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## VENDOR PROFILE

### Debra

BY HELEN HILL  
STAFF WRITER

Debra was born and raised in Youngstown, Ohio, during the height of the steel industry boom. Her father began working in the mills when he was 17 and eventually progressed to pipe fitter and metal fabricator. Her mother was a homemaker.

"My parents had a good marriage," she said.

When the steel industry collapsed in the late 1970s, Deb's father was forced into early retirement and died shortly after he lost his job. With a mass exodus of residents from the Rust Belt, a failing local economy, and little or nothing to keep her in her dying hometown, Deb joined the Navy after high school. It was peacetime, and she was sent to Spain for a tour of duty.

When Deb came home, she started a family and soon found the passion of her life.

"I was nothing short of amazed, amused and fascinated by my children," she said. "Life with my children was exciting, joyous. They owned me. I was happy to be their mother."

She has three boys, Dino, Dusty and Dylan.

Deb started back to college at Youngstown State University in 2000, when her sons were teenagers.

"I love academia," she said. Criminal justice, psychology and paralegal studies are among her interests.

While in college, she also worked as a direct care aide for people who were disabled and elderly, and she helped care

for her mother, who had cancer.

"I was there every day with her," she said. It was a busy time.

When her mother died in 2009 and her sons began to leave home one by one to escape the lack of opportunities in Youngstown, Deb felt a terrible void.

"There was no 'me' I had defined. I was effective raising my boys, but when that was over, I was empty. The bottom of my life fell out. Some mornings, I felt like there was no reason to get up," she said, "and I never took that grieving time when my mother died; I was too busy. Grief has claws. You need time to grieve."

Deb's sons ended up in Portland, and when she came to visit in 2011, the first step off the plane "felt like home."

Last year, she moved to Portland and was able to find an apartment through HUD's VASH program, the Veteran's Affairs Supportive Housing service.

"My sponsor was amazing," she said. "I had a housing voucher within 10 days."

"Providence led

me to Sisters Of The Road and to Street Roots. The people I meet there have a wealth about them."

Deb is passionate about Street Roots.

"I never want to walk away from Street Roots. Even if I have to buy 100 papers and leave them places, I will do that," she said. "Everyone should read this paper. Everyone is so receptive. How cool is that? Nearly everyone who buys the paper from me says, 'I love this paper.'"

"Street Roots pays my fixed bills, my utilities. It is still my only income," she said.

Deb recently got a part-time job washing dishes for the Veterans Affairs hospital, but she can't receive a paycheck until she gets her birth certificate sent from Ohio. Her Street Roots income is helping her save the money to start that process.

"My saving grace is I have a reprieve, a quiet bedroom apartment that is cozy and warm. Why me? I can only suppose. My heart wants to serve. I want to spend the rest of my life serving those who are ignored."

Meanwhile, Deb is loving living near her sons again.

"I think I'm transported into another dimension when I see them all in the same room, being friends, brothers. Making plans. They are good people. They are doing well."

Debra sells Street Roots outside the Starbucks in Sellwood, at the corner of 13th Avenue and Tacoma St.



## Answers to Page 15 Puzzles

