

Sounds From the Street

Sasha Williams on Finding a Home

Transcribed by: Joseph Doyle

Sasha Williams (Guest): I found a place, actually. I'm so excited! That was last Friday.

(Music)

SW: I was determined to do something. To change something I was going through. What I can change as far as my journey of being homeless.

(Music)

Adam Kampe (Host): This is *Sounds From the Street*, where we get to meet the men and women who define *Street Sense*, D.C.'s non-profit media center dedicated to creating economic opportunity for those experiencing homelessness. I'm your host, Adam Kampe. Today's guest is the resilient artist and filmmaker, Sasha Williams. Sasha's life, arguably more than most living on the margins, has been one long struggle. She'll share more on that later. We're gonna start on a bright note. Sasha and her daughter Ebony, are moving out of D.C. general family shelter and into a place they can finally call their own. For the first time, ever.

SW: I have a voucher, yay! Yes I did get my housing voucher. I'm so excited! I found a place actually, yesterday. I'm really thinking more and more: "Go and get it Sasha." "It's your time." "Enjoy it."

(Music)

AK: That is so sweet. So can you explain how that process works? Just briefly?

SW: You do an intake and an assessment. Your case manager helps you set that up as well as getting you resources and connecting you to the right people. You do the housing assessment. After you get your score you can get placed with either: transitional housing, rapid rapid re-housing, or permanent housing. I took two housing assessments, the second one I got permanent housing. That's a great thing, permanent housing. "I'm excited about that!" Then i'm going to a housing briefing. With the housing you're told important information that you need. You can apply to the places you want to stay, apartments or town houses.

AK: So you you get a selection?

SW: Yes. You basically pretty much shop. Network with your family and friends. You never know who will know something. You have to have that voucher to apply though.

AK: When was the last time you were in permanent housing?

SW: This is my first time in permanent housing. This is a big thing. My first house for me and Ebony. Yes, an amazing thing.

AK: That is so great. That is so great Sasha.

SW: Things are supposed to happen good so. I'm glad that good things are happening. I deserve it, Ebony deserves it. We're both getting what we deserve. Two bedrooms.

AK: She's gonna have her own room. That's so sweet! We keep talking about Ebony. So Ebony is your daughter.

SW: Yes.

AK: So how old is Ebony?

SW: Ebony's two years old.

AK: For the record we should say that she's the cutest child on the planet.

SW: I love those eyes. Those eyes smiling at me when i'm outside.

(Music)

AK: I wanna make sure we talk about your work in the media center. *Street Sense* media center, especially the filmmaking co-op. I understand you've got a film in the works.

SW: Yes, my film is in the works. The gentleman from the film co-op he was able to display the documentaries. I did participate with a couple of people's documentaries by helping them with the cinematography, so that was exciting. Straight off the bat, learning things, i'm just loving it. Now I get to direct my own documentary. The females are going to showcase their documentaries in August. I'm excited!

AK: August 26th. We've got a date now!

SW: Wow! Yes, yes, yes! It's exciting! Can you tell us a little about the film? Like a plot summary?

SW: Basically me transitioning out of D.C. General.

AK: D.C. General family shelter used to be D.C. General hospital, where in fact Sasha was born thirty years ago. D.C. General has been in the news a lot recently, and not for good reasons.

SW: It's a lot going on. The biggest thing was what happened to the girl. That was before I got there.

AK: You talking about Relisha Rudd?

SW: Yes. Eight year-old who went missing. That's sad. I keep my daughter under my armpits I don't like the fact that a family shelter is on the same campus as a jail and a detox center.

AK: The Relisha Rudd disappearance notwithstanding. The shelter is riddled with structural and sanitary issues.

SW: It's an old hospital building. Some parts of it is abandoned and a mess. The guy that came in for the *Washington Post* what he was able to capture was something else. You gotta have a better building. They had scabies one time.

AK: Is it designed for women and children on one floor and men on another?

SW: Well families basically. It's single mothers, single fathers, and families that have a mother and father that's trying to maintain housing. They have special police officers and security guards on each floor. You have to sign in and sign out everytime you go in and out the building. I won't miss that at all when I leave by the way.

AK: So I spent a windy afternoon with Sasha, Ebony, Angie Whitehurst a fellow vendor and producer on the film and their instructor, Brian Bellow. What kind of camera are you using in the shelter?

SW: A phone with the filming pro app, it's amazing.

AK: These phones are so sharp.

SW: Technology, *Apple*, *Android* is doing it too. It's an apple phone. This is where I'm at showing me and my daughter, well I can't really show me and my daughter cause I hold the phone. She would just hold it and look at it. I can't show me all the time like I want to. I get to show her, how she interacts with people and goes through the halls. I like taking pictures of her. I have so many pictures of my daughter. I need that, I love it. I've been through a lot of places and different shelters. Being at D.C. General is better than being on the street.

AK: Why does this work matter? Why does this new media work?

SW: Basically you're showing that everyone is not the same. Everybody doesn't think the same. We are trying to show we are more than what people say homeless or what people think what homeless people are. We are using the outlets we can use to show our messages, for people to hear that message. I think it's a great idea. We're at the forefront of it so let's just keep this going. Let's keep this moving! Now that i'm at the last destination.

AK: Ok so we're talking about your journey. I like that notion. That's a really cool concept. Would you mind sharing a little about your story? You don't have to.

SW: So basically when I first became homeless, that was November of 2003. I got my diploma in June 2003. I was always at gun point and I didn't want to be in that neighborhood. I didn't have that type of communication with my mom because I was holding onto what happened internally instead of externally. I was young at the time so it was a life changing event.

AK: How do you share that with anybody. I can't imagine. When did you start to talk about that?

SW: Well, when I started opening up about it I felt that I was no longer a victim. I'm a survivor, i'm still surviving. At one point when I shared it, somebody else was able to talk about it. It was a healing thing for me. I don't mind sharing it, it happened. The experience was traumatic for me though. Life, you have reality, the good, and the bad.

AK: This was just in your neighborhood here in Washington?

SW: No. When I was in high school I was staying with my mom. I was in Montgomery County. It happened in Montgomery County. I returned back to D.C. I was a resident student. The process of being in the shelter, not being with family, not having a family with was so much different. Now I have a family so it's like I had to work on myself when that happened. At the end of the day what am I going to be doing? What is my point? I had to reevaluate some things, collect some thoughts, and find my purpose. It's important to have a purpose. To know that I have good days. I will have good days. I will be happy. I have to continue to speak positive affirmations.

(Music)

SW: I'm a good woman, i'm a great mom, a good writer, a director, an artist, and i'm beautiful. I remember times where I didn't want to look at the mirror. I'm still done with being blind. That's a whole nother event that happened. It's life changing. I have to find my courage.

AK: You were blind in your right eye?

SW: Yes, it was an accident. I was blind in both eyes. An airbag deployed and popped in my face. The left eye went back to 20/20 but the right eye had extensive traumatic damage. My journey is my journey you know? But hey, i'm a survivor. Good stuff is gonna happen, you know? Of course when those events happened to me it was like why? I had to go through the process. Why? What is going on? But what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. That's part of growing up and I know the meaning. Even what i've been through, there's someone out there who's going through worse things.

AK: What were you doing before *Street Sense*? You mentioned you were working at a bank.

SK: Well the bank was 2007 or 2010, so fast forward to 2014 because it's been a year, I was with my sister. I was doing job skills training. I was trying to of course find housing. My mom was focused on my work and where I was working.

(Music)

AK: During that time, how were you managing, is there a coping mechanism you use?

SW: It was a "not knowing" phase. What's out there. Who can I talk to? Now I know, this is who I talk to, this is what I do. It was a whole journey within my journey. There could have been better resources. Now that everything has changed because we have a new Mayor. We'll see. We'll see.

(Music)

AK: Everyone's got a different style when they're selling the paper on the street. Do you do anything special?

SW: I have to sing a song to keep myself motivated. I say, "*Street Sense*." I let people know that *Street Sense* is the Washington area street newspaper. I let them know you can find out more on streetsense.org. Some people say. "What is *Street Sense*?" I say, "*Street Sense* is a great outlet for homeless or former homeless individuals."

AK: Why should people support *Street Sense*?

SW: Supporting the movement means so much. You're participating in the voice. Why not get involved? There's so much to be done you know? With so little help. That's all we need is help. So much more to do.

AK: And what would you like people to know about you that they don't know?

SW: That i'm a geek. I love technology. I actually want to study IT and engineering.

AK: This is a hard question. In one word or a phrase, *Street Sense* is.....

SW: *Street Sense* is my foundation. I'm absolutely thankful that *Street Sense* exists. All of the opportunities they're opening up. It's just like a bubble. I like it all. While distributing papers, my voice has become louder. I'm out of my shell. I'm loving it.

AK: So you're talking about the impact of the workshops.

SW: And *Street Sense* as a non-profit. When you walk into the doors and meet all of these people, it's like a whole nother environment. The staff, the vendors you know, just coming to these workshops. Everybody in the workshop inspires me. Everyone at *Street Sense* as a whole, the volunteers.

AK: It's getting me a little choked up. It's not a joke. I keep hearing that.

SW: Brian, he's amazing. When he said the words, "You're not clients, you're colleges." That was deep. I was like, "Wow!" You thought you heard it all, but then you hear something new.

AK: And that's Brian Carome, the Executive Director.

SW: And then Brian Bellow. He's just an amazing instructor. He's been inspiring me and motivating me even during my project. He is great when working with me. All groups are good. All groups. I've been beating myself up for so long. I've been negative to myself, critical thinking and all that. I don't wanna be nobody's obstacle. I just want to be able to smile more, send a positive energy if I can, enjoy my daughter while she's growing, enjoy my years, be more healthy and change my whole life style.

SW: My name is Sasha Williams, and you're listening to *Sounds From the Street*.