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VENDOR PROFILE

Melissa

BY LEONORA KO STAFF WRITER

Melissa moves through life with willpower and a positive outlook.

"I'm very open to everything," she said. "I don't judge. I think if you're happy, that's all that matters." She was born in Coos Bay. Straight out of high school, she said she began working for a subcontractor that assembled dental equipment in Newberg. She excelled at her job for "10 long years" and her supervisors told her they liked her sense of quality control for catching flaws in the assembly pieces. "It was fun. It was a stable job," said Melissa. "The pay wasn't good, but the boss was good. He just treated us with respect. If someone has a disability, you don't put them down. You bring them up and say, 'You can do it. You can do anything you put your mind to.' Like me. I have a disability, but I say 'No, it's not a disability. It's a hurdle I have to go through.'"

When that subcontractor went bankrupt, Melissa found a customer service job at Harbor Freight. When Harbor Freight downsized, she lost her job.

Melissa had been living with her parents, but her mother and father passed away. She said the family was very close and "it's been hard without my mom and dad around."

Unable to stay in their home, Melissa found a cheap apartment in McMinnville. Last December, the landlord raised the rent from \$620 to \$925 and Melissa couldn't stay.

"I'm looking for a place to live right now (in Portland)—which is kind of hard," she said. "Even the price for rooms to rent is outlandish: like \$850 to \$900 for a room in another person's house. But I have the opportunity to use the kitchen and such. That's the cheapest I've found. Apartments are \$1,200, \$1,300, \$1,400. Too much

for my pocketbook. I'm thinking of looking in Beaverton. "Right now, I'm sleeping in a tent. Stressful. I never dreamed I'd be out here."

Melissa said she was unable to stay in the major shelters because she is in a gray area of transitioning from a man to a woman. She doesn't want to talk much about it, but she keeps a sense of humor about the process.

She was riding the bus when a man called her a fag. "I'm like, 'You know what dude? I'm more man than you want and more girl than you can handle.'... A lady sitting next to me goes, 'She told you!' I've got some pretty good comebacks."

Melissa said "Just respect the person and love them for who they are. Recently I haven't been getting it—except from here. At Street Roots."

She said her Street Roots customers would probably be surprised as how gung-ho she is at selling newspapers and working to improve her life.

"I get up every morning. Look for a job. Look for a place to live. Go (back to the tent), eat dinner, go to bed. And then do the same thing over again."

But Melissa chooses to focus on the positive. When asked to name some happy moments, she said, "That's difficult. I have too many to count. Way too many to count."

She ticks off a happy list of family vacations to discover their heritage in the United States, a Daytona 500 trip with an aunt and other sports events as especially happy moments.

"I like sports," said Melissa, who goes to events with her former boss Ed. "I'm like part of his family. I've known him for over 10 years so we're very close.

Portland Winterhawks. We went to Volcano games. We went to the roller derby in Salem."

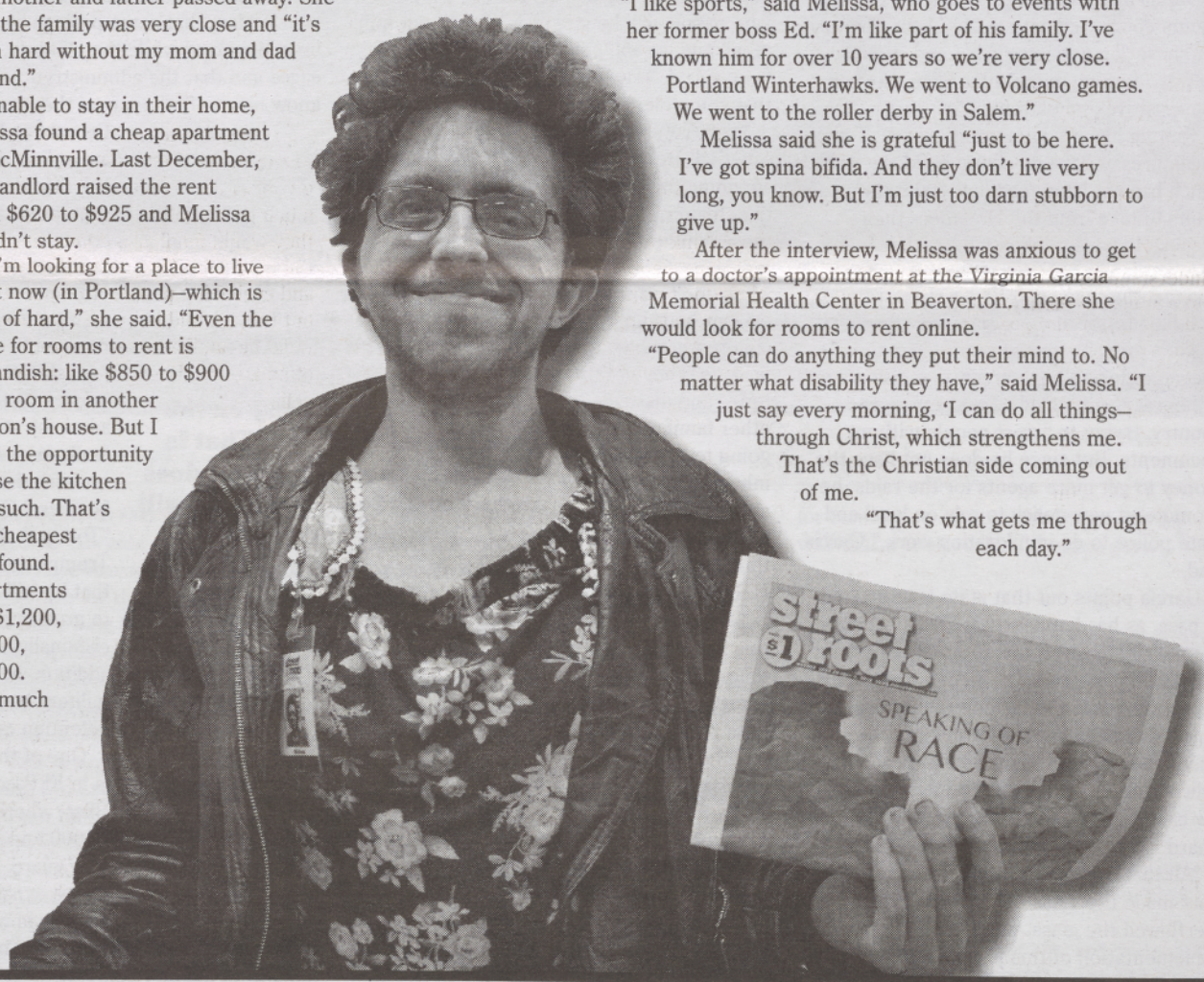
Melissa said she is grateful "just to be here. I've got spina bifida. And they don't live very long, you know. But I'm just too darn stubborn to give up."

After the interview, Melissa was anxious to get to a doctor's appointment at the Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center in Beaverton. There she would look for rooms to rent online.

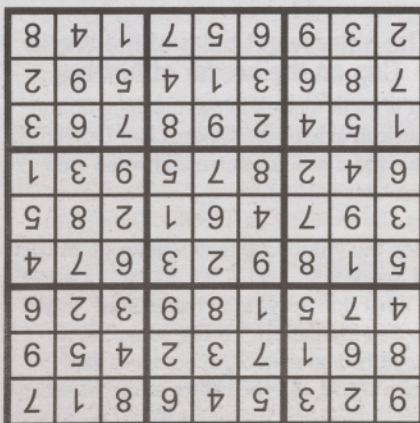
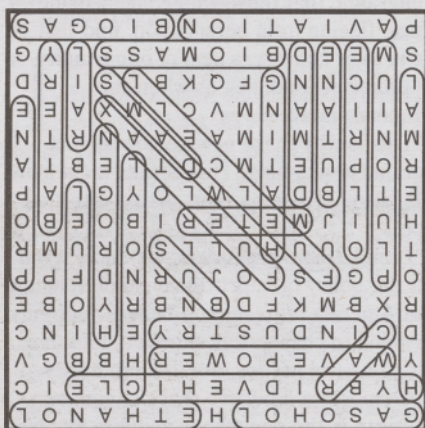
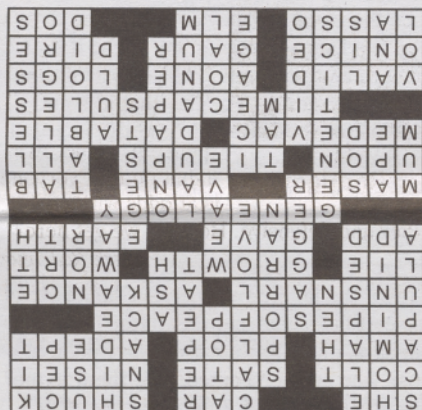
"People can do anything they put their mind to. No matter what disability they have," said Melissa. "I just say every morning, 'I can do all things—through Christ, which strengthens me.

That's the Christian side coming out of me.

"That's what gets me through each day."



Answers to Page 15 Puzzles



Street Roots is proud to be a member of the global street paper movement and honored to serve the readers of Portland and Multnomah County.