

Finding our moral power

There is a woman in Old Town who stores her mound of suitcases under a tarp and stays near it, almost as though she were sitting in a room and the walls themselves fell away. On warmer days,

she paints bright pages in her notebook – bold strokes of blues and yellows and reds. When it snowed and she needed protection from the cold in a shelter, she could not leave her

possessions. Moving them was not easy, but she was finally helped by a kind taxi driver who lamented Portland's expensive housing and talked about how we need to help each other, all while she loaded suitcases and bundles into the trunk.

Others wandered around Old Town on those wintery days – thick snowflakes landing on duffel bags and backpacks, while they bided time for severe weather shelters to open later in the evening. A sound of winter weather in Old Town is the sound of roller suitcases dragging over ice ruts. Many people have to work all day to secure their sleep for the night, and if a person hangs onto more than a suitcase of possessions in this world, mobility to get into a shelter is that much harder.

Everything about being poor makes it harder; problems compound upon problems. A Street Roots vendor recently began to talk to me about his health struggles, only to talk about fearing eviction, only to talk about weighing one bill against another, only to talk about how that stress makes him sicker.

People all over our city are ensnared in a tangle of stress over housing insecurity, isolated by numerous barriers and the exhaustion of trying to overcome them.

Street Roots is about connection, about striving to be stronger through our support of each other, about fending off that isolation.

This is why I am inspired by the theme that Portland Jobs with Justice promoted for its Faith Labor Justice breakfast at St. Andrew's Church last week: moral power. It's an idea that I'll be mulling over for some time, but one that seems extraordinarily important when we think about homelessness and poverty.

How do we overturn a sentiment that money gives us worth? Most people know intuitively that this is wrong, but it is undeniable that this logic runs through society in terms of the opportunities one does or does not have. For the poorest people, life's edges are brutal.

The Portland Jobs with Justice Faith

Labor Committee awarded Street Roots the 2018 Lucinda Tate Award "for faithful reporting on moral issues affecting the people of Portland." A labor organizer and a community activist, Lucinda Tate was a remarkable Portlander committed to equity and justice, and we are very proud to be honored by an award in her name. The journalists at Street Roots produce a weekly newspaper of the independence, integrity and courage under the leadership of Executive Editor Joanne Zuhl, who has sent at least 700 editions to the printer over the past 15 years.

The Lucinda Tate Award – and the coalition of faith and labor leaders that awarded it – makes me appreciate the Portland faith communities that wrap around Street Roots' vendors. Right now we have vendors at First Congregational United

Church of Christ Portland, First Unitarian Portland, Grace Memorial Episcopal, Rose City Park Presbyterian, Saint David of Wales Episcopal, Westminster Presbyterian, Portland Mennonite, Waverly Heights United Church of Christ, Bridgeport United Church of Christ, First Congregational Hillsboro, Multnomah Friends Quaker Community, Christ Church Portland and First Christian Church.

Having a vendor at such a community creates a regular opportunity for people to buy Street Roots, but it also means that meaningful relationships develop, and that vendors are folded into a supportive community.

If you are part of a faith community that might want to build such a relationship, please reach out to our Vendor Program Director, Cole Merkel, at cole@streetroots.org.

Organizers nationally – and locally – are taking up this idea of moral power by reigniting a Poor People's Campaign, which The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. worked on during the last months of his life. This movement shines light on the systemic racism entwined with economic oppression, declaring that "people should not live in or die from poverty in the richest nation ever to exist. Blaming the poor and claiming that the United States does not have an abundance of resources to overcome poverty are false narratives used to perpetuate economic exploitation, exclusion and deep inequality." I look forward to the direction the revived Poor People's Campaign takes.

After all, we cannot give up until we find the collective moral power to demand that poor people are at the center – and not the margins – of our conversations, our policies and our sense of who we are as a community.



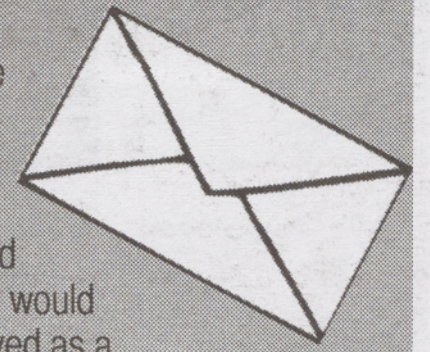
DIRECTOR'S DESK

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

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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