

Vendor losses force the question of 'livability'

We have lit so many candles these last few weeks in our Street Roots office. In recent weeks, four Street Roots vendors or former vendors have died.

Andy Howard, Dallas Boyd, Dani Wyatt and David Testawich.

It is powerful to see the Street Roots community come together to cherish each person, and fitting that the memorials are everywhere – graveside, in our office, at sales posts, and on parade by bike.

The causes of death are various – heart failure, stroke, drug overdose, murder – and on average, they died decades before the general population would. Life is so hard for people suffering homelessness and deep poverty – more

violent, more taxing on health. This is why in 2011 former Street Roots executive director Israel Bayer urged Multnomah County to begin reporting the deaths of people on the streets, a joint effort that we've continued every year. In 2016, the most recent year we have data, 80 people died on the streets. The average age was 49. We will soon be releasing a new report.

These losses reverberate through many other lives. Over these weeks, phone calls have come in from Street Roots customers and family members. Word of mouth passes through the office. Our office walls are filled with flyers for memorials and funerals. And as we have done for all 20 years of our existence, we will make sure their lives are remembered in our newspaper. In this edition we have an obituary co-authored with Real Change newspaper in Seattle for Dani Wyatt, who was a vendor for both Street Roots and Real Change.

On Aug. 8, we held an office memorial for Dani, guided by some of her family and friends who are current Street Roots vendors. In particular, they wanted "Friends in Low Places" by Garth Brooks piped through the office. She loved that song, they said. People shared donuts and traded stories of her antics, her laugh, her blue wig.

A number of our vendors and staff attended Andy Howard's graveside memorial on July 24 with his family, childhood friends and neighbors, along with co-workers from his job at Willoughby Hearing Center. Then we held an office memorial on July 31. Swells of vendors and Andy's family gathered, listening to "Stairway to Heaven" by Led Zeppelin, which Andy used to play on the guitar. Andy's sister, Bev, delighted Andy's Street Roots friends by describing how Andy once fixed a man's hearing aid on the streets using a bike spoke he sterilized with a lighter.

Andy's 23-year-old daughter, Katie, said that her very favorite days were those she spent visiting her father on the streets. She loved seeing how much other people trusted her father's kindness.

"When you are on the streets like that, all you have

is the sense of community of the people you're with," Katie said to me. "You are genuinely connecting to people."

It is that connection that I want to shine a light on. Street Roots vendor McKenzie Nelson creates his own memorials, and that is what he did for former Street Roots vendor Dallas Boyd on July 27. McKenzie posted flyers around the office for the bike memorial he created. With blue and pink balloons trailing from his bike – Dallas's favorite colors, McKenzie said – he biked throughout downtown.

He then set up a memorial at Salmon Street fountain, a photo of Dallas surrounded by candles and hydrangea flowers because they, too, were blue and pink. He's created many of these memorials for friends on the street. "It helps the family cope and helps me cope," McKenzie told me.

We only just learned on Aug. 8 that we lost long-time Street Roots vendor David Testawich, and already, there is a memorial at his sales post at Trader Joe's at 2122 NW Glisan St. I biked up to visit the memorial just as a Trader Joe's customer walked up, noticed the memorial, and began to cry. "He was always there," she said softly, looking at the table of photos, cards, flowers and two of David's Street Roots badges.

When so many people on the streets are reeling from loss, we must acknowledge this: This city is literally not livable for the our deeply poor neighbors.

The term "livability" is a cruel word choice when it is focused on campsite removals. Instead, what makes this city "livable" should be public health, housing and compassion.

Some Street Roots vendors have wept and wept about these recent deaths, but also, countless other losses. I am grateful for all the ways they can come together to grieve, laugh, remember and hold space for each other.

Please continue to

cherish your Street Roots vendor. Cherish the people in campsites with walkers leaning against tents. Cherish the woman who wanders barefoot and hollering her deep suffering. We are together in this city, gloriously human, responsible for each other.

As I biked to Street Roots this morning, I was dazzled by the sun, almost pink in its strange light. I love the early morning hours of Portland, the birdsong and morning routines of people trying to hold their lives together in the glare of the public eye. The sun is the lamplight for people sleeping on the streets, many of whom try to pack up before passersby and commuters are plentiful.

"Let a candle be added to the sun" wrote my favorite poet, Cesar Vallejo. I thought of all the candles we lit in our office this last month, and all the candles lit these last 20 years Street Roots has insisted that lives of deeply poor residents of Portland are essential to the civic fabric of our city.

Many of these lives burn early and bright. See that bright sun? It might be hard to notice, but I do believe our beautiful vendors are lighting it up.



DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Kaia Sand

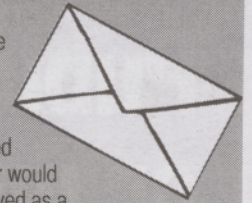
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The memorial outside Trader Joe's on Glisan Street for David Testawich, a Street Roots vendor who passed away this week.

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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