

Sounds From the Street

Episode 1: Eric Thompson-Bey on Go-go, Homelessness and more

Transcribed by Joseph Doyle and Nolan Casey

Eric Thompson-Bey (Guest): That's the good part about Street Sense too because the money, like I said, is good but meeting the people I got jobs and a lot of stuff just by being out there doing the papers, because you can get a lot of opportunities, you can get a lot of resources just by being out there. Panhandling you don't get that much because you really just focusing on the money; you just want the money and go, but see now when I do the paper I like to talk to the people about the paper; tell them about the paper.

Kampe (Host): Like Peter, a guy Eric met while selling the paper on the street...

Peter: Fortunately I've had the pleasure of getting to know Eric and what he's been through. He's been dealt a really bad hand in life. he's told me about his upbringing and his childhood and I can't even imagine personally I'm adopted myself and I know what it's like just to not have parents there supporting you there's just something that he and I build a connection around that, and I want to do anything I can to support this guy.

Kampe: I know at least when I see someone with a badge or somebody who's got a certification, you know the Street Sense vest, indicate ok well this person clearly is earning versus what's probably kind of a nasty word, but begging. You know, and do I think people see that right-

Thompson-Bey: Some people, everybody don't I mean I got regular corner. If it's not my regular corner I see a panhandler right there I won't sell there. But, if it's my regular corner where I normally sell, if he's there he's just gonna have to deal with me selling my papers I've been- one corner and a panhandler has been right beside me and they don't have the panhandler money. not all the time sometime imma say about 25 percent probably go to the panhandler a lot of people will give the money to the panhandler before they give it to a vendor but most of the time I would say it goes to the vendor, as far as myself

Kampe: So you've got you know a set location where you vend the paper do you know and I'm just- some of these questions might sound a little basic or like, "Why do you care?" But you I think people who might hear this may have no familiarity with Street Sense, what the relationship between the vendor and the paper is as a contractor for the paper do you, like I'm curious, do you keep a set schedule like Monday through Friday?

Thompson-Bey: I'm gonna vend from eight to noon maybe take a break. I mean do you look at it as a job. Yeah I got a set schedule I do on certain days; Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, that's a schedule I do. Tuesdays and Thursdays, I do a different routine. Saturday I don't sell. Sunday I only sell at the market at Dupont Circle. So my regular routine is; I got certain spots that I go to, I usually start at 7th and H; work from 7th and H, 9th and K, Connecticut M. I just got like a circle that I go through. it's all in this area Farragut North and Dupont Circle area that's where I do the same routine on them days

Kampe: What do you say to people when you're at one of your spots?

[Pre-recorded Audio]: Grab your copy of Street Sense! Only a two dollar donation! Street Sense!

Thompson-Bey: Street Sense. get your copy of Street Sense. Help support the homeless. Suggested donation of 2 dollars- And then I explain to them about the paper. Tell them we pay 50 cents for the paper we ask for a suggested donation of 2 dollars if you don't have two dollars I'll take whatever you have I let them know, a lot of the articles in there, we write them ourselves. Our articles are usually at the back of the paper; I let them know if I have an article in there or not. I tell them other stories, articles in there they can read; a lot of customers ask, what's good in the papers. Of course imma tell them mine's, but I also like Jeffrey's writing too. So I always let them know once I read the paper, a good article that they can read besides mine, but I always tell them about mine's first.

Kampe: But, you know, there are a lot of different ways to make money. Why have you stuck with Street Sense?

Thompson-Bey: It's two reasons, I gotta save money number one. My second reason would be opportunities and resources. See, it's still about money but it's also about getting our word out about our paper and letting people know that, you know what i'm sayin, that read the paper and understand what's really going on with us homeless people

Kampe: I mean they may not know it but you are offering up an alternate source of news about a community that doesn't really get discussed that often by the mainstream.

Thompson-Bey: Yeah, that's right. its some people, I really believe that really don't care. it's a lot of people don't care. I've done been, and they'll you know, "I don't want your paper, don't ask me no more" you know it's not too many of them but its some people that's like that and those are the people you just have to block off and just let them go and remember don't ask them again when they come past. More care than don't. I learned that by doing these papers by being with Street Sense. More people care than don't; I do know that.

[Music]

Kampe: So this might be one of those questions that you may not want to answer, but, you know, can you tell just a little bit about what led you to panhandling and being homeless?

A lot of- see I-

Kampe: And again, only if you mind sharing, you don't have to.

Thompson-Bey: You know what, for a long time I didn't know. I really didn't know. You know, I grew up in a broken home, and I think that I really believe that got a lot to do with it.

Like some people see people on the street, and they're just like 'lazy' or you know 'they're just not trying' or 'trying to find the easy way out' like they want to be homeless, right? A lot of people are veterans, a lot of people have mental health issues, I mean, so do people who aren't living on the street, you know, everyone's got problems and there are people that can relate to that if they knew where people were coming from.

But that's only one part of it; that's only one part of it. Drugs had a lot to do with it too, and I always thought that was the only problem. Now that I know that ,really, there- it had something to do with my upbringing too. You know what I'm saying, I grew up without my mom, my dad. So, you know, that's just how it is. Yeah, I never knew my moms. It's eight of us; five boys and three girls- well, there's four of us left.

Kampe: And where are you in the-

Thompson-Bey: I'm the youngest.

Kampe: You're the youngest?

Thompson-Bey: I'm the youngest, yep I was- I think my sister and them was telling me I wasn't even two when my mom's passed, I don't even remember, I've just got a picture of her. Well, as far as that, it was eight of us and when she passed we split up my aunt took the four girls my father took the three boys and one sister; so, our family split up. So, that's got a lot to do with it.

Kampe: Yeah, that's not easy; I can't imagine. And, are you still close with your other siblings?

Thompson-Bey: I don't really be with 'em too much.

Kampe: Is anyone still in the District?

Thompson-Bey: I've got my sisters here; they looking for me, they wanna see me, but right now I wanna- I'm going through something right now. I'm in a shelter, they not, so.

Kampe: You know it's hard for most people myself included, just to like- to have structure right, you know, to be disciplined in life, to like just- to get out of bed and want to do stuff and there's a lot of things that are distractions from that right? I mean it- I just-I have to say I'm always impressed by people that I've met through Street Sense, 'cause there's a deep strength to push through all the noise and the B.S., you know. Do you mind sharing, like, how did you find the shelter you're currently at?

Thompson-Bey: That's the main shelter in DC, where everybody know about it, and that's the shelter I wanted to be in.

Kampe: And which one is that?

Thompson-Bey: CCNV, 2nd and D. And, the reason I wanted to be in that shelter, it's the main shelter in DC, it's the shelter that you can leave all your property. You don't have to leave out at 7 o'clock in the morning like the rest of the shelters. I can stay there all day; I've got a bed, I've got a locker. And, that's why I wanted to be in that shelter. God, I was leaving from a room that I had, going to the shelter and I didn't want to go to a shelter where I have to get up at 6 o'clock in the morning every morning and can't get into- leave out at seven and had to be back in at seven. So, I went to CCNV and they let me in. I told them my situation, I'd lost my room. I was willing to pay to get in the shelter. I was willing to give a guy some money because I didn't wanna be on the street. He let me in. I told him my story; I said, man I payed my rent, the people done- they put me out, you know what I'm saying, they told me I had to leave, so I wanted to come in the shelter.

Kampe: Forgive me I don't know, is there a waiting list? Is it hard to get in?

Thompson-Bey: You know, the shelter's corrupt, Imma be honest with you. I don't wanna be there, it's a lot of stuff that's going on there, especially on the floor. So, it's a lot of distractions there, that's why I'm never there. I'm only there to sleep. I only sleep there and that's it. When I get up in the morning I'm gone.

[Alarm plays with music and bird sounds]

Thompson-Bey: It's a lot of stuff going on in this show. A lot. It's not good and it's a lot that comes out, that really needs to come out. I wanna do it, but I wanna do it through *Street Sense* through the paper, But I don't wanna do it in the shelter. It's a lot of stuff.

Kampe: Do you mind sharing?

Thompson-Bey: Abuse, I see it. You got him on the floor, he abuse clients. And I got witnesses to that.

Kampe: Like physical abuse?

Thompson-Bey: Physical, physical punches. This is the guy that runs my floor It's not just on my floor. It's going on in the whole shelter. I'm on the senior citizen floor. Everybody on my floor is fifty and older. I'm forty eight. Either their fifty and older; or they got a handicap. They got walkers. I see how they treat people everyday, it's not good at all. We get none of the donations. Big donations coming in from everybody, we never see it. As it is we never see it. It goes to the people up top. Everybody in there is homeless, nobody in there has a home. Everybody, even the people that run the floor, everyone is homeless. They just up high and got an advantage. It's real bad man. It's really bad. Don't just believe me, talk to some other people. Don't just take my word. I'm gonna put it out there once I get out of there. People are gonna know what's going on in that shelter. I'm gonna make sure of that. It's serious man, it's serious. The only reason i'm there, it's cause it's the best shelter and I got nowhere to go. I'm not living with nobody, I want my own place. I'm tired of being put with other people. I'm gonna stay in the shelter just to sleep or whatever. People need to know what's going on in this shelter, I'm serious about it.

Kampe: How would you say *Street Sense* has changed your life?

Thompson-Bey: A lot. It has a lot to do with me not being on drugs. It helped me out in so many different ways. It is hard to explain. A lot of different things man, that's why i'm so happy just being part of the paper. I'm gonna be real with you man. The real good part of it is that they are really good.

Kampe: The staff at Street Sense?

Thompson-Bey: I love the paper. I do. I really do. I thought today if Street Sense disappeared, what would I do? I've thought about that. I really didn't have many job skills. not that many. I just thought about that, that was scary. Just thinking about if the paper.

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