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VENDOR PROFILE

Kitty Hernandez

BY LEONORA KO
STAFF WRITER

When Kitty Hernandez sits down at Street Roots, she is tired and her back hurts, but she is beaming with good news.

"I've been holding down two full-time jobs, plus selling Street Roots and saving up money, money, money to get an apartment for me and my kids," she said.

Kitty works two jobs at Taco Bell and 7-Eleven with little time to rest.

"See these bags under my eyes? I sleep on the MAX between Gresham and my other job and on my lunch break," she said, laughing and pretending to snore. "I'm working as fast and as hard as I can."

She said her work ethic comes from growing up on a 20,000-acre ranch in Montana.

"That's how they raise you in Montana. If something needs done, do it. ... My grandpa, my mom and everybody in our family have a motto like, 'Nobody sits.'"

"After court yesterday, it's going great," she continued. "The state of Oregon was asking for custody of my kids. The judge said it's not necessary for my kids to be anywhere near their system. She said the second I get a place, she wanted this case closed."

Kitty said the judge described her as a mom who would move heaven and Earth for her two boys, who are 6 and 2. She feels deep remorse that she had to put them in emergency foster care.

"It's all my fault. Yes, it is," Kitty said fiercely. "If I would have taken responsibility a long time ago, before either one of them was born, this never would have happened."

In April, she was extradited to an out-of-state jail for an outstanding

warrant. Before she left, Kitty made arrangements for a friend to care for her children, leaving the friend with her family's apartment and a \$3,500 bank card until Kitty got out.

From jail, Kitty made daily phone calls to her kids and scheduled doctor's appointments for her younger son, who has cystic fibrosis.

Kitty traded her food for phone calls. "People would let me use a couple of minutes off of their phone cards. I didn't have money on my books," she said.

To have the best chance to regain her kids in the courtroom, Kitty said, she hired the best lawyer she could afford.

"One of my entire paychecks goes to this lawyer because I didn't want a free lawyer." She will also pay the state for the emergency foster care.

"That's fine; I'll do it," Kitty said. "I'm grateful for a Judge Judy-like judge. Oh, yes I am. An honest and fair judge that took mercy on me and my mistakes that I've made. Didn't make my children pay for them by keeping us apart longer, you know? The judge gave me a second chance."

Kitty said she's also grateful for Street Roots. She and her boys sell the paper at the Starbucks on Northwest 23rd Avenue and Northwest Overton Street.

After the kids' dad was deported to Mexico, Kitty and her first son came to Portland. Kitty had signed up with a housing program

months before but had heard nothing. That's when Street Roots Vendor Program Director Cole Merkel found them sleeping in the office doorway.

Kitty was pregnant, washing dishes full-time and sleeping on the street. Street Roots advocated for Kitty, and she and her son were housed within two weeks.

They moved into their new apartment just before Christmas and found a Christmas tree in the trash. It had lost half of its branches, but Kitty told her son: Let's decorate the tree with whatever we've got. Stuffed animals, spoons, playing cards. "It was the coolest tree ever," she said.

Her second son was born the following February, and Kitty was able to bring him home to a clean, warm apartment.

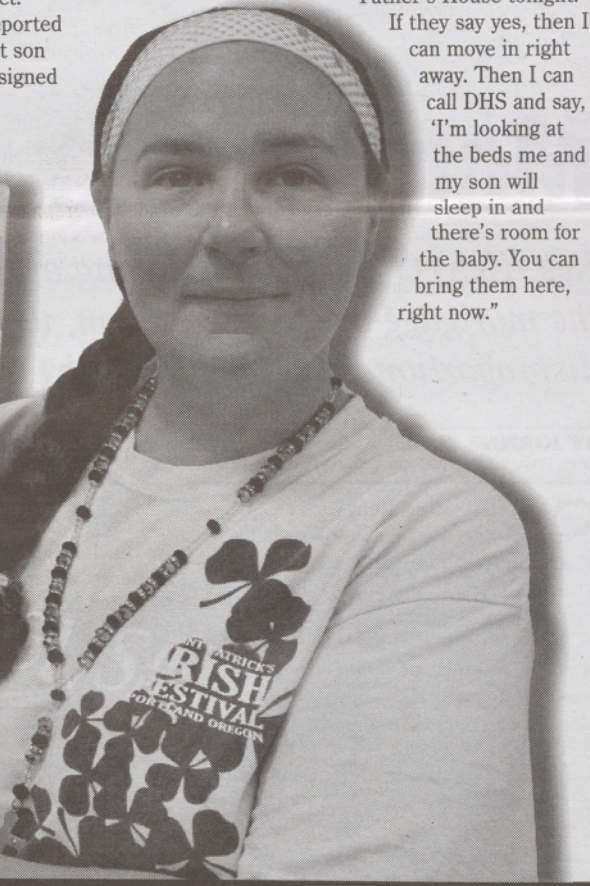
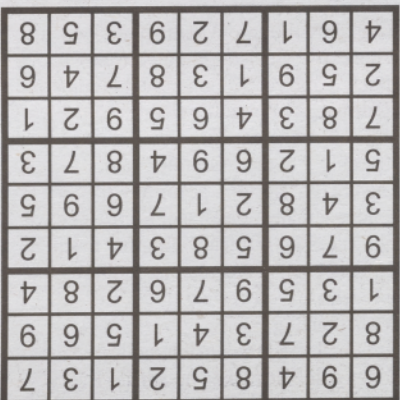
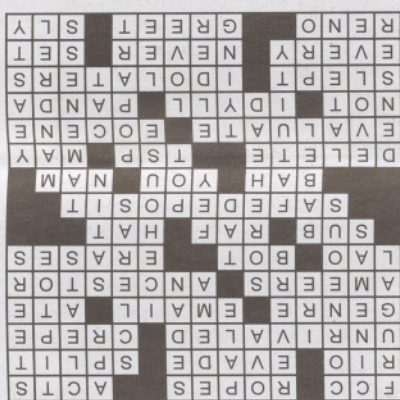
It was while they lived in that apartment, however, that police found out about her warrant, and she was jailed. When Kitty returned to Portland, she went to Street Roots "to start off on the right foot."

Kitty, who got clean when she became pregnant, said her kids are why she is alive today.

"They are the reason I get up every day and work as hard as I do. The only reason," she said. "So I'm crossing my fingers for (the family shelter) My Father's House tonight.

If they say yes, then I can move in right away. Then I can call DHS and say, 'I'm looking at the beds me and my son will sleep in and there's room for the baby. You can bring them here, right now.'"

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.