

The street paper tiger

**Forget handouts.
Israel Bayer wants the homeless
to earn your respect
— and your dollar.
By Chris Lydgate**

It's 8:47 a.m. on a soggy Monday morning, and the windows at *Street Roots* are already clouded by caffeine and condensation. The front door clangs open and shut as the sales force traipses into the paper's headquarters in Old Town, wiping their boots, shaking the rain from their coats, and clasping mugs of coffee with both hands to soak up the warmth. Most of them spent the night outside.

Presiding over the morning's chaos is the paper's director, 31-year-old Israel Bayer, sitting at a desk populated by newspapers, envelopes, manila folders, a wheezing Mac and a gargantuan calculator. His file cabinet is ablaze with stickers. One says: "Marching to the beat of a different accordion."

"Sorry about the mess," he says, grinning, as a visitor bumps into one of several thrift-store floor lamps, which stand at haphazard angles, like trees along a riverbank.

With dark eyes, golden earring, and scraggly black beard, Bayer looks vaguely like the young Fidel Castro, an impression somehow reinforced by his St. Louis Cardinals ball cap and the pen stuck behind his ear. It's not an inappropriate comparison. There is something revolutionary about the idea of a newspaper written, edited, and sold by the poorest of the poor. Since the first edition of *Spare Change* hit the streets in Boston back in 1972, the idea has spread to more than 40 cities across the United States and Canada.

From humble beginnings in 1998, Portland's *Street Roots* has grown into a handsome biweekly with 60 vendors, a circulation of 10,000, and total sales of \$235,000 a year, of which approximately \$165,000 goes straight into the pockets of its sales force.

Much of that growth is due to Bayer, who stands out as a maverick even by the iconoclastic standards of newspaper publishers. Raised by a single mom in southern Illinois, he dropped out of high school at 16 after reading *Black Elk Speaks*, a book about a Lakota medicine man. He wandered to St. Louis, Dallas, Denver, Missouri, Arkansas, Washington, trying, as he puts it, "to find my voice." Poured concrete. Dug ditches. Baked bread. Lived on a biker compound. Followed the Grateful Dead. "My early '20s

were pretty much spent in a fog," he admits.

Bayer landed in Portland in 1999, when *Street Roots* was just a few months old. (It was built on the ashes of *Burnside Cadillac*, another paper named for a street person's shopping cart.) The paper then was a shoe-string operation published monthly by an unpaid collective, and hawked on street corners by a handful of scrappy vendors. "We didn't know anything about putting out a paper," he remembers. "It was trial by fire. I was a poet. I didn't know how to put a paragraph together."

Bayer signed on as poetry editor, and supported himself by working the graveyard shift at a local convenience store ("the best training a social worker could ever have"). He found himself bewitched by the iridescent characters he met at the paper, like runaway grandma Jada Mae Langloss and Rastafarian poet Jack Tafari. He received submissions scrawled on brown paper bags, pizza-box tops, and even the backs of beer-bottle labels. "It just felt right," he says. "I knew we had the potential to be great."

The heart and soul of the operation are its vendors, who buy papers at 30 cents a copy and sell them for \$1. Vendors can earn anywhere from \$10 to \$50 a day, depending on their turf and their sales skills. "It helps me make ends meet and keeps me out of the rain," says Art Garcia, 56, a gritty-voiced Vietnam veteran who lives in a Dodge van and hawks papers outside Wild Oats on East Burnside, typically clad in a pea coat and fedora. Like many vendors, Garcia also is a contributor and volunteers in the office.

For many people in poverty, selling *Street Roots* is a transformative experience, according to Bayer. Apart from the income, he says, "They gain self-worth and self-confidence. It's one of our greatest benefits." Every year, the paper's annual report includes thank-you notes from vendors who were able to get back on their feet by selling newspapers.

The paper is now able to pay Bayer and a managing editor, Joanne Zuhl; they each make \$12.50 an hour. "To work on a street paper you take a vow of poverty," shrugs Bayer, who takes the bus, shares a North Portland house with two housemates, and is in a relationship with Devin DiBernardo, a

community organizer with Sisters of the Road, whom he calls “one of the most talented and dedicated women I’ve ever known.”

Bayer’s commitment doesn’t surprise those who know him. “He’s all about passion,” says Tim Harris, executive director of *Real Change* in Seattle, where Bayer worked for a year in between stints at *Street Roots*. “He’s street smart. He’s good at sizing people up. I know lots of people with college degrees who can’t do what Israel does.” (Harris rates *Street Roots* as the second-best homeless paper in the country, after his own.)

Bayer maintains that the paper’s more professional tone is largely because of the efforts of Zuhl, who was an editor at the *Post-Crescent* in Appleton, Wis., before joining *Street Roots*. Certainly, the paper is exploring a wider range of subjects. A recent edition included a dispatch from New Orleans, an editorial calling on the police union chief to resign, and a quirky astrology column by Soup Can Sam. (“VIRGO: I think you’re screwed.”)

Which raises an interesting Catch-22. On one hand, the paper strives to be a voice for the homeless. On the other hand, it also is a vehicle for people to escape poverty by selling a product — and most of the customers who buy it are not themselves homeless. What, for example, to do with submissions from street people whose copy is, say, incoherent? Run them and the paper looks ragged. Don’t run them and the paper begins to look too clean.

Bayer wants to resolve this dilemma by broadening the paper’s focus to include issues such as immigration, housing, health care and the environment. “A lot of street papers don’t realize you can’t write about homeless, homeless, homeless and maintain readership,” says Harris. “You’ve got to have a broader outlook. You’ve got to write for your readers.”

Bayer has other big plans for 2007. Running color photos. Beefing up ad revenue. Recruiting an advisory panel. Upgrading computers and launching an ambitious fund drive.

But for Bayer, the heart of the paper will always be its sales force. He knows them all, knows their stories, knows their turf. He has their respect, which is not something the homeless give lightly. You have to earn it. **OBM**



STUART MULLENBERG

ISRAEL BAYER, director of *Street Roots* in Portland