

Poverty and Civil Rights

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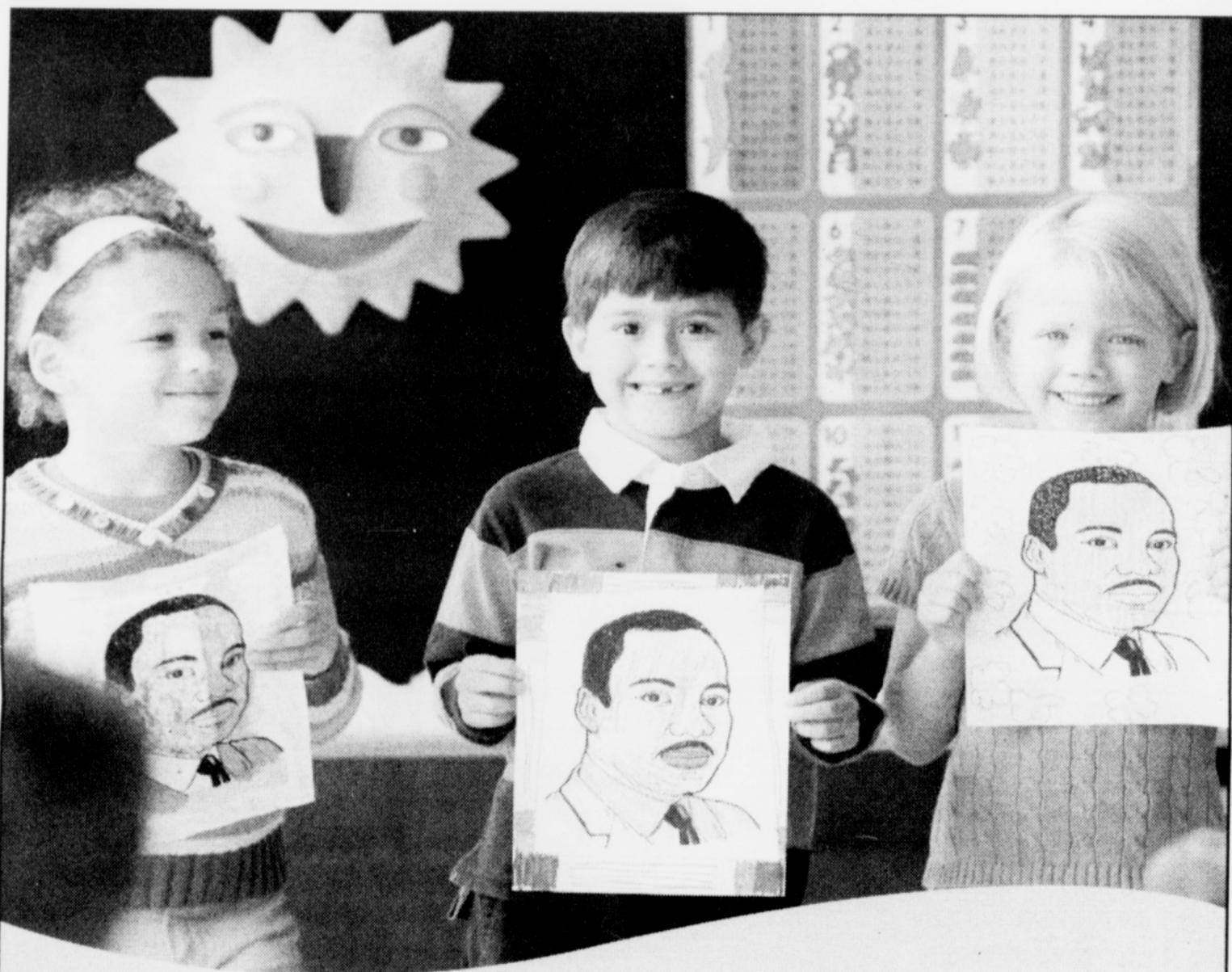
Israel Bayer, Street Roots' director, said that his organization looks to Martin Luther King Jr. as an example of how to engage people on issues facing the indigent, and often frames poverty in the same moral terms as the civil rights icon.

"I think that as an organization we look at him as a mentor in the way he lived his life," said Bayer.

At about any given time, SR has about 50 to 70 vendors, explained Bayer, who range from people who've long been homeless to others who have just recently experienced a crisis and need some income.

The paper sells for a dollar. Vendors keep 75 percent of the profit, which they typically use to buy food, pay medical bills, or get housing.

Bayer explained that vendors



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PHOTO BY JAKE THOMAS/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Street Roots Director Israel Bayer proudly displays a copy of his paper in his Old Town office. He's been with the paper since its inception 10 years ago.

develop a much-needed sense of self-worth from earning money. He also said that the paper helps deepen the general public's understanding of homelessness.

Many vendors establish a consistent spot to sell the paper, often near a grocery store or a busy street corner. Their regular presence helps them develop a rapport with repeat customers, which Bayer said helps people understand that the homeless aren't just "bums," but real people with their own stories.

"Our goal is to change the way people think about homelessness," said Bayer.

Leo Rhodes, a homeless man who sells the paper outside Trader Joe's in the Hollywood District and serves on SR's board, said that he has repeat customers who tell him that the content of the paper, which has a heavy focus on poverty, and their interaction with him have changed how they perceive homelessness.

"A man's got to work," he added, describing how the paper has given him a much-needed income.

Bayer, who hails from what he describes as a "very blue collar" background in southern Illinois, was wandering aimlessly across the country in the 1990s before ending up in Portland, where he got involved with SR just as it was getting started.

At the time, it was a scraggly and thin publication, full of poems from people on the street and

rantants against the injustice of homelessness.

But over the years, SR has steadily professionalized its content. An Oregonian page designer volunteered to help with layout. It also scrapped together the money to hire an editor and reporters, who picked up a couple of awards from Oregon's Society of Professional Journalists last year.

"I always knew the potential was there," said Bayer.

The paper has kept a steady focus on issues facing the indigent, but has broadened its coverage and partnered with other street papers to bring readers national and international news.

"As small as we are and as scrappy as we are, we work; and we get better every year," said Joanne Zuhl, the paper's managing editor.

The paper had plans to go from publishing every other week to every week, but stepped back after the recession hit. SR does, however, intend to set up a paper distribution site in east Portland due to the growing concentration of poverty in the region.

But the fact that it's held steady, and was poised to grow, is remarkable for almost any media outlet, which Zuhl attributes to its unique mission.

"We're not growing for the sake of growth. We're looking ahead at what the needs are for the people on the street," she said.