

Angie Whitehurst Part 1 of 2: A Life Interrupted

Transcribed by: William Aitken

Angie Whitehurst (Guest): I've had homeless experiences, which I don't talk about in much detail. It can happen to you. It wasn't supposed to happen to me.

[I Need a Dollar by Aloe Blacc starts playing]

AW: I've been homeless here. I've been homeless overseas. I have been through it.

[Song continues to play]

AW: I wasn't supposed to go through any of the things I've been through. I was supposed to be a nice little black bourgeois child, who grew up, got married, had some kids, and went on with life, and my life has been anything but that.

[Lighthearted music plays]

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, raconteur and renaissance woman, Angie Whitehurst. In this show, part one of two, we're going to learn about Angie's path to homelessness. It's no secret that there's no predictable path, and Angie's life story proved that in more ways than one. Thanks to two serious diseases, cerebral malaria and fibromyalgia, not to mention an unwavering commitment to her family, her life direction and her focus dramatically shifted just as her career was starting to take off. It's nearly as unexpected as it gets. Bottom line is, as she just said, it can happen to you. It wasn't supposed to happen to her. Let's meet Angie.

AW: My sister told me that I was from outer space. My name is Angelyn Whitehurst. It's Angelyn Lucille Whitehurst. I live in Washington D.C. I was born in Freedman's Hospital, on September 8th, 1952. What was my doctor's name? I can remember seeing him, when I popped out. Dr. Picknee or Pinknee, something like that... No, I don't remember seeing him. What else would you like to know? I'm a Washingtonian.

AK: You know, if there are any questions you don't want to answer, you don't have to. This is super informal. This is not live.

AW: Okay, I'll tell you "Nunya". You know what "Nunya" is?

AK: Nunya business. (None of your business)

AW: Nunya business.

AK: [laughs] You sounds like my friend's mom from North Carolina. She says "Nunya"...

AW: Nunya!

AK: ...and "Noes trouble". If someone's getting all up in your business, they're being nosey. She just says "Nose trouble." [In a southern accent] Hush that fuss.

AW: Hush it up-

AK: [Still using accent] -right now! That's her other big fraise.

Both: [In unison] Hush that fuss!

AK: That's what you say to little kids.

AW: Hush, hush, sweet Charlette.

AK: [Laughs] Nunya!

AW: Nunya... That's right.

AK: Okay, so before Street Sense, what was your life like? Where were you?

AW: That's a huge question, but I can capsulize it for you. My life, for several decades, had been a hodgepodge of ups and downs, because of my own health problems, because I had malaria, and I went through a number of years suffering with reoccurrences that were severe and debilitating, and then, not being able to work. I would work temporary, and I would take on temp jobs and try to get into something that was more stable. I work on contingency. I worked with companies that should have done well, where people turned out to be crooks, stole money, ran away, left us all stuck in more limbo, And if you'd try to get a job with someone after that... That's really like ptomaine poison. Then family problems and issues, because I had been committed to my sister, who has a mental illness, and to my mother, who was a divorcee, and my other siblings, and their struggles, their adventures, which has been most interesting. So with all of that, my life wasn't focused on me. It was more focused on keeping together whatever little tiny root of a family I had together, at my own expense. I do not recommend that people do that, especially after what I've been through. Sometimes, it works out, and sometimes, it's like where I am. It's called a "never ending story."

[Acoustic Guitar Music Plays]

AK: And how did you contract malaria?

AW: Oh, I was in West Africa, and I was asked to make a detour, before I came home, to observe something, which I did, and I got bit by a nasty mosquito bite on the back of my neck. Didn't bother me then. Maybe, less than a week after that, I became seriously ill and went to a hospital overseas, and they said, "Oh, you have malaria. The bad news is, you have a rare form of malaria." What they didn't tell me, and what I didn't ask was, "What does that mean?" I found that out, once I got back to the states, that it was rare and there was no cure, that I would suffer with it or die with it. The other people who had the same type, cerebral malaria, that I was able to find... most of them had died. At that time, I think that there were, maybe, five people alive. Time goes on, and you say, "Okay, I'm going to leave this alone.", and I left that alone. So, I just suffered through the reoccurrences.

[Ambient Electronic Music Plays]

AK: So, you were working in West Africa?

AW: Yes.

AK: For the government?

AW: I was working for a private organization as a subcontractor, as an, on quote, "international consulting economist".

AK: And...Is that code for something?

AW: I don't know. We'll have to look back at the records and let the historians figure it out. It was during the Cold War period. I know, it was an interesting time for everybody.

AK: So, economics was your focus?

AW: My studies was political science, international affairs, and economics. Some of the things I did... I worked in the exhibit business. I did some volunteer work, contract work, with the Commerce Department. I worked on some international trade types of things, contract rating and review, some Minority Business Development projects, and import/export business development.

AK: So, you got back, had to deal with the onset of the malaria...

AW: I had a friend who... I kept getting sick, and I had done some work for his company, some years before, and someone told him, by word of mouth, and he came to Washington and got me, put me on a plane, took me to Africa, got me to some clinics and doctors, who had more experience with cerebral malaria, and they gave me some medication, that was experimental, but I was so sick and ready to just die, 'cause it's very painful. It's excruciating. I took it. I didn't die... again. [purposefully laughs] I had an enlarged spleen, for a while, which gave me a big stomach, y'know, and that abated, and there was more control, but I still had reoccurrences, but they weren't excruciating to the point where you became delirious or comatose.

[Sad Organ Music Plays]

AK: Is that connected to the fibromyalgia?

AW: It might well be. You know, that's a good question.

AK: When were you diagnosed with fibromyalgia?

AW: Back in... probably 2000... I want to say 2005, because, see, before that, I knew I had post-polio syndrome, and when I would go to a doctor, they would always say that's what it was. I didn't have insurance, so I got a pro bono visit with a doctor at Johns Hopkins, who told me that. But years before that, I had a professor, who was a biologist, who was a doctor, who told me I had that. So, then I knew... and accepted. The fibromyalgia, I refused to accept, what the doctor said. I just didn't want it. And, I already have post-polio syndrome, which, y'know, for after I had it, I knew I had a weakness in my legs and back, which is why my parents enrolled me in ballet, and so, I'll always dance, because it helped with that, but I did not want the fibromyalgia, because that's much more painful than tired, fatigued muscles. It's a bitch, and that's why I call it "Fibro B".

[lighthearted piano music plays]

AW: I'm more influenced by my mother's side of the family, which is from West Virginia. Mountain people, no matter what happens, they're there for you. No matter what you do... We might tell you off. Y'know, we might watch you like a hawk to make sure you don't do something again, but we're still there for you. And so, I probably have too much of that, I think. Maybe not, I don't know, but I wouldn't be happy if I just said, "To hell with everybody. I'm going on about my business." And so, currently, my mother has stage four variant cancer in remission, remarkably, unbelievably. You don't leave people like that, and I love her dearly, even though, we have big differences, but there's some things we have in common. And then, y'know, when I had malaria, once I had a reoccurrence, I had a fever of like a hundred and eight, and my whole body, all the fluid just sweat out. I messed up my mother's beautiful, several thousand dollar, sofa, but my sister, the one who has the mental illness, was the one who sat and stayed with me. She didn't leave my side, [uplifting acoustic guitar starts playing] and even after the fever was over, and I had to go here and go there, and I could hardly walk or move, she went with me and helped me. Society doesn't deal well with people with mental disabilities, and then, their prime caretakers get old and die, and their really left out to the wind, and quite a few of them do become homeless.

AK: So, at what point during your journey did you stumble into Street Sense?

AW: Street Sense, I think when they first started, and I was working downtown and doing some consulting work for someone, I used to buy the paper, and I would tell other people about the paper. Now, let's see, how did I get back to Street Sense again? I think, when I was taking yoga downtown and my mom was sick, had gotten sick at that time, and I would see the paper, and I would get the paper, and then I decided that I wanted to go and do that, and I went there and then, I think I stayed away, and then, I came back, and then, I signed up for the vendor's class. I had to take it three times, 'cause I had had a stroke before I was taking the yoga. Why I was taking the yoga was to strengthen my focus, strengthen my muscles, give me something positive to do, besides staying in the house, looking at the tv all day, deciding what I was going to eat.

AK: And so, when you first joined or, during the process of the training class in order to become a vendor, you didn't identify as homeless, or did you?

AW: I've had homeless experiences, which I don't talk about in much detail, several times in my life. I knew that I didn't want to repeat that. That's a pattern of behavior that I have to look at with myself. When you keep having trauma and trauma throughout your life, you do get a serious case of anxiety and depression, and after I had the stroke, I was suicidal. So, I saw Street Sense, because I had met, the man who I call, "The cat in the hat", and had a conversation with him.

AK: Eleventh and F?

AW: Yeah, some years before when he was out there...

AK: He's still there.

AW: He didn't remember me, but I remembered him. So, that sort of propelled me to say that there was something here that is unusual and open and might be a little strange, but it's worth a try, anything that was going to help me get on a path that was soft, or more stable than the one I had been on, and it has been that.

[Orchestral music plays]

AK: That was part one of a two part conversation, with Angie Whitehurst. Next time, we're going to focus on her love of art and her super active role in the Street Sense media center's growing slate of workshops, from photography, to theater, to the interactive art bus, all of which will be celebrated at the Street Sense gala on October first at the beautiful Josephine Butler park center, just off of Meridian Hill park. In fact, you can meet Angie there, as well as many other Street Sense artists. You can also listen to the cool sounds of cellist Benjamin Gates, drink great beer from D.C Brau, and greet Gin from Green Hat, and bid on some fantastic items at the silent auction. Tickets are on sale now at <https://streetsense.org/audio> .

[I Need a Dollar by Aloe Blacc starts playing]

AK: 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 Throw 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 "Charmed Life", "Clouds", "farm", "birds", "front porch," and "Lifting off slowly", by Adam Selzer, from the album, "Production Music". Excerpt from "I can't imagine where I'd be without it", by Chris Zabriskie, from the album, "Thoughtless". And, if you happen to see Angie, out on the street, and she's making a fuss, you can tell her to[Speaking in southern accent] hush that fuss right now!