

Sounds From the Street: Entrepreneur Ken Martin Wears Many Hats

Ken Martin

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So life just got worse. And then then we have heart attack. So it really was, it's been an interesting ride.

Adam Kampe

That's entrepreneur Ken Martin. And this is Sounds From The Street, where we get to meet the men and women who define Street Sense, DC's nonprofit media center, dedicated to creating economic opportunities for people experiencing homelessness. I'm your host, Adam Kampe. To say Ken Martin has been through the ringer of life is the understatement of the century. His story is also a testament to the admittedly tired line: "it can happen to you." Because what happened to Ken, like what happens to a lot of folks who lose their financial or housing stability, is a case of bad luck. Really bad luck—blood clots, heart attacks, divorce—life changes in a heartbeat, and suddenly you're living at National Airport without a safety net. Then what? If you're Ken, you focus on the good, you dig in, and you recalibrate. I sat down with Ken at the Street Sense offices as he shared his backstory, his deep love for jazz, his deep love for hats, and, ultimately, his deep love for humanity.

Ken Martin

My name is Ken Martin, and I'm at the church of the epiphany. One of the things that I say when I'm out there selling is, "Yes, it's true. It can happen to you." Because it does, it can happen to anybody, a lot of people look at me and assume that because I'm homeless that I was some, some poor old alcoholic. Well, yeah, it's true. I am a recovering alcoholic. But that was 35 years ago, I haven't had any drink for 35 years. So alcohol did not bring me down. I had gone so far as to have four homes and two businesses on K Street at the same time. So I have had money. It's the lack of a support network, a strong support network, a reliable safety net, can happen to anybody, once you become ill, if you don't have those things in place. Your housing is unstable. And if it's unstable, there you go, a paycheck one month, two months, you're gone. So it can happen to anybody.

Adam Kampe

No, it's like that can never be said enough.

Ken Martin

Well we need to be a community. You know, that's the bottom line community needs to become community that needs to be unity in our community.

I'll start by saying that I was a social services worker in Washington, DC for over 20 years, very active in the community. So I had a lot of connections. And I knew people that I've talked with a lot of people since I came back to DC. And suddenly we found myself homeless, I went to every agency that I knew to go to. And I think of myself to be resourceful, I could find no help. I eventually ended up meeting a gentleman from Sweden, who said, you ought to go to Street Sense. And I'm like, "What is that?" Now, here I am an entrepreneur, looking for housing. And you would think that everybody would

say, "go to Street Sense." And the odd thing about is all these people who work with the homeless, none of them suggested it. It was a person from Sweden, who runs an entrepreneurship program that told me to come here. And the sad thing is that I didn't know about it myself. But I had been living in Maryland for a while and then came then moved to Georgia. So I really just was out of touch.

Adam Kampe
What year was this?

Ken Martin
This was a year ago.

Adam Kampe
What were you doing before you found Street Sense?

Ken Martin
Suffering. Before I came to Street Sense—

Adam Kampe
Very Buddhist of you.

Ken Martin
Well, I wasn't it wasn't intentional. I actually had two heart attacks, just prior to coming to Street Sense.

Adam Kampe
Wow. Is that what precipitated your homelessness or in part?

Ken Martin
Yeah, but for the most part, no, I had heart disease and I had some other issues. Unfortunately, the woman who I was living with at the time, was not prepared for my illnesses. I had to have surgery on my legs. I had four surgeries for vein removal. And she was not mentally equipped to deal with that. She couldn't handle the blood no better than I could, but she couldn't handle that experience very well. And I understand that now. But it led to parting our ways. After that, but after being homeless for about a year, I found myself in Georgia. Getting on my feet and doing rather well my best day different almost two years. My daughter came, visited me twice down and spent three weeks two times. The second time she cried the whole time she was down there because she didn't want to come back home. My daughter has selective mutism. And she had, in her words, no one to talk to. Her brother had been removed from the home, her father was removed from the home, her girlfriends were separated from her because they changed her mother changed the school. So she just didn't have anybody anymore. Mother was involved in another relationship. So the attention was gone. She needed somebody that couldn't keep her down there. So they'd had to come back up here. And things didn't work out. My buddies, who were going to put me up until I got situated, got involved in relationships and the relationships were not having a third wheel. So I ended up on the street. A week after I find out that I'm homeless, I step off a curb wrong, tear my meniscus on my left knee, and end up with a blood clot. So life just got worse. And then then we have heart attack. So it really was it was um, it's been an interesting ride. Man, it's been an interesting ride. And there's in the works. Okay, there definitely will be a book on this one. Okay. Been through worse, almost survivor.

Adam Kampe

Trying to get a map in my head. Where do you typically sell the paper?

Ken Martin

My best spot is Tenleytown, CVS at Tenleytown, I sell other places, but that's the best spot. That's, it's where I'm recognized. When I first got here, first of all, I was petrified that I had had a paper right when I was 11. But that was a long, long, long, long time ago. And I really didn't want to sell newspapers, to be frank with you. When Marcus Lawson from life acid suggested this. Okay, you think so. And he told me that I needed to become humble. He says, I realized that homelessness is a humbling experience. But you've had businesses on K Street, and now you need to come to terms with not having what you had. I was petrified and I went up there and the guys took me under their wing and gave me some tips. And then I met the Cat in the Hat. And I talk with him he sees a father too.

Adam Kampe

Then you mean literally the guy who wears the cat and who may not know the cat in the hat, a gentleman who I don't know his name, actually. But

Ken Martin

Philip Black? One of the top sellers.

Adam Kampe

Yeah he's often over on 11th and F ish.

Ken Martin

Yeah, yeah. He and I talked. And he said, you know, what sells is persona. People need to know who you are, you need to give them somebody to like, and I thought about it, and it made good sense to me. So I went to my storage unit, and I dusted off the top hat. And I put some Christmas lights around it. And I created a persona. Put the LED lights around my bag that I kept my papers in. And then I would change up from jack frost lights to the Christmas tree lights periodically. And I got an awful lot of attention. Because as time changes, and when I got up there at night, people looked out and he saw those lights, they were intrigued. They want to come over and find out what is going on over there. And I engage them in conversation. And once I do they buy my papers.

Adam Kampe

That's smart advice. Is the Cat in the Hat advice. Again, it's applicable to anything, right? I mean, not necessarily like fake a persona, but like, you know, just draw people in. It's market. It's a hook. And do you still do that now?

Ken Martin

I'm working on something a little bit different now. I'm going to be bringing Lydia to work with me. This is the first time I've even announced this. But I have a wires assistant who's going to be coming out with me. She's the color of Street Sense. And that's true since neon. And I'm working on a stand for her with that engineer, so we're gonna hook this thing up. And she'll have LED lights on her and hopefully smart LEDs and that. She's a work in progress, but I'm gonna have a hope nobody else asks.

Adam Kampe

This sounds like a performance art piece.

Ken Martin

Kind of sorta. In fact, I've even toyed with that idea of hooking up a speaker to her and having her do her own sales pitch, working on that. Marketing was a hobby of mine.

Adam Kampe

You can just be off doing other things, let, let let the robot

Ken Martin

She can make change.

Adam Kampe

Beyond this persona, this character and this is draw that you created, what is your pitch?

Ken Martin

You wanna hear my pitch?

Adam Kampe

Yeah. Expect that it's good.

Ken Martin

Get them here, get them now get them while they're hot. There's a present, the latest version of Street Sense, news all freshening. Still, when it's true returns, changing lives one paper at a time written by the homeless with you in mind it's Street Sense. Street Sense!

Adam Kampe

That's good.

Ken Martin

I'm a little ham, I gotta make it fun. And like I said, I got some drama experience, I have been a performer. I'm kind of a renaissance guy. I've done a little bit of everything. I got into photography class because I wanted to, I'm cheap. Bottom line, I'm a cheapskate I wanted to, I wanted to do my own photography for my catalog and my website. And I wanted to be good. I want my stuff to look professional. So I figured what better way to learn how to do professional photography than take a class from a professional photographer? I like to play around with the subject, I like to get the subject in different angles and, and I like to be able to make a picture worth 1000 words. I want it to be interesting. So I try to take shots that I think are interesting. I catch her shots. That I'm not very, I'm not very well skilled at dead photography. So like, again, 90% of it is luck. But I tried to, I try to position myself and the camera in the right spots and just start shooting and I shoot until I get no pictures where I can go through and hey, that's pretty good. You know, consciously I'm just trying to make the conditions right. And I'm aiming and shooting and I'm hoping for the best. I got a rose, I was walking down 18th Street Northwest and right in through the yard got a rose wish on it. But it had a rose. It was just beginning to open. And that was the most beautiful thing. And I just stood there and I just took shots of it from different angles, because that thing was just breathtaking to me. I'm into horticulture. That's, that's my hobby, far more so than I am into photography. In fact, I take a lot of pictures of a lot of flowers. That particular rose was just a thing of beauty. And I was really fortunate to be there. And that was like an aha thing for me. Because I was bound and determined I was going to get all the best shots I could get from that little thing because I knew that would never happen again.

Adam Kampe

And speaking of workshops, which ones are you participating in?

Ken Martin

Actually co facilitate face group on Fridays, I participate with interactive art.

Adam Kampe

And can you just briefly what is face?

Ken Martin

Face is a focus on achievement, commitment to excellence. And it's a it's an advocacy and self empowerment group. It's to get the vendors better sales to develop a mindset of self empowerment, self determination, get them out of just being Street Sense vendors and but to, to self actualize.

Adam Kampe

And that's run by vendors. Right? Right. It's like launched and managed.

Ken Martin

Strictly by vendors.

Adam Kampe

Yeah. And what's a good day for you selling the paper? And I don't just mean economically?

Ken Martin

A good day is when I get to engage with people, I don't have to make money. When I'm selling the paper. A lot of times I make money when I don't expect to. A good day for me is when when I get some students a group of students and they want kick it for a minute. Or when I get somebody who wants to talk about something other than just homelessness. I've had some very good days out there that had absolutely nothing to do with me making a paper sale. In fact, a lot of times I'll just give people the paper. People come up to me and tell me that they only have \$1. And I'll just give them the paper or do they say well, "I don't have any money today. I can't get the paper. Take the paper. Pay it forward. If you don't, if you don't see me give it to one another vendors." It's okay. People will say, "here's \$1 I don't want the paper." No, I'll tell you what, "you keep the dollar and take the paper because I don't want the paper. I want somebody to read what's in the paper. I don't need the dollar that much. The dollar will help me but it's not gonna help me that much. It's only \$1. Take the paper. There's a lot of good content in this paper, it's a great newspaper. It really is. That's why there's 13,000 people reading it." Now the one of my little pitches is that, um, "the 13,000 people can't be wrong." And I say that, because I firmly believe that if 13,000 people buy it, at least 10,000 read it. I just want them to read it and discuss it. And that's what I push when I sell.

Adam Kampe

What do you want people to know about you that they wouldn't necessarily glean from reading the paper? Or what do you like to do when you're not selling the paper?

Ken Martin

The crusader in me, my ultimate goal is to create a foundation for children with dyslexia, and selective mutism, and other disadvantaged youth but mainly those because they don't have a voice. So that's one of mine. One of my goals. As far as the things that I do to entertain myself, I love jazz, or movies. In fact, I collect music. A homeless guy with a music collection. I have a serious music collection in storage. I

can't wait to get it out of there. Stuff I haven't even touched some, stuff I haven't even seen in over 10 years.

Adam Kampe

What's like your go to music? It sounds like there's a lot, but like, is there, if you could pick out like an album or two that you just like jonesing to hear anything,

Ken Martin

Anything Crusaders, anything Jazz Crusaders. I love the Jazz Crusaders. I was raised in a household where they listened to Ellington and BC and Fitzgerald and Sinatra and all of those. But when I turned 13, I heard the Jazz Crusaders. And after that, they were my group. And they have always been my group, anything by any one of those members. And Hubert Laws who originally played with them, that type of music moves me. Those guys, Grover Washington Jr. is one of my favorites. When he died, a major part of me died, I was stunned to hear that this man died. I've seen him perform. And I know there has never been a more energetic performer ever. Cause I grew up in the Motown era. So the Temptations were my, they were my idols. In fact, my cousins and I, we had a couple of singing groups that we pattern ourselves after them. For Tops, Smokey Robinson and Miracles, those white groups, and a few local groups like the Unifix, for example, a choice for DC has some bad musicians come up with this place. Young Senators we had, we had some excellent performance in this town. I liked George Benson, but I like Re Clue more. Something about the Chet Atkins thing I hit that he's got good, I've been robbed. Listen, I love the Thing of Bonanza. And then he did too. And it just you relate that whenever you hear him, so I love that. Then there's Gerard Butler. Hell, he is this elder singer. This guy could without a microphone, his voice could be heard two blocks away. Awesome guy. And a nice guy. You know, that's that's the beauty of working in hat stores. You meet people. I've met some great and some great folks, you know, over the years, Paul Newman. Yeah, I saw what happened. Paul Newman for joining would that was big time. That was major.

Adam Kampe

You've mentioned the hat thing, and I was gonna bring that up. Yeah. Can you just kind of give us a little bit of the backstory of how you fell into this love for hats? I mean, a man who has an email with hat man, as part of the name?

Ken Martin

That became a nickname. Over the years. I've been selling hats for almost 20 years now, quite by accident. My lady friend, who I'm still seeing, we used to meet at Union Station. One of her clients, he's a beautician, one of her clients worked in this hat store. So we would meet up over there and we would just stop and talk to her friend. One day she said you know, you got to work here. And you like hats so much. We should come on in here and work with us. So I said, why not? And I went in part time and I stayed part time for about two months and then I was offered the co-manager job. I had already had a love for hats. I've been wearing hats since I was a teenager. I learned how to handblock hats when I was a kid because we couldn't afford them. So if you couldn't afford and you wanted a new look, you had to change the style your hat, my folks went out buying hats like that. So we knew how to do that, so we did it by hand, wet newspaper and a lot of sunshine. Sometimes we can you know fan that helped to dry it but learn how to do that by hand. And when I'm worked there, it was an awesome experience being in there and in Union Station. A lot of people came from a lot of places, so you met people. And one of the people that I met was Paul Newman, Tom Brokaw, Tim Russert, Duggie Doug, Michael Collier, and a lot of people.

Adam Kampe

And what is it about hats? What is the attraction? Can you explain that definable?

Ken Martin

One, they're protection. There's a certain comfort level that I or anyone else should have been protected from the elements. So that's significant. The other thing is the image. The hats complete the image. A well dressed man in a nice suit, with a nice neck tie. Hat appropriately placed on his head. Looks good. It's the finishing touch. The crowning glory. Ladies, likewise, they call them crowns and queens, queens should wear crowns. I think it's just wise and, and it accentuates the beauty. You know? So and I think that everyone should, should at least try to wear hats. And see that's the other thing. People make the mistake of thinking that you wear hats and you don't wear hats. You work hats. That's why people say that I put on a hat. I don't look good. And hat. I don't wear hats. Well, you don't wear hats. That's true. Because that's not what it's done with hats. You have to manipulate the hat just like you would anything else. If you want to get the best out of it. You have to work with it.

Adam Kampe

Do you have a story about a relationship that you've developed out of bending the paper with somebody that's like really notable? Or another way to ask that is like, is anything ever happened, in a good way or a bad way, that really surprised you? That was unexpected?

Ken Martin

Guy came up to me one day, I was just finishing up, came over to me and he asked me who I was and how long I've been out there and what I was what I needed. He said, "God put it on me to give you something. What can I do for you?" "I really don't know. I've been thinking about it. I don't I don't, I can't think of anything. I really need housing, but you can't do that. So I can't really think of anything." He says I'm going and CVS, is there something I can get you from CVS. I said, "no not really." I wasn't thirsty. I just couldn't think of anything. And he put me on the spot now, happens a lot of times people ask you, "you know, I'm going on CVS, can I get you something? Or is there anything that you need?" I don't know.

Adam Kampe

Yeah. I mean, unless just like, I need band aids or something like really specific.

Ken Martin

I just wasn't thinking about it. So he said, "Well, I'm going to CVS, think about it. When I come back, maybe you know." So he came back out and I said, "You know what, my daughter needs a—" And I knew that's something he wasn't going to be able to do. I said, "My daughter needs a transparent cellophane styled backpack for school, because they, they want to have see-through bags for these children to prevent weapons from getting into school." He said, "I'm going to The Container Store, I'll see what I can do." I stood around there, and I really what I was trying to leave, so I stayed around that. And I'm may have had maybe five or six papers left. So I sold them. And I'm standing around there, and I'm waiting and waiting. And the guy comes back and he's got this big box. So he says— they didn't have—no, it was that and cane tips. I needed a tip for my cane. Because I was on a cane at the time. So he went to Ace Hardware and got these cane tests and the cane tips was just like, big enough for the elephant's foot in. So I like whether they won't work so you can take those back. And then he says, "well, they didn't have they didn't have a cellophane backpack. So I got you this." And I looked at the thing. And lo and behold, this man had gotten me a suitcase, a piece of visionair luggage that sells for 176 bucks. I was stunned. He's like, "God said to give you this. Here." I said, "I can't accept this." He's like, "you don't you don't

have no say in the matter. This is between me and God. You have to take this. You can buck against me, but you're not gonna buck against God, are you?" Oh, wow. We know I can't do that. I'm a very spiritual individual. I was flabbergasted. And I accepted it. And we've become good friends as a result of that. So since then, we put it that way. And we see each other every week or two. He comes through then and we talk, and he'll buy a paper. Maybe once every other month or so, he'll come by a paper and he'll give me 50 bucks. He'll do that. He's in a position where he can and, and he says, "Look, it's not for me, it's from him." He has it like that. That's my special customer.

Adam Kampe

That was entrepreneur and haberdasher extraordinaire Ken Martin. Keep an eye and an ear out for updates on Ken's planned pop up hat shop in DC: Brims. The man will show you how to wear a hat. I promise. To hear more sounds from the street. Check out street sense.org backslash audio. You can also find us on Soundcloud or Stitcher. And soon enough, you'll be able to find us on iTunes. Please keep the conversation going on Facebook and Twitter at Street Sense DC. The Sounds From The Street Theme song, "I need \$1, how to make it in America," performed by Aloe Blacc from the album "Good Things" used courtesy of Stone's Throw Records. The song was composed by Aloe Blacc written with Leon Michaels, Nick Motion and Jeff Dynamite, used by permission of Songs of Cobalt Music Publishing, EMI Blackwood Music slash Sony ATV. Excerpt of "History of An Apology," composed and performed by Paul Rucker from the album "History of an Apology" used courtesy of Paul Rucker, and excerpts of the following used courtesy of Creative Commons and found on w FM us Free Music Archive: "elephant raindrops" and "cocktail hour" composed and performed by Adam Seltzer from his album Production Music, excerpts of "Vituro" by Blue Dot Sessions from the album arrow knot, and excerpts of "n def" and "Instagram" composed and performed by Jonathan Hadal.

Ken Martin

My name is Ken Martin and you're listening to Sounds From The Street.