newspaper, but now a robust weekly sold by 170 people, and firmly lodged in the civic imagination of our city.

Executive Editor Joanne Zuhl has guided Street Roots into an award-winning

newspaper committed to intrepid social justice reporting and connected to the international street newspaper movement.

But still, as in the early days as Burnside Cadillac, Street Roots takes the old model of the print newspaper and makes it new and urgent.

Why? Our city sidewalks are still a place where news is exchanged. Street Roots makes democratic claims on our public spaces. Who do we listen to? How do we know how to listen? How do we tell the stories of our times? The news is ours to write and read.

And through our vendor program, Street Roots insists on the value of human interaction. Poverty may separate some of us from others, but at Street Roots, we produce a newspaper to bring us all together.

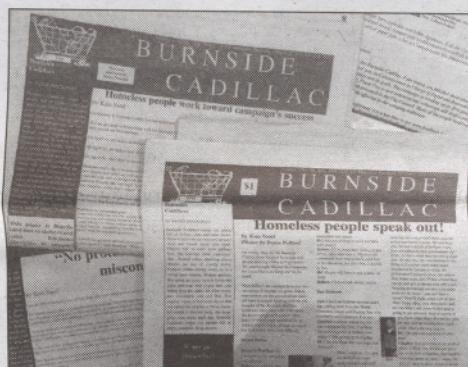
Do you have memories of the Burnside Cadillac? Were you involved with Street Roots during its early days? Did you know Sharon Pearson? I'd love to learn your memories. Next year marks the 20th anniversary of Street Roots (and add a few years before that for its life as the Burnside Cadillac). We want to tell the big story of our newspaper and its vendors. Please email me at kaia@streetroots.org if you have a story to share. We want to know what you remember.



DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Kaia Sand

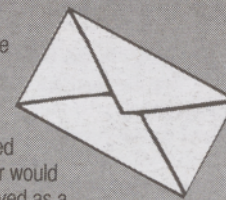
Kaia Sand is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach her at kaia@streetroots.org. Follow her on Twitter @mkaisand



Original copies of *The Burnside Cadillac* from 1998. The newspaper was the precursor to Street Roots.

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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