



Self-portraits drawn by vendors adorn the office wall at Street Roots.

Tell your representative housing comes first

Many of our vendors recently sketched self-portraits with the artist Helen Hill. These drawings adorn a wall of our vendor office, and I see them each day. I love these faces.

These are the faces of people who love Star Wars and who have sisters who bake pies. These are the faces of people who tell puns and who wish

people a good morning even when theirs has gone terribly. These are the faces of people who warm their ears with knit caps. These are the faces of people who lost their last family photos when their backpack was stolen or their camp was swept.

These are the faces of people who have endured slurs. These are the faces of people who write poems about sunsets and write poems about being treated like trash. These are the faces of people whose mothers called last week and whose mothers died last year. These are the faces of people who sometimes just bear the day in silence, copies Street Roots clutched to their chest.

You know their faces. You know the hard work our vendors do as ambassadors all around our city, particularly at a time when a great deal of rage swells over homelessness.

At Street Roots, we are built around a big love, as Israel Bayer would say, a love that embraces us all.

But rage, too, is big in our city, a rage that targets visible homelessness. Some of this rage may be rooted in fear. It is painful and frightening to see how desperate life can become; our neighbors are living in conditions almost unbearable to imagine. People on the streets are subjected to hellish levels of violence, and it is very difficult to take that in. Sleep deprivation and sickness inscribe the human body, and that can create further distances. Some people have to reinvent their lives every day, finding bathrooms and showers and ways to secure belongings and ways to dispose of trash and secure bus fare. Not all of this is possible. Some people convulse in their addictions, their spirits fragile against cruelties. The brutality of homelessness crashes against mental illness for some who wander in

public spaces.

While some neighbors rage over the siting of shelters or the presence of camps, it's worth remembering that there are simply not enough affordable places to live in Portland. The history of modern-day homelessness arcs back only 40 years to the early 1980s when the federal government massively stripped money from housing. The rage is misplaced. It's like blaming a person for toppling to the ground when actually, the very earth is quaking. Except this is not a natural disaster; this is a human-created disaster of economic inequality.

We don't have a quick fix for all the inequalities that abandon people to the streets of Portland. But let's step up again and again. We must have endurance for our solutions. Some efforts focus on ways to get people as safe and stable as possible, such as making sure there are enough shelter beds or supporting organized camps.

We must not give up until everyone has a right to high-quality, affordable housing. Here is one way to support this right now: The Oregon Legislature is in the midst of a short session, and one bill before the legislature would increase the document recording fee, an ongoing source of funding for affordable housing, as well as rental and first-time homebuyer assistance.

This is one steady source of funding.

Please let your representative know that House Bill 4007 is one more way we can strive to have a state that prioritizes housing for all. As dry as legislation like this might seem, I urge you to think about the elder weathering the rain on a porch stoop, or the school child who struggles to complete her homework in a shelter.

Or think of the faces of our vendors, and how deserving they are of the best opportunities of life.

I am proud of the work Street Roots vendors do each week to connect us across our differences. We need this supportive connection as we address the systemic problems of income and housing inequality, and we need to reserve the rage for the systemic injustices, not the people suffering from them.

Regardless of whether we live indoors or outside, in poverty or economic stability, Street Roots vendors, staff, volunteers and supporters form a community. Let's let our care for each other carry us forward.



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 @mkaiasand

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.



Street Roots

211 NW Davis St.
Portland, OR 97209
503-228-5657
Fax: 503-227-3117
www.streetroots.org
www.news.streetroots.org
Hours: 7:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Mon.-Fri., 7:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Sat. and 7:30-1 p.m. Sun.

Advertising

Interested in advertising in Street Roots? Email Andrew Hogan at andrew@streetroots.org

Staff

Executive Director Kaia Sand
kaia@streetroots.org

Executive Editor Joanne Zuhl
joanne@streetroots.org

Vendor Program Director Cole Merkel
cole@streetroots.org

Development Director Andrew Hogan
andrew@streetroots.org

Senior Staff Reporter Emily Green

Operations Director Sarah Beecroft

Program Assistant Caelin Miltko, Jesuit Volunteer

Vendor Assistant Scott Jackson, Alex Gillow-Wiles

Development Assistant Rosemary Wilson

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