

Jeffery McNeil on Self-Determination

Transcribed by: William Aitken

Jeffery McNeil (Guest): I was going through a rough time. I was in the midst of drug addictions. I had other addictions, and I'm not someone who blames others for my failures or anything like that.

[I Need a Dollar by Aloe Blacc starts playing]

JM: Through some newspapers and odd jobs... I mean, I don't work a full time job. But, through some odd jobs and stuff, I managed to get me a room over here on 13th street.

[Song continues to play]

Margret Jenny (Guest): I just thought, "You know, he seems to be a pretty dependable person and really trying very hard to pull himself up and out of his predicament."

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 opportunities for people experiencing homelessness. I'm your host Adam Kampe, and today's guest is writer Jeffery McNeil. A lot of people write for Street Sense, volunteers, staffers, vendors, but Jeffery McNeil identifies as a writer. In this show he bravely shares his story and how he willed his way from the grips of addiction to a place in the workforce, with a little help from his friend and today's other guest, Street Sense board member, Margret Jenny. First, a little on Jeffery's backstory...

JM: I was born in Zanesville Ohio, May 7th, 1969. I grew up in New Jersey. I lived in Philadelphia, for a while. I lived in Baltimore, for a while. Then, I moved to Washington D.C, in about 2007.

AK: What brought you to D.C?

JM: Through luck, I met a group of people from Washington D.C, and they said that this was where all the resources were.

AK: And, do you remember the day that you started at Street Sense?

JM: I discovered Street Sense by accident. I was working at a strip club called "Fast Eddy's". I was a cook there, and I got my first paycheck. I got drunk, passed out, got robbed, and that might have been the best thing that ever happened to me, cause I'd seen a guy with a green vest that was selling newspapers, and he said that, "You can sell newspapers and put some money in your pocket."

I was a proud person, and I didn't want to be out there panhandlin' and beggin'. I didn't want people out there feeling sorry for me. So, I just started selling newspapers. I've been published in the Washingtonian and the New York Times. I wrote a book. I'm actually working on a second book.

AK: Wow, so you just naturally have a skill to write, or did you go to school for it?

JM: No... I mean, when I came down here, I was illiterate. I had an eight grade education. I just stated going to the library, reading, and what got me into writing is... There's two sides to every story. There's the liberal side, and then, I say, the facts.

[Music plays]

AK: One of the things I'm really fascinated by, because I've been buying the paper from the same guy for years now, is the relationships that grow out of people vending and certain people... You probably have regulars, right?

JM: Yeah.

AK: They see you in that corner. It's probably a routine.

JM: Yeah, it was the regulars who got me out of homelessness. Margaret Jenny... I had a relationship with her. I've worked for her today.

MJ: My name is Margret Jenny. I'm president of RTCA, and we're in my offices here in Washington D.C.

[Cheerful music plays]

MJ: You pretty much can't get off Farragut West without, between there and here... You're going to run into at least one vendor and, I just started getting interested in these vendors out there and who they were, and one of those next mornings, as I came into work, he was out there, as usual, with his newspapers, and I just stopped and started talking with him. And, he would give me his newspaper and he would always indicate if he had an article on a certain page. So, that was very interesting to me. So, I would just take the paper and read the article, and then, the next time I would see him, we would start have a conversation about his article and his politics. His were not the same as mine. [Laughs] So, you know, just different ideas about things. So, we would spend some time on the street talking about that.

JM: The best thing we could do for the poor would be to cut every government program and give 'em a check. The reason why Street Sense works is... You don't have to go to a middleman. If you want to buy the paper, you give me the money, and I decide what to do with it. I don't know what the answer is. Maybe, we should do something like they did back in the 1870's with the Homestead Rebate. The reason why we're having housing problems on the east coast is because the huge regulations, and all the land is owned by private people. So, all this area that's being saved for otters and deer... Maybe, if we sent the poor out there, let them redevelop it, give them some type of rebate, that'll be a way to solve these problems, 'cause everyone's just competing for the same living space. So, it's creating housing shortages somewhere else.

MJ: So, at one point, I just said, "Why don't we get together for coffee, and we'd have more time to talk about your writing." So, we started on a routine basis. Probably, every once a month, we would, through email, pick a time, and we would meet at one of the local coffee shops, and you know, Jeffery would get some coffee and a little something to eat, and we would spend forty five minutes just talking about politics. And then, he started telling me more and more about how much he likes to write, and how much he would love to be able to find ways to make a living at it and start finding outlets for his writing. So, I

stated trying to think about ways to help him with that and trying to get him connected with people. He's very, very good at networking. He's very good at leveraging all the people that he meets out there.

JM: And then, another customer helped save my father's life, when my dad was very sick, and another customer... Helped me... You know, I haven't drank in seven years. That's more than just buying the paper. I don't really... I write coulombs. It gives a voice that, you know, nobody else is hearing. Your reading from a person that's not a policy wonk, or a politician, or a professional writer. You're just hearing grassroots writing.

AK: So... I mean, these are huge stories. So, you're saying, someone helped your father, who was sick.

JM: Yeah. So, it's kind of a long story. Like, one day, my dad, because my dad grew up in New Jersey. He passed away last year. That's why I wrote this story. He had prostate cancer. One of my customers drove all the way up to New Jersey. We took him to the hospital and literally saved his life.

AK: That's was based off of... You had explained the story and you guys had developed a relationship over time.

JM: Yup. One day, I was down here, sellin' in front of Dupont Cercle. I'd seen a church group from Barnesville Ohio. That was where my mom got buried. And, they went back, and that's how I reconnected with my whole family. They didn't even know I was on the streets, 'cause that's how far I regressed that. I was so ashamed of who I was, that I wouldn't even tell my family that I was on the streets.

AK: So, you just kind of vanished?

JM: Yeah... Yeah, I reconnected, and... You know, I have relative relations with relatives. And, you know, I'm doing good. I could do better, but I'm not doin'...

AK: Do you mind talking about your current situation like—

JK: Through some newspapers and odd jobs... I mean, I don't work a full time job. But, through some odd jobs and stuff, I managed to get me a room over here on 13th street. I've been there for about five years. The only reason I stay there is because the cheap rent.

MJ: We just sort of kept getting together and talking about his articles, and I sat him down and said, "I have a proposition for you."

[Jaunty music plays]

MJ: So, you should know a little but about our company.

AK: The R.T.C.A, which stands for "Radio Technical Commission for Aeronautics".

MJ: We operate a lot of large committees. We have a lot of meetings here. We have a fairly large conference space, that's fairly high tech. We have a lot of people who call in. We have remote... We have virtual meetings. We have to set up our conference rooms every night, and you have to be able to move tables around, clean tables, set up microphones, wire everything. It's not a trivial job. It can take a while, and you can't do it until the end of the day. So, I offered to Jeffery. I said, "What if you were to come in every night at five and stay for however long it takes you to reconfigure the rooms for the next day." It

can take anywhere from five minutes to two hours. And, I offered him a... "We'll pay you for the two hours, no matter how long it takes you, but with a couple of stipulations. One is, you have to be one hundred percent reliable. You can't call me and tell me you have some reason why you can't come that night. We have to be one hundred percent dependent on you, 'cause my staff has to be onboard with doing this... You know? And then, we'll give you a set amount and put it directly into an account.

Through this process, he had to establish a bank account for the first time and set himself up to do that. So, I waited until he got that in place, and we started. This is probably... We're coming up on about three years since we did this.

[Triumphant music plays]

MJ: And he has, really, just not missed a beat. There's been a few times he's had family issues and has had to go, but he's been very careful about letting us know. He's reporting to one of the people on my staff. She puts together a book every day. He comes in when he can, and he checks it out, sees how the configurations are, and makes it happen.

[Music Continues]

JM: Street Sense is just grassroots. Every day, people just telling their life stories, and every once and a while, like I said, I've had articles picked up by the Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post. I like to read, to challenge my critical thinking skills, because it's a progressive newspaper, so you have the progressive bias. So... You know... I like to portray the other side of the story.

AK: Meaning the not progressive side?

JM: Yeah... I mean, not the liberal or conservative side. Usually when you write, you get one side of the facts, but you never ever get the causes or the root causes or why something is that, or you're getting' it from a social worker or a professional, but you're not getting it from the independent voice. Like... Last issue, I wrote about the Medicare system, where it only helps the very rich or the very poor. It don't help guys like me, who are right at the poverty line, who wants to get off, because if you make over a certain amount, then they knock you off of Medicaid and then they make you pay for things. Like... Just because, all money is relative, like... You might be making twenty thousand a year isn't that much money. So, all income is relative. So, how we gauge things makes the whole poverty discussion out of whack, 'cause it's material poverty. I take a side that not the traditional mainstream. The reason why people don't some of these "Beltway" papers is because they're just partisan, and it's just the typical talking point. People just get tuned out. [laughs]

AK: Do you primarily write opinion pieces?

JM: No, I write personal stories, because, yes, I was homeless. I've slept out here. Three years, I've slept in the shelters. I've lived in the streets. I've been robbed at gunpoint. I was almost murdered. I mean, I've had some bad experiences out on the street. So, I think there are two types of people out there. There are those that are progressive. So, they got their heads stuck in the sand. They don't want to believe that this kind of stuff goes on with their social engineering. And then, there's those that know what's going on, and they're rigging the system. And it's not just either or. It's not just democrats or republicans. It's the system. It's broken.

[Sad orchestral music plays]

AK: Who is, in your estimation, Jeffery McNeil?

MJ: Ah... Jeffery... That's a really good question. He is a person with, I think is, a fair amount of pride. He's somebody who doesn't believe in getting handouts, really believes that people should... What's the best way to put it? We have conversations about things like welfare, and he sees so of that as actually not helping people, but keeping them down. And he, I feel, thinks he's done a fair amount to pull himself up and out. I think he has issues with people who don't do that, and that can sometimes get him in trouble with people. Well, he's got very strong opinions. They're not... They're not what you would consider his opinions would be about things, and he talks to me about Donald Trump as someone worth listening to, and it takes you back. You have to think, "Why is he saying that?" He works hard. He doesn't really suffer fools... Well, I don't think. He knows that he's flawed. He knows he's made mistakes. He's tried very hard with his family, but he has some interesting relationships there. I think he's a fairly intense person, who trying had to make his way in the world and do it without expecting people to give him a lot.

[Sad guitar music plays]

AK: How would you describe the feeling of being on the streets or being homeless.

JM: I'd say it's like a roach motel. It's easy to get into, but hard to get out of, because, after a while, sometimes, you can be comfortable in your homelessness, because you don't have to get up and go to work in the morning. Everything's there for you. You can go to the Mariam's Kitchen and get a free meal. You can go in the park on Saturdays. I mean, especially if you have an addiction, like if you're an alcoholic. You can rustle up a few bucks to go get a beer, get fed, three hots and a cot. And... You know... It's easy. There's like, "Homelessness" and then there's a "Homelessness mentality". There are some people who believe the world owes them something, that everything is right. No, I don't believe everything is right, and I think that's a problem with poverty. When you get something for free, you're not going to take care of it. You go out and work for it. That's why I worked my way out of homelessness, because I don't want nobody to give me anything. I want to go out here and work for it.

[Rock music plays]

AK: What myths about homelessness would you like to dispel?

JM: There's millions of dollars being spent on poverty, while homelessness isn't decreasing. I was just reading an article in Street Sense, which was a good article, where they're spending fourteen million dollars a year on a shelter, D.C Family General, where there's rats, roaches, women are getting sold into prostitution. So, wouldn't it have been better if they get rid of the shelter and just give everyone whose homeless a check and let them find their own housing.

[Happy music plays]

AK: What would you like people to know about you when you're not vending the paper? I guess, you like to write. You are interested in politics, social issues. So, what do you like to do when you're not vending?

JM: Well, I'm a well-rounded person. I can talk about any issue... besides social issues or whatever. I'm well rounded. I like to fish. I like to hunt.

AK: What's your dream scenario?

JM: Write a best-selling book, so that I can retire. [Laughs] So, I don't have to get up for work anymore, could just go travel around the country.

[Happy music continues]

MJ: So, he's... after two years, we've expanded. We've actually given him a raise and given him a little more responsibility. I think he's been able to parlay that a little bit, too, because of his experience, he's been able to get other jobs during the day now. I think he's actually gotten a job at a gym.

JM: Working at L.A Fitness.

MJ: Neither of which is actually what he wants to do with his life, but he still writes, we still meet for coffee and talk politics... argue and... [Laughs] He's very thoughtful and persuasive. You know, he gets me thinking. We do that to each other, and he comes to social events with us, with the staff. All in all, I think it's, for us and for Jeffery, a kind of a win, win.

[Music fades]

AK: That was Jeffery McNeil, on writing himself into housing, and Margret Jenny, president of R.T.C.A. Because of her curiosity and compassion, Jeffery now has a job, and because of Jeffery, Margret now sits on the Street Sense board. To hear more Sounds from the Street, check out <https://streetsense.org/audio> or find us on Soundcloud. Please keep the conversation going on Facebook and Twitter at Street Sense D.C.

Sounds from the Street theme song "I need a dollar. How to make it in America." Is performed by Aloe Blacc in the album "Good things", used curtesy of Stones Thrown Records. The song was composed by Aloe Blacc, Leon Michels, and Nick Movshon, and Jeff Dynamite. Used by permission of Songs of Cobalt Music Publishing, EMI Blackwood Music Inc/Sony ATV. The following songs used in creative commons, found on FMU's free music archive. Excepts of "Happy Time", "Pluck and Bounce", "Elephant", and the song "Quiet March" by Adam Selzer from the album "Production Music". Except from "Hebejebes" by **Gram Bowl**, from the album "First new Day". And an excerpt from "Haven" by **Gel Sonic**, from the album "Various moods 2".