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The Monday Profile: b!x

Portland e-citizen doggedly chronicles local government

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INARA VERZEMNIEKS

The man in the floppy gray fishing hat took one last drag on his American Spirit cigarette, then ground it out on the sidewalk and pocketed the butt (still some left, and money's tight these days). Then he adjusted the press pass hanging around his neck and slipped quietly through the doors of Allen Temple Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

He'd already been going for eight hours straight, from City Hall to an ACLU news conference, and now to this Northeast Portland church and site of a mayoral candidates debate, and he was starting to get a little rummy, wishing he hadn't made that last espresso decaf after all. He swallowed a yawn.

Only a handful of people had shown up for the debate, and the candidates joked that they would be talking to themselves. But in a few hours, hundreds of people would know exactly what they had to say, thanks to the chain-smoking man in the floppy hat who had found his second wind at this fresh whiff of politics and was sitting in a front pew with his head down, scribbling furiously in a notebook.

His real name is Christopher Frankonis, but everyone who's anyone in Portland political circles knows him simply as b!X. And during the past year and a half, this college dropout with no journalism experience has become the must-read source for those who follow city government.

Since December 2002, b!X (pronounced "bix") has published a weblog called "Portland Communique" (<http://communique.portland.or.us>), an earnest and at times obsessive "experiment in amateur reporting" that touches on everything from near-stenographic accounts of the public involvement standards task force to up-to-the-minute accounts of the latest turn in the same-sex marriage saga.

But unlike most bloggers, who typically link to previously reported material and then offer their own analysis, b!X is unusual because he's going out and doing his own legwork. Armed with a black spiral notebook, a laptop and a homemade press pass, the admittedly shy and soft-spoken Frankonis has become a familiar face at City Council hearings, county task force meetings and news conference crushes, quietly forging something that is one step beyond the Fourth Estate.

The official headquarters of "Portland Communique" is a spartan one-bedroom apartment in Southeast Portland that smells faintly of tobacco and Scully, the delicate tabby that b!X adopted not long after he moved to Portland seven years ago from San Francisco and who mews sweetly as b!X taps away at his laptop. But b!X, who is skinny with dark eyes, thick and long lashes and the ever-present hat that has the feel of a modern take on the pressman's fedora, spends much of his time at Stumptown Coffee's downtown Portland outpost, where he begins each morning with two mugs of espresso, sweetened with a generous slug of sugar, and the crossword puzzle, which he fills out in ink, all caps.

On a recent Wednesday, b!X sat sipping his first cup of the day, debating whether he could attend both a hearing at City Hall on changes to an ordinance that excludes lawbreakers from parks and a news conference across the river announcing a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of same-sex couples challenging the constitutionality of Oregon's marriage law. The decision was complicated by the fact that b!X, who is 34, does not have a car and has not learned to drive.

In the end, he decided to skip the ACLU news conference if he had to "since that's going to get a lot of coverage, no matter what," and no one else really seemed to be following the park exclusions issue.

In fact, what some fans love about b!X (who, when he could afford cable, watched C-Span and the NASA channel incessantly) is his painstakingly thorough coverage of meetings and hearings that would hardly warrant two paragraphs in most newspapers -- what City Commissioner Erik Sten, a faithful "Portland

Communique" reader ("Everybody at City Hall reads b!X"), calls the "tidbits of news you don't get other places."

Indeed, b!X speaks of his site, which recently recorded its 50,000th visitor, "not as a replacement but as an adjunct to the coverage that's available."

Prefers to work alone

His stories certainly occupy their own niche. If you were to diagram a story by b!X, it would typically include references and links to stories in the local news media, his criticisms of those pieces, his own reporting, as well as his opinions of the issue -- as if the notes of a media critic, editorial writer and small-town beat reporter were somehow squashed together.

Recently, after reading about Abigail Scott Duniway, who launched a suffragist newspaper in Portland in 1871, b!X decided to start using the editorial "we" instead of "I" in all his stories. Sometimes now, even in casual conversation, he will use "we" when speaking about himself so that those who do not know better might imagine that "Portland Communique" has many in its employ. In fact, b!X prefers to work alone. He does not like large groups of strangers, or in his words, "dealing with people I don't know well."

He has received requests from people who want to write for the site, but he has politely turned them down. He rarely approaches people for comment at meetings or hearings, but later that day, Sten notes, e-mails will quietly appear in officials' in boxes, requesting clarification or follow-up.

At the hearing on the park exclusions ordinance, b!X takes a seat in the back row of the City Council chambers, as is his custom (despite the fact that he needs glasses and must squint to make out anything far away). At one point, microphone difficulties make it hard to hear what Commissioner Randy Leonard is saying, and b!X leans forward, straining to hear, until his torso is almost parallel to the ground.

Later, on his Web site, he paraphrased Leonard's remarks and included this disclaimer: "The specific comments were difficult to make out, since Leonard's microphone either was on the fritz, or he wasn't making use of it. But the above is the general thrust of his continuing concerns."

Leonard is an avid reader of the site, visiting at least three times a day -- even after b!X once wrote the headline "Is Leonard Literate?" Leonard frequently posts comments on "Portland Communique," (as he did on the park exclusions entry to clarify what the microphone had failed to amplify), and he has on occasion alerted b!X to stories before the rest of the Portland news media.

"For political nerds like myself who really enjoy the debate and discussion," Leonard says, "it's the place to go."

Money about to dry up

What amazes many who visit the site is the fact that b!X has no job. Initially, "Portland Communique" began as exercise for b!X to get to know Portland better. He had lived here longer than he had lived anywhere since his childhood in upstate New York, and b!X, long active online (his name is a truncation of his Internet handle, "baby-X"), imagined that writing a weblog about city happenings would be the best way to force himself to learn about his new home.

An informed and engaged citizenry is something b!X feels passionate about. He has posted a sign that says "Vote or Die" in his apartment window, which faces traffic-heavy Southeast Division Street.

As he started to get out more, haunting City Hall or dropping in on Portland Business Alliance breakfast forums, he kept expecting someone to say, "What are you doing here? You can't be here." But no one did. Soon, b!X, who had never considered being a reporter, began devoting all his time to reporting and writing for "Portland Communique."

For the past few months, b!X has lived off money his parents saved for his college tuition. He spent one year at Purchase College of the State University of New York before dropping out. Writing "Portland Communique," he says, has been a far more useful education.

But that money will soon dry up. This month, b!X is hosting a pledge drive on "Portland Communique," asking readers for donations to keep the site running. (Leonard cops to giving \$50 -- anonymously -- "I don't want him to lighten up on me.") Still, b!X has had his phone and Internet service cut off in the past, causing a temporary blackout of the site.

Very soon, he will need to find another way to fund his experiment. He has been looking into grants, but barring "a rich donor who wants to become a Renaissance-era patron," he thinks he will have to get a job

soon. And if he gets a job, he knows there is no way he can keep "Portland Communique" going as it has been.

Lately, with the mayoral race heating up, and the continued twists and turns in the same-sex marriage story, it has not been unusual for b!X to log 12-hour days and to write three lengthy posts a day. On the day of the park exclusions hearing, b!X was pleased to discover he still had time to hop a bus across the river to the ACLU news conference.

As a phalanx of television cameramen, photographers and reporters formed around the speakers, b!X sat off to one side, rarely looking up from his notebook. He took 10 pages of notes and did not ask any questions.

An 11-hour day, no pay

Then he caught two buses to return to his apartment so he could write a story on the park ordinance ("Why do I have eight pages of notes when nothing happened?" he asked aloud at one point.) When he finished, he allowed himself to walk to the coffee shop near his house, where he ordered a decaf espresso and sat leafing through a copy of the ACLU lawsuit.

"I have a feeling I'm not going to be able to digest this today," he said, deciding to wait until the next day before posting anything so he could link to the stories that had appeared in other news media and add his commentary and analysis based on what he had seen.

Then he walked back to his apartment, set the VCR for "The West Wing," checked his e-mail and wolfed down a glazed doughnut before heading off to the mayoral candidates debate.

By the time the debate finished at 8:40 p.m., he had logged an 11-hour day. He had ridden six buses, downed five cups of coffee, smoked about 7 1/2 cigarettes and written one story. He had made no money.

He shook out the half a butt he had pocketed before going inside the church, flicked open a silver Zippo and inhaled deeply. Then he set off down the street, the ember of his cigarette bobbing in the darkness, his mind racing with all he would say.

Inara Verzemnieks: 503-221-8201; inarav@news.oregonian.com

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