

# Sounds From the Street, Episode 14: Executive Director Brian Carome on the state of homelessness

*Transcribed by Joseph Doyle*

**Brian Carome (guest):** When I started this work homelessness was new. I didn't grow up in a world where folks were sleeping in doorways. I grew up just outside of Cleveland, Ohio. I found it outrageous that we had folks living outside, and I just felt compelled to get involved in the work. I fell in love with doing the work.

**Adam Kampe (Host):** THAT'S BRIAN CAROME, EXEC DIRECTOR OF STREET SENSE, AND THIS IS SOUNDS FROM THE STREET, WHERE WE GET TO MEET MEN AND WOMEN WORKING TO END HOMELESSNESS. I'M YOUR HOST, ADAM KAMPE. IT'S HARD TO FATHOM, BUT HOMELESSNESS WASN'T ALWAYS A NATIONAL ISSUE IN THE US. IN FACT, IT'S AS YOUNG AS SOME MILLENNIALS. WHEN BRIAN CAROME GRADUATED FROM BOSTON COLLEGE IN 1985, HUNGRY TO CHANGE THE WORLD, HE ENLISTED IN THE JESUIT VOLUNTEER CORPS, A SORT OF DOMESTIC, SPIRITUAL PEACE CORPS. THAT EXPERIENCE SOLIDIFIED AND IGNITED HIS PASSION FOR ENDING HOMELESSNESS. SOME YEARS LATER, HE'S STILL AT IT, POURING HIS DEDICATION AND ENERGY INTO WRITING AN AMBITIOUS FUTURE FOR THE SCRAPPY NONPROFIT. BRIAN AND I DISCUSS THE VARIOUS CHANGES AFOOT AS HE EXPLORES HIS PAST, STREET SENSE'S PRESENT, AND WHAT LIES AHEAD.

**BC:** Four years. It was four years this past November.

**AK:** Okay. And what were you doing prior; what was your life like prior to becoming the Executive Director of *Street Sense*?

**BC:** I'm in Many ways a really typical *Street Sense* story. I'm here seeking a second chance. My career has been spent in homeless services. I started working at a shelter and daytime drop-in center for persons who are homeless here in the District of Columbia back in the mid 1980s, right after college. Immediately prior to coming to *Street Sense*. I had a couple of years of real instability in my life. Unemployment, trying to find a job that inspired me, and that really worked for me. I had some short stays at an organization. *Street Sense* gave me a chance to be an executive director again at a time when I wasn't sure I was going to have that opportunity,

**AK:** And you you mentioned that you worked in homeless services prior?

**BC:** My goal coming out of college I wanted to be a professor of Irish and European history. It was instilled in me that I had a responsibility to give back, so I took what I thought was going to be a year diversion from graduate school and came to Washington through a volunteer corps, and spent a year working in the basement of a Catholic church that had a multipurpose center for folks who were homeless. Six months in I was pretty sure that this was what I was going to do for the rest of my career, I fell in love with the work, the people who were doing it, and what we were trying to do. I found it outrageous that in a nation of such wealth that we had folks that were living outside, I just felt compelled to get involved in the work and I fell in love with doing the work. I also do the work because growing up I experienced that a safety net. There was a period after my parents' divorce that my mom was struggling to raise six kids on her own. We experienced what a safety net looked like and how it can hold people above water. That gives me a real appreciation for the work that I am doing.

**AK:** I know we talked for disclosure reasons we said that we both went to Boston College.

**BC:** It was an incredible experience for me. Homelessness was one of the main political issues of that time and there was a small number of very charismatic national leaders, one of whom was here in D.C. As I mentioned I was a history major in college i was pretty much was a student of revolution and nationalist movements. I found the revolution I was looking for, or at least I thought I did because there was a very strong movement coming into being to end homelessness in this country that grew out of the anti-war movement and the war on poverty that was lead by a number of very charismatic people including Mitch Snider who was here in Washington D.C.

**AK:** Did you study liberation theology?

**BC:** I did.

**AK:** A couple of housekeeping questions about *Street Sense*. For somebody who has no idea what this organization is. How would you define *Street Sense* and what is the mission?

**BC:** So *Street Sense* began as a typical street paper. Which is a model that we didn't invent. It began in New York City in the mid 1980s and has since spread all around the world. What a street newspaper is, is a local publication that is print, it's not digital. It reports on homelessness and poverty. It then employs men and women who are homeless to sell the newspaper. They distribute the paper as a way to make an income. And that gets to our mission which is twofold. One is we provide economic opportunities to men and women who are homeless, and two is we are a public education entity, we believe in informing the public about the issue homelessness and poverty out of a belief that a more informed public is going to be more likely to get involved in public policy initiatives toward dress and eradicate the issue. *Street Sense exists* to play a part in ending chronic homelessness. My first day on the job at my very first job at the shelter in D.C I was told by my executive director that part of my job is to put the organization out of business. And I sort of exploited, what does that mean? Were not looking to exist forever. Our

job is to end whatever issue what brought us into being. So here at *Street Sense* our job is to end homelessness, not to create a massive organization, but to put us out of business by eliminating the issue that brought us into being.

**AK:** And the time that you have been here, relatively short how do you think that the organization is doing?

**BC:** The organization has changed a lot since i've been here. Its also very different than any place i've ever worked. My career had been spent in traditional homeless services. There's a real difference here in our relationship to the men and women that we serve than any place i've worked before this. In that the men and women that we serve are the targets of our mission feel a genuine sense of ownership for the the organization that they've earned. From the very beginning they were the entire distribution network of the newspaper. They also have produced the writing and photography for the newspaper. About half of the writing comes from men and women who are homeless and selling the paper. That traditional organization client hierarchy that exists probably needs to in most homeless services doesn't exist here. We very much see ourselves as colleagues and I think that really changes so much of the dynamic of this place. The men and women who come here don't see themselves as victims as much and we don't see them as victims. They are folks who are using their own agency to change their lives and taking the power they have and the skills they have to move themselves forward in life. We provide a conduit. I always tell people that the hard work that is done to help end homelessness here is not done by the organization of *Street Sense*, were sort of just a platform for the men and women who do the really hard work and using their own talents, skills, personalities and charisma to move themselves beyond homelessness. One unique benefit for the men and women who pass through the doors of *Street Sense* is there's no judgement. You could walk in the door and you could be coming directly from jail, or some sort of substance abuse center. Your history; not that it's totally irrelevant, but it doesn't really play a factor into whether you are going to be allowed to become a *Street Sense* vendor, assuming you follow the regulations that are in place to become a vendor.

**AK:** Can you talk about that?

**BC:** Sure, you know like everyone else on the planet, i've made a lot of mistakes in my life, i've made a lot bad decisions in my life, i've gotten myself into some pretty desperate situations in my life; economically, financially, and employment wise. I know what it feels like to be judged, and I know being judged. I think most of us are our own harshest critics. Were not about looking at folks' past and asking them how they got into end up in the circumstances you are. We take people at their word when they show up here. We take it at their word that they want a different future for themselves. We look for ways to provide that for them. We don't hand them a better future, we give them the opportunity to work their asses off to create a better future for themselves, whether out on a street corner on a ninety-degree day, or a ten-degree day in the rain or the snow. Whether that's getting up on stage and telling their story to an audience of folks, or putting their story in a movie and doing all of the hard work it takes to bring a movie through a production process so that it can be shared with a wider public. That hard work is

done here by men and women looking to change their lives around. In all of my years of in social services I know that the moment you judge someone, you push yourself further away from being able to help them in any way. It really begins with ourselves, were all the same here, we've all made mistakes, we're all looking for second chances, and we're all looking for a chance to use our skills to better ourselves and better our community.

**AK:** The paper was really the heart and origin, the genesis of *Street Sense*. The physical print paper. But it has moved much beyond that. The momentum has been building for many years. It's becoming much more concrete in the last two to three years. This past year; 2015 being particularly galvanising year with the momentum and creative energy around this media center. Can you talk about the way and which the paper has gone beyond the physical paper and how it's transformed?

**BC:** What we knew was that the opportunity for self expression that writing for the newspaper offered was really powerful and transformative. For the men and women who were choosing to get involved, not just in selling the paper but also writing for it, we just saw much greater impact on their lives. We began wondering, could we do that on platforms beyond print, beyond newspaper. And also we recognized that increasingly a newspaper was becoming extinct. We were running the risk in putting all of our efforts into one medium that was declining around the United States and the world. We also wanted to engage a larger, wider audience that may never buy the newspaper. We began looking at other platforms that would do those two things. One, opportunities for self expression and two, opportunities to engage a wider audience a wider audience beyond the newspaper. The first project we began implementing was a theatre project. I had previously worked at tutoring and mentoring program for the kids living in the shelter, children living in D.C. shelters. One summer we had the opportunity to partner with Helen Hay's award winning play writer Karen Zacarias and her organization *Young Playwrights Theatre*. We picked eight or nine young people from this tutoring and mentoring program and put them in a workshop with kids from other schools around the city. We picked some of the kids who were the biggest trouble makers, and the kids who were the most disruptive and acting out, both in school and our tutoring program. They just thrived in this theatre workshop. They were part of bringing a play to a full production. I fell in love with the opportunity that that theatre offered for transformation. Both for the folks who were participating, and the folks who were experiencing the theatre as an audience member. And so we were introduced to two playwrights that *George Washington University School Department of Theatre and Dance* at *George Washington University* and they just embraced the idea, this is Leslie Jacobson Elizabeth. They embraced this idea of having a workshop of men and women who have been homeless, to bring theatre performance around the issue of homelessness to the public here in Washington. Things just began to grow organically from there. That same summer of 2013, Brian Bellow, a young very talented filmmaker, interested in exploring homelessness through film. He began a workshop with our vendors. We added a photography workshop, an interactive art workshop, we added these podcasts, we added series of public issue forums. The goal of all of these is to engage the public in thoughtful discussion and dialogue around the issue. Again, to move us towards a growing tolerance for homelessness in our midst. We should be outraged that there are folks sleeping outside tonight in the city, and in a city of such wealth. We should

be outraged that some of those folks are veterans of the United States Army. We should be outraged that some of those folks have a chronic mental illnesses and physical illnesses. As a community we can do better than this. We can do better than having folks who are in the midst of struggling with things like mental illness, and sleeping outside. We're a better community than that reflects. One thing we know know is that the cost, the financial cost to us as a community to allow homelessness to exist is actually far far beyond, its actually twice as much as it costs to house people and to provide them with case management and the services they need to remain in that housing. Study after Study has shown that, including a recent study done in Washington D.C. And so i'm one of those folks who has been screaming from the rooftops of the moral implications of homelessness. Now we can talk about the economic implications of homelessness, While the myth is that to end homelessness would be out of reach economically, the truth is if we house people who are experiencing homelessness we're going to save ourselves money because there are going to demand a lot less emergency systems in this city that are far more expensive than housing is. Whether that's emergency psychiatric care, emergency medical care, or 911 response because someone is urinating in public for instance, the cost of an overnight jail cell is a lot more than it costs to house somebody over the course of a month or a year. We believe now that we have a mayor that gets that and she's making a lot of decisions, she's bringing lots of folks into the city to work for her that seem to understand that this new understanding of homelessness just doesn't make sense economically, and that we are hopeful that we are on the track towards ending it and seeing the day where folks aren't sleeping outside. And chronic illness just doesn't exist here

**AK:** One of the various multimedia workshops Adam's digital marketing and digital hope.

**BC:** So we're very interested here in providing economic opportunities for people. To allow them to use their own skill and their own willingness to work really hard to move themselves towards better economic stability and eventually into permanent housing. One of the workshops that we began in early 2014, was a digital marketing course. Some of our best writers were handpicked from writing in the newspaper and put in this course or offered this course. They are being taught how to write commercial marketing materials. They've progressed to the point where they are getting paid contracts and satisfying contracts while earning money. It's around the lessons that we've learned. It's a very small private workshop that we believe we have discovered what we hope to be a very wide and very successful model for moving many of the men and women who come to us looking for a better economic future for themselves to put themselves on that pathway towards that by creating greater opportunities to learn and then fulfil and do work in this field of digital marketing.

**AK:** So we talked about the dramatic see changes that has happened in the last couple of years, culminating in 2015. Could you talk about what is in store 2016?

**BC:** So we have three or four major goals for next year and for the next several succeeding years. One is across our platforms and channels we're working really hard to improve the content of what we're producing. Whether that's the newspaper, one of our films, or one of our theatre productions we really want to up the ante and increase the reach and engagement that

those channels offer us. We also want to build this new pathway to employment for more of our vendors, and we're looking to invest lots of our resources and expertise in doing that. Thirdly we're looking to add a social service component to everything that we do here. A lot of the men and women who come here; a lot of the vendors are disabled by either mental illness or physical disabilities or chronic health conditions. Those folks have resources that are available to them through the public service this year in the District of Columbia including subsidised housing. The pathway to those services is very arduous and complicated. It takes a lot of persistence. We also want to add a case management support for those folks here so that they can speed through those pathways a little bit quicker and get to the housing that they deserve and this community owes them. One of the things we know that happens in these workshops is a genuine sense of not just community, but of a genuine sense of family develops. What I know to be true from the thirty years I spent working with people who are homeless is that if you find yourself sleeping out in the street, you've lost all tethers to community that you may have had previously. One of the most powerful things that we offer here is an opportunity to build that fabric of community and that fabric of family. That's so important, that's the foundation which we thrive in our lives. That's the foundation upon which we experience stability and build stability. When we meet people who really don't have that in these workshops where people are using their powers of self expression it really gives them because there's a lot of vulnerability because people are putting themselves out there by sharing their stories in the workshops. In that we're seeing some community and family develop. We know that that is such a key component to building more stable futures for the men and women that we work with.

**AK:** You've had experience with this world since the mid '80s more or less in Washington D.C. Obviously it's still a huge problem. Roughly 12,000ish people in and around the city are still homeless. Do you feel like the ball has been moved forward? Not as just the executive director of *Street Sense* but just as a citizen in the District of Columbia since the '80s. How the homeless landscape has changed ?

**BC:** The landscape has changed. That sense of outrage doesn't exist anymore. Folks who are eighteen, nineteen, twenty who were born into a world where this is just part of the social fabric. Certainly since the Great Recession of 2008, the numbers began going up again, pretty dramatically. What we see though on the horizon very clearly here in the District of Columbia are public officials who now understand that homelessness is an economic drain on the city. That the solution is more cost effective, more cost saving than to allow the problem to still exist. In that way i'm optimistic. Let's be real clear, the problem still is very large, we've got a number of years to go if we stay focused if we can eliminate chronic homelessness. It's in sight, we have the resources, and we seem to have the leadership here in the city that gets it and understands it, and is a willing partner with us and with the other non profit organizations that are committed to seeing an end to chronic homelessness here in the city.

**AK:** What about the work that you have done are you most proud of? It's not a *Street Sense* specific question.

**BC:** I may not answer your question so directly here, but it's an enormous privilege to walk alongside someone who is trying to change their life. I certainly have not seen in my career enough homelessness ended. Enough people who have moved beyond homelessness. We don't see that enough here at *Street Sense*. There's so much of an important call to me to just be present to folks who are suffering from such awful circumstances. To just be with them along their journey. That's a graceful opportunity, and it's a privilege to have that opportunity. I've been a part of building some really innovative programs in my career, some really innovative housing programs that have taken folks that have lived in the woods of Fairfax county for a decade or more and have moved their way into permanent housing for the rest of their lives. We've seen a lot of folks here at *Street Sense*, especially in the last eighteen months end their homelessness after ten or more years after being homeless. I don't take credit for that, but it's a real privilege to watch that journey happen. You spend time with people who are clawing their way out of an awful situation. You get a real glimpse of what it means to be human, and it gives you an opportunity to really understand how lucky you are.

**AK:** Is there are particular story or anecdote that really stands out to you?

**BC:** Patty, who a year ago I ran into in the middle of an awful snowstorm. She was catching a cigarette break outside of the awful and decrepit 2nd and D Street shelter down near the U.S Capitol. Today Patty is in her own housing for the first time. It's an apartment that she can stay in for the rest of her life. This Christmas she spent it at home in her own apartment. Patty suffers from mental illness and a lot of health struggles in her life. Patty now has the housing that she deserves. In early December, Patty was up on a stage with some high school students, and it was a really incredible production. Young high school students and men and women here who were homeless were exploring how much common ground they shared. To know that a year ago Patty was sitting out in the freezing cold, and is now in a warm home of her own is one of the best gifts i've had in the last year.

**AK:** I've recently asked this question to Laura Zeilinger, the Director of Human Services here in the district. If you had wish for the city, you could wave a wand and make it come true, make it happen what would it be?

**BC:** That we would close the gap between wages and the cost of housing in the city by investing in affordable housing. And that we would embrace the idea that housing is a right as equal to the right to public education, equal to the right to access medical care, the right to raise your children in a safe community. That housing is a right and that we're a better community when we embrace that and offer it to everyone.

**AK:** The same question now applying to *Street Sense*. If you had one wish for the organization.

**BC:** I want to get us to the day where we don't have anything to write about anymore. Where we don't have any movies to make about chronic homelessness because it doesn't exist here in the city anymore. So we can close up shop and turn our sights to a different problem. That's my ultimate dream here. When I say my job is to make the organization go out of business, I take

that very seriously. Addressing the issue of homelessness. We hope of a day where there is no chronic homelessness.

THAT WAS ADVOCATE AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF STREET SENSE, BRIAN CAROME. TO LEARN MORE ABOUT STREET SENSE, DC'S NONPROFIT MEDIA CENTER DEDICATED TO CREATING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS, GO TO [STREETSENSE.ORG](http://STREETSENSE.ORG). AND TO HEAR MORE SOUNDS FROM THE STREET, CHECK OUT [streetsense.org/audio](http://streetsense.org/audio) OR FIND US ON SOUNDCLOUD OR THE PODCAST APP, STITCHER. PLEASE KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING ON FACEBOOK AND TWITTER @streetsensedc

SOUNDS FROM THE STREET THEME SONG, "I NEED A DOLLAR (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 WITH LEON MICHELS, NICK MOVSHON AND JEFF DYNAMITE. USED BY PERMISSION OF SONGS OF KOBALT MUSIC PUBLISHING, EMI BLACKWOOD MUSIC INC./SONYATV [BMI] EXCERPTS OF THE FOLLOWING USED COURTESY OF CREATIVE COMMONS. FOUND ON WFMU'S FREE MUSIC ARCHIVE.

"FOR LAND, FOR LOVE, FOR TIME" COMPOSED AND PERFORMED BY WEINLAND FROM THE ALBUM, BREAKS IN THE SUN

"CURIOUS" COMPOSED AND PERFORMED BY JON LUC HEFFERNAN FROM THE ALBUM, PRODUCTION MUSIC, FROM THE NEEDLE DROP COMPANY:

"IN A DREAM" COMPOSED AND PERFORMED BY JOHNNY RIPPER, FROM THE ALBUM, SONGS FOR A FILM THAT DOESN'T EXIST.

AND THE FOLLOWING FROM BLUE DOT SESSIONS:

"BLUE DAY" AND "COTTONWOODS" ON THE ALBUM, FEATHERS,

"THREADS AND VEILS" AND "PAVING STONES" ON THE ALBUM, THE CONTESSA, AND "TAR AND SPACKLE" ON THE ALBUM, PLASTER.

**BC:** MY NAME IS BRIAN CAROME AND YOU'RE LISTENING TO SOUNDS FROM THE STREET

**AK:** THANKS FOR LISTENING AND HAPPY NEW YEAR!