

Sounds From the Street

Episode 15: Christie Jones on her children's book about homelessness

Christie Jones (Guest): *Are We Home yet* is a story about a second grade little boy named Max, who finds himself in a homeless shelter with rest of his family.

(Music)

CJ: The book is based on a compilation of students that i have been working with. So I just pulled out a sheet of notebook paper one day and started writing.

(Music)

Adam Kampe (Host): That's Counselor, Educator, and Author Christie Jones, and this is *Sounds From the Street*, where we get to meet men and women facing and/or fighting homelessness. I'm your host, Adam Kampe. Two and a half million children annually experience homelessness in the United States. That's a devastating fact. It's not exactly water cooler conversation because A: who wants to talk about it, and B: who can wrap their head around 2.5 million anything. Here's where Christie Jones entered the picture, she took attack to breaking down the complex issue. She wrote a fiction children's book about one homeless child, Max. It didn't take Jones long to realize there wasn't a children's book out there that addressed the sensitive and overwhelming problem. I met with her in mid September, just before the *Street Sense* forum on child homelessness. Today we'll learn about this native Washingtonian's story, and how her book became a reality one year ago in 2015. You're an educator, counselor, and a writer, were you an educator first and the writing came out of that, or were you always writing?

CJ: I was an educator first, it was never my intent to be an author, or to write anything, to publish anything. I do journal, but that was for my own personal interest. I thought about writing a book when I came across certain students that I was working with and I couldn't find a resource for

them, so I pulled a out a sheet of notebook paper one day and started writing. A story that I thought could best be told from the perspective of a small child. It was born from there.

AK: Are we talking about *Are We Home Yet?*

CJ: Yes. The title of the book is *Are We Home Yet?* Yes.

AK: Was it modeled after a first hand experience with a child who was experiencing some form of homelessness or was living in a shelter?

CJ: Actually the book is based on a compilation of students that I have been working with since the beginning of the school year. It had been on my mind to see if I could put something together. Like I said before, there were no resources available for them. There were no stories telling the story as it related to them, and was telling it from their perspective. Just in talking with those students that I was working with at the time, and providing them with resources and providing their families with some resources to help them through their situation. I decided to after months and months of sitting and thinking about it, sat down and wrote it all out. I had a friend to proofread it and see if it was something that she thought would be relatable to those students. She thought it would be a really good idea. I then put it in a folder and sat on it for six years, until last year when I decided to publish it.

AK: Oh wow. So it was only last year, or since last year that it's been in the world as a physical, tangible object.

CJ: Actually the book was finally published in January of this year. It's been very well received because like I said before, it is a story that has not been told before. It's not like any children's book that you could find in the public library or in any bookstore. But it was a story that needed to be told nonetheless. I know some people were concerned because of the topic of homelessness, but it's bringing awareness to a situation that is very real to a lot of our children. The way that the book end I hope it provides hope to those children who find themselves in that situation.

AK: What is the plot? What is the summary of *Are We Home Yet?*

CJ: *Are We Home Yet* is about a second grade little boy named Max, who finds himself in a homeless shelter with the rest of his family. The book goes through how he feels about living in the shelter. The different ways that other families in the shelter got to be in the shelter as well, and how counselors in the shelter help him with some coping strategies to help him deal with all of the different emotions that he experiences while he is still living in the shelter and going to school simultaneously.

AK: How would you describe Max? Who is Max?

CJ: Max, I would just describe Max as the son that I never had. Somehow whenever I do write things I said that I never wanted to be a writer, but I did find some things that I wrote in elementary school, and Max was the main character. I guess he's always been on my mind. So he was just a little boy that needed his story told. I thought that it was very important to have a boy on the front cover of the book, to have him be the main character because we don't often see boys as the main character. It's always that little girls like to read and little boys don't like to read. I want to change that. So I thought that putting a little boy on the cover, who's holding or throwing a football, would get boys who maybe like football might want to pick this book up, even though the book has nothing to do with football. I just wanted to make a connection. So that's who Max is, a little boy who was in my imagination.

AK: And what is Max's story?

CJ: Like I said, Max is the main character, I based his family off of how my family is built. I have a mother and father, of course and a little sister. In the story Max has a little sister. It's just the four of us. Unfortunately, dad ends up losing his job, or getting laid off rather. They weren't able to pay where they lived anymore, so they had to go and live in the shelter.

AK: That's such an archetypal representation of a traditional homelessness story. One of the parents, or a single parent, or the primary loses their job for X,Y,Z reasons. Can't afford wherever they're staying, apartment or house. This is what I really like about the book, there's a lot of transition in homelessness, it's not a black and white. You're under a tarp, or causeway, or

breezeway somewhere out in the open. You could be in a shelter, like Max says in the book, in a room with the Roberts, Smith's. The Smith's had been living in their car, the Roberts came from a motel. The spectrum is pretty wide.

CJ: Correct. Like I said before, he was a compilation of students that I worked with. I also worked with those families so I got to know their stories, and because i've been at that school for a long time, I knew the families prior to this situation. I knew that they were all hardworking families. No one intentionally wants to be homeless. At the time the economy took a turn, those who had small thriving small businesses, found themselves folding in those businesses, not able to get any gainful employment. Not being able to pay their mortgage, eventually going into foreclosure. They just ended up in this downward spiral, that some call bad luck. They just ended up in this downward spiral because of their economic situation, and they tried really hard to get out of it. A lot of people who have never used any resources before ever in their life, now found themselves in the situation where they had to use social services. And get things like holiday assistance and Thanksgiving assistance. It was also an issue of not pushing their pride aside or totally down, but us extending a hand and explaining to them that it was a hand up not a hand out. We want to help you, we do want to see you thrive, but right now, you do need some help, so please let us help you. There were so many different varying stories, I wanted to make sure that those families that I worked with got their story told.

AK; Did you have any chance to talk to those families once the book was published?

CJ: One family in particular, I am contact with, unfortunately they are still kind of struggling, but they're getting back on their feet. Some of them have transitioned and I can't find them. That is a concern.

AK: I was just curious, what an experience that would be if you were a second grader, third grader, or a first grader, just learning how to read and you were in this situation. What would it be like to have that chance to identify with a character that represents you, which is finally,

thankfully, in 2015 being an issue, in terms of race and sexual identity, there's a lot more variety out there. Which is great.

CJ: When i've shared the story with the children I didn't base the story on in particular, they were relieved that their story was told. Now they had someone that they could relate to. There were parts in the book where Max talks about how he's embarrassed, he hopes that no one in school finds out that he lives in a shelter. I've shared it with entire schools, I had one girl raise her hand and be so excited like, "I used to live in a shelter." She was so glad that the story had been told. We started to have a further discussion into, what is a shelter, what does that look like? It helped her classmates to understand what her living situation was like. Some teachers have used the book when they do their unit on talking about homes, and the different types of homes people live in. Using my book they have delved into that some people don't live in an apartment or a house, this is where some people live. Some people live in a shelter. They have extended it that way. It's gone into education and awareness.

AK: A way to demystify or dispel myths. It doesn't mean that you're some outcast or that it was a choice, as you mentioned.

CJ: It's not that you want to be homeless, or you don't want to work, or that you're a lazy person. No, it's much deeper than that. They are many of us who are about one paycheck away from being considered homeless. It's a lot closer to many of us than we think.

AK: There are some lines in the book that have stuck with me. Early on he wishes he could live at school because he has his own space. A desk that's his own, with his own things in it. He's got this uncomfortable shared space.

CJ: Yes exactly. In a world where many of our kids have their own room, who have their own space, they don't know anything about sharing a room with a brother or sister, it really blows their minds to think that somebody will have to live in a room with another family. Even two or three other families. Or maybe live in a big space like a gym. It teaches compassion and empathy in that way. Being an educator we see everyday, kids so glad to be in school,

because school is their consistency. School is the place where they have structure and boundaries. School is the place where they have snacks. School is the place where they have a compassionate adult who's going to sit and have a conversation with them. That was yet another message that I wanted to convey in the book, that for the kids that are able to be in school even though they are experiencing this homelessness situation, this school part is so very important to keep everything as normal as possible. Whatever that looks like, it needs to be done. It has to stay that way.

AK: In the book it's Mr. Mike, the adult figure, the counselor. You know a little bit about, a lot a bit about what that job entails. There's some good life lessons from Mr. Mike how to manage the anger, embarrassment, and shame. The anger of seeing other kids who have cool toys or new shoes. Of course, kids are the cruelest, or can be the cruelest. It talks about how he just needs to like calm down.

CJ: Yes, draw a picture, or go talk with your parents. It talks about how he needs to pray, which is not something we can push in a public education, but there are children who that's how their parents are raising them, to pray in times of difficulty and pray in times of joy as well so we can make sure we stay grateful for what we do have. Once again it was important to give those coping strategies to kids because they don't have the verbal skills just yet. Some of them to say, "Somebody called me a name and that really bothered me. I feel angry when you do X,Y,Z." Kids are still in the process of learning how to use eye messages. There are a lot of adults who are still in the process of using eye messages. I thought it was really important that I share that sometimes kids don't necessarily know the words to use. Sometimes they'll act out because they don't know how to express how they're feeling. That's what the role of a counselor, not just the school counselor, is to help to give kids those words to help them identify the emotions that they're having, so they can express themselves correctly.

AK: It's something that has come up with my interviews with *Street Sense* folks about managing anger.

CJ: And conflict resolution. An appropriate way to use conflict resolution.

AK: If you had to choose one takeaway or a moral for this book for those who come across it, what would it be?

CJ: After anyone who would read *Are We Home Yet*, I hope that the takeaway would be that they see anyone who is homeless, or who they think is homeless, I hope that they remember that this person is still a human being. And that we need to be compassionate enough to find out this person's story and do what we can to help them. Even if we only help one, that's one more being helped, that's one more person who's not living out on the streets, suffering through the agony of the summer heat and the dreadful cold winters that we have and that they're going hungry. I pray that people learn that this is a real issue that does affect us all in one way or another.

AK: What's your dream scenario surrounding this issue, if you could impart a wish.

CJ: If I could impart a wish, it would be that whoever the powers that be, are the ones that work the money end of it, so we could provide the services that the homeless community needs. That they go ahead and throw all of the money that they have towards solving this problem.

(MUSIC)

AK: That was Author of *Are We Home Yet*? Christie Jones.

CJ: My name is Christie Jones, and you're listening to *Sounds From the Street*.