

Cynthia Mewborn on PTSD and Recovery

Transcribed by: Joshua Davis

[Music]

Cynthia Mewborn (Guest): Now when I first started selling the paper I didn't know what I was doing y'know I was just "Street sense copy of your local street sense!"

[Music continues]

CM: And so it became more than just selling the paper it became, y'know I really felt like people were investing in me.

[Music continues]

Adam Kampe (Host): This is Sounds from the Street where we get to meet the men and women who defined Street sense. D.C.'s nonprofit media center dedicated to creating economic opportunities for people experiencing homelessness. I'm your host Adam Kampe and today's guest is a singer, songwriter, Film maker, Cynthia Mewborn. Cynthia lived for a year on a tent in the street and not by choice much like a soldier's experience in war, her time in that tent haunts her. Even though she now has a place to live Cynthia fights on the daily to beat back the demons of her past. She openly identifies as a recovering homeless woman with PTSD shining a light on an issue that many on the street face yet never have a chance to share. Cynthia bravely explores her homelessness in a short film she directed and stars in, in part 2 of the series cinema from the street which will screen at E street on August 26th.

CM: That experience of living on the street was probably one of the worst experiences I've ever had in my life. Um.. I've been through some rough, rough, rough, very rough, experiences but that took the cake I mean there were just so overwhelming. In my movie I don't even touch the surface of what I went through y'know because it would be unbelievable that one human being could go through that much and still have a positive attitude and y'know the list just goes on and on, so it was heavy it still is heavy because I have flashbacks I think about y'know what I went through but I try not to let it hold me down cause at the end of the day y'know I'm getting older my life on this planet is 30, 40 years left so I want try to make the best of it. So the Title of my film is called "who should I be grateful to?" and it sounds negative because it really.. I'm just addressing that aspect of who should I be grateful to for making me homeless? Y'know?, who should I be grateful to for all the stuff that I went through when I was on the street?. But I – and then I say at the end I shouldn't be grateful to those who tried to abuse me but I am Grateful to those people who tried to help me.

[Music]

AK: and do you explore one of those? Or any of those...

CM: I do explore one of them - I mean yea I talk about one of the experiences I went through on the street and we actually go through it we go- show the whole thing so y'know and then I talk about the fact—

AK: so it's like a reenactment?

CM: yeah reenactment and that took a lot from me and I went home one night it was rough I had to have a drink after that, it was rough having to remind myself of all that stuff I went through. I guess I have to move forward cause I let people know that no matter what I been through I'm Not a victim I'm not I'm not a victim, You tried to victimize me but I'm not a victim, cause I let them know that you're not going to victimize me out on the street I let predators know, I let the rapist know, I let everybody know that "no I'm not here because I'm homeless and I'm a woman out on the street that y'know that I'm free bait to you. It's not that kind of party because I'm fighting for my life I'm fighting for my life right now. I tell people y'know when you come to this movie get excited that the fact that one lady says "thank god your still alive" get excited about life but to get excited about this movie again, there is liberation only in the sense that um... You'll see in the end what I do with all the stuff cause I held on to that stuff for a year. I would've held on longer because y'know when you have been traumatized it's hard to just say "Ok I'm gonna just y'know let this stuff go" it's —like I'm recovering so I'm recovering from all of this, I pushed my kart even when I wasn't homeless anymore for almost three months.

[Piano music plays]

Y'know it's hard I'm still carrying my little backpack because it's hard to break free from those behaviors that you had to develop and had to learn how to survive while you're out on the street y'know what I'm sayin?.

[Music continues]

AK: You mentioned recovery, your recovering homelessness.

CM: Yea.

AK: Can you talk about that? Like what that means?

CM: well recovery I think is different for a lot of people um.. Some people have to recover from substance abuse, from drugs, thank god I didn't have those issues but y'know I did drink I am an alcoholic. One of the things with homelessness is that you don't get any sleep by lying on the street, you'd rest your body is going to nod off and so I think that's across the board I think that's something all homeless people can agree upon, We recover by getting rest number one. The other thing is because a lot of our energy has been depleted so we have to regain our strength, y'know also I'm recovering from being angry my adrenaline was so high I had to y'know take medication to bring it down because I was always on the defense, well y'know that your behaviors is fight or flight, mechanisms well I was in the fighting mode. So now I'm learning how to recover with that anger by taking that anger and doing positive things with it, y'know exercising um because I have to let that anger out I still haven't.

AK: I've always said in a dream world, shelters would have gyms.

CM: absolutely it is very, very, important because I'm telling you, even with a mental illness – a person with a mental illness is not going to make a sound decision, for me thank god that I did not develop a mental illness. I mean I developed mental behaviors but I did not develop what you would call- AK:like a diagnoses.

CM: well no I had diagnoses I mean I have- I actually ended up with posttraumatic stress disorder and some other stuff while I was homeless cause it- you're so traumatized what I'm saying is that I didn't break down I didn't have a nervous breakdown. The thing that I like about Street Sense is that number one I can come here and be myself, I can have bugs flying out my hair and Street sense is like "COME on in!, Hey! Give ya a big o'l hug and everything" I'm not kidding you it's crazy I really feel like Street sense is a "AA" for homeless people it's really been a great service to me I would highly recommend it this service for everybody that is homeless when um I first started selling the paper I just went to a spot I didn't know at the time what it was going to be like, no one told me y'know "hey you go to this spot" so people started getting the paper and uh but it became more than just a paper it became more because I started having conversations with people we got to know each other so it was kinda like y'know they would bring me coffee sometimes or y'know they would say hey you want something from the store I'll pick you up something, I had one lady- White lady I won't forget it – had a marcasite's bens and it was a bad marcasite's bens it was one of them 2000 and.. Like y'know the new one!, it was nice and she said "Hey! I saw you walking" and she said I wana give you a ride and beeped the horn you didn't hear me you kept walking I said "really?" and she said "next time I see you walking I will give you a ride in my car" and I was like "huh?" this lady doesn't know me from Adam, y'know she just didn't know anything about me and plus I'm homeless you're going to give me a ride in your marcasite's bens? That's crazy. So yea people out there I had a guy that worked at the Senet and he was nice to me I told him- I said y'know it was real cold last winter real, real cold it was almost abnormally cold he said "y'know what you let me know the last time you're out on the street you can come in my house and sleep" and I'm like huh? I'm homeless this man is a senator and he gonna tell me I can come to his house and sleep, I mean the relationships with the people I've built out on the street are incredible they're almost like family it's weird! These people are- I had people who invited me over to their homes, I'm talking about push my kart to their house they have crabs we sit, hang out, drinks some beers, have some crabs with their family. I had a little boy I loved this little boy we had this conversation and he said I'm going to the beach – he says I'm going to the beach with my parents and he says is there anything you want? And I say "sure I want a seashell!" and so they went to the beach and y'know this little boy about 4 years old I'm not kidding you he's about 4 year little boy and he remembered what I said that I wanted a seashell so his mom and his dad were walking down the beach and he decided to walk along by himself and he walked on down the beach he looked for almost an hour and his mother said "for a special seashell for me" Isn't that incredible?

AK: oh my god. **CM:** and brought that seashell man that just- blew me away I had to hug the baby and y'know I almost got real choked up.

[Music plays]

Even before I became homeless, living on the street people were like “so how did you get this way, what is your situation?” And y’know “How did you become homeless?” and I would tell them no I’m not homeless just yet, I’m facing homelessness and I said y’know I’m getting ready to Lose my home. I’m getting ready to live out on the street. Y’know cause I can’t get into a shelter and people are like “oh okay well sorry to hear that.” And also I had started writing articles, that was the one thing I really enjoyed I had started writing articles and basically what I wrote articles about primarily was the environment and my argument is that if we don’t take care of the planet were all going to be homeless.

AK: I think this is an interesting distinction thing facing homeless versus being homeless, like people are on the edge or the brink of that change and I think that’s the stuff that’s really gonna reach audiences and the reason why I’m interested in this issue as supposed to every other social problem in the world is that could be me, y’know and I’m so aware of that every time I step around somebody sleeping on a grave one of those industrial blankets y’know 22 digress outside. So if you’re willing to talk about a little bit of your personal story and what led to—

CM: me becoming homeless?

AK: yea,

CM: basically like I said before everybody has their own situation and their own story, I ain’t gonna go into a lot of detail why I became homeless and for the most part, most people wouldn’t believe it anyway because truth of a strangers conviction?). Because I really don’t think that that’s the real issue, I just feel that y’know sometimes things happen in life and you just have to stick and accept it. When I became Homeless I made some contro- I knew I was going to become homeless, I knew it , It wasn’t just me selling the paper because once your rescores start running out y’know you’re not able to find work, you are going to become homeless unless you can find a friend or find a family member to live with you are going to become homeless. **AK:** And around what year what time frame are we talking about?. **CM:** That happened uh... what year was that probably be like I don’t know what year was maybe 2 years ago I was embarrassed because um, I had lost my home and all my stuff got thrown out on the street y’know and um it really hurt me. I just said I’m gonna go ahead and go through this process and I’m just gonna go ahead and- because I had never been thrown out on the street before, I was never able to find any work I was um It was just hard for me y’know it was just hard for me so there’s no hand books for being homeless y’know “Here you go! Here’s a Manuel for it notes on how to live on the street” And I had to learn everything on my own. When you’re out of the street and so overly stressed out your mind is going to, it can still deteriorate, I was losing my abilities and being homeless

[Creepymusic plays]

AK: you don’t have to get into details but, I’m just curious if there’s a way to talk about like what it feels like it’s a hard question to answer but—

CM: it's-... I can't even describe what it feels like because there are really no words , I can only say it was probably close to Death. There's no way to describe it I mean it's really is horrific it's a horrific experience and it was just overwhelming it was, you just felt, completely alone.

AK: skipping forward a few months from our first conversation I sat down again to catch up with Cynthia now in addition to completing her first film she's working on writing her future link scripted, and she just composed a song in an animated short to be featured in a street sense illustration workshop, the song is a reply of sorts to my earlier question what does it feel like to be homeless?

CM: so the title of the song was called "you don't know what it's like to living on the streets"

[Singing]

AK: Cynthia! Damn that's gonna be the opening of the podcast I tell you

[both laughing]

CM: are you serious?

AK: yea I think so um or the end! One or the other perfect opening and closing. **CM:** Well thank so much I mean yea when I did this song and brought it to the animation class because we have like a deadline, were working on this animation now for Street sense we have 3 months he gives us all like a position what we should do and I'm working on the music and somebody else will be working on the drawings for the figure etcetera, etcetera so basically I had like a week really to get this music together. And so I worked on it y'know because I had just learned it I've downloaded this app, this app, and this app and learn how to put the music together. And so I said let me go and try to put some more in, I've got to do this song so when I brought this song into the class I mean everybody loved it, they started singing homeless people were dancing, and people were like "yea this is our song and tis song is catchy like man this song rocks!" y'know? And they were just dancing and singing and in the class they were going on like [imitating singing from other people] it was crazy! And I just- man felt so good everybody was like "yea! This is song is about us!".

AK: it's like an anthem, I mean there is a catchiness to it that in another way to create some common ground or music art—

CM: absolutely.

AK: it's always what brings people together from different backgrounds.

CM: and so I feel like I'm healing, I feel like I'm moving forward in a positive way, I will have an opportunity to enjoy some life I think I will.

[Music]

AK: That was artist Cynthia Mewborn on her documentary "Who Should I Be Grateful To?" It will screen on August 26th at E street Cinema alongside the film "Raised to Rise," directed and produced by Sasha

Williams and Angie Whitehurst respectfully. Author Marita Golden will moderate a full Q&A afterwards. These films are executive produced by Bryan Bello and created by D.C's first homeless filmmakers co-op as part of the Street Sense Media Center. Go to Streetsense.org/Film to get your tickets for the must see August 26th screening.