

## Sounds From the Street: Middle Schoolers Discuss Homeless Activism

Transcribed by: Joseph Doyle

**Michael Martini (Guest):** We're here with the *Student Action Committee* and over one hundred sixth graders making our point heard at the homeless anti-discrimination rally. Let's get some sounds.

(Music)

**Adam Kampe (Host)** THAT WAS ALICE DEAL MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER MICHAEL MARTINI AND HIS STUDENTS AT THEIR RALLY IN SUPPORT OF ANTI-DISCRIMINATION LEGISLATION LAST SUMMER. AND THIS IS SOUNDS FROM THE STREET, A PODCAST ABOUT HOMELESSNESS AND LIFE ON THE MARGINS. I'M YOUR HOST, ADAM KAMPE. FRESH ON THE HEELS OF DAYLIGHT SAVINGS AND SPRING BREAK, WE'RE GONNA TURN BACK THE CLOCK ALL THE WAY TO JUNE 3, 2015 WHEN A GROUP OF MIDDLE SCHOOLERS PROTESTED OUTSIDE THE MAYOR'S OFFICE IN DOWNTOWN DC. ALONG WITH THEIR TEACHER, MICHAEL MARTINI, THEN-6TH GRADERS NICO FOXLEY AND SOPHIA GIORGIANNI, HELPED ORGANIZE A RALLY TO SUPPORT THE HOMELESS ANTI-DISCRIMINATION LEGISLATION. THE GROUP FROM ALICE DEAL MIDDLE SCHOOL GOT SOME ESSENTIAL HELP FROM MICHAEL STOOBS AT THE NATIONAL COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS AND ALBERT TOWNSEND OF THE PEOPLE FOR FAIRNESS COALITION. THE CAPSTONE EVENT/RALLY WAS PART OF A YEAR-LONG SERVICE-ORIENTED CURRICULUM WHERE THEY EXPLORED THE ISSUE OF HOMELESSNESS. SO, LET'S TURN BACK THE CLOCK TO THE DAY WHERE IT ALL WENT DOWN AND FIND OUT WHAT THEY LEARNED. HERE'S SOPHIA AND NICO, TWO OF THE YOUNGEST ACTIVISTS EVER, AND THEIR TEACHER, MR. MARTINI.

**Sophia Giorgianni (Guest):** I remember waking up and saying in my mind that I might be able to make a change today for the community. I remember it being really gloomy outside.

**Nico Foxley (Guest):** It was like drizzling. I wish it was sunnier so more people would be walking on the streets so more people could see us.

**SP:** As Nico said, I wanted it to be sunnier so more people outside so people could pass the word around about what was going on. I really remember this rush of excitement going around as we were on the metro. We we're practicing our chants. We we're all holding our posters. When we were actually going around the block, our chants were so loud. There was so much excitement and touchy feelings. You could feel what everyone else was feeling. One of them was, "We live,

we breathe, we are all the same.” There was, “They’re homeless, they’re human!” “Equal under the law!. I remember, what’s her name again?”

**AK:** Anita Bonds came out. She spoke to us.

**SP:** I remember when she came out. I liked that she acknowledged that we were trying to make a change.

**AK:** Michael Martini.

**MM:**We even had the students introduce her when she came out. Maddy, one of the other students gave a great speech on who she was and how important it was the same came out to meet us. Did you guys introduce anybody? I think you did, Nico.

**NF:** I think I did the main introductory. We also made a big banner that said, “Heart for the homeless.” We were outside in a hallway and we were all painting and finishing our banners.

**SP:** I thought it was really unexpected how they even closed down the roads. Surprised me how many people stopped and took a video or picture. I thought people were just gonna walk by. I was really glad that people were taking videos.

**MM:** I saw the permit, and I knew we were allowed to do this. When they had the cops on motorcycles leading the charge. When we said we wanted to go into the street, they blew the whistle to stop traffic. I don’t know if I was expecting all that.

**MM:** My first couple of years here in DCPS, especially at Alice Deal, we had a day of community service called “Deal gives back.” It always took place in May. It was one day where the whole student body and the faculty, over one thousand students and close to one hundred teachers would become involved in a community service project for that day. It was always really nice. Classes were put on hold, we shifted our focus, we got out. We went into the community or stayed at the building and did something to serve others. A few teachers got together a few years into that program and we wanted to make the shift from community service as a one day thing we do with students, and turn it into service learning. The learning and education the students receive is around the theme of service as an ongoing way to lead your life, and not something that takes time away from your other tasks.

**AK:** The community service component is making an impact. Don’t just take my word for it, listen to these students talk about why this work matters.

“Realizing there’s more to helping than your personal benefits.”

“Realizing that community service should be a way of life, not just something you do.”

“Do the smallest things with the most amount of love.”

**MM:** As a committee we met and decided on a couple of options we'll throw out there for students to digest that we can be involved in for the year. It was about three years ago stuck. Different homeroom classes had discussions. That seemed to be one that both students and faculty were generally interested in exploring. Thankfully that was at the same time a teacher recommended me to the *National Coalition for the homeless*. Once I contacted them, Michael Stoops and a few other great leaders immediately had some great ideas for us. The teacher's wanted to do it. When we told the students about it they were in. We started looking into a year long continuum of service learning projects, both lessons and action steps we could take as a student body. From there it flourished. We started with some collections. We did seasonal collections, followed up with outreach runs where the nation coalition would have guides. Homeless or formerly homeless guides lead the students in groups of about fifteen or twenty through the city. We went to Franklin Park, Farragut square and a lot of other parks. The guides taught the students how to interact with the homeless community and how to approach people experiencing homelessness and deliver the items we collected and talk to them. To watch my students, some of them eleven or twelve years old learning to break stereotype. All of our community service projects always have a nice goal. That goal was never face to face. It was a number. How much money we collected, how many hours did we serve, this was the first time where our success was measured in the number of relationships that were built and minds opened. When one of our guides talked to the group and said, “How many stereotypes have you hear about people experiencing homelessness?” The things that the students said were the very real stereotypes we all hear. Then watching him teach the students the real causes of homelessness, or the real reasons people end up in that situation. In the students it was like lightbulbs, what they thought were causes were actually effects. That made it more meaningful when they met people to know any that came up. With kids out in public doing this kind of work, there were a few issues. Sometimes there were angry tempers or isolation. It was easier for them to see why it was happening because they saw them as humans going through a difficult experience, and not something that defined their personality. It defined the situation they were in. Students were learning that we can still talk to people, we can still offer, we can still ask them their name. If that's all they want for the day that's ok, we can leave it at that, we did something.

They accepted what we had. Sometimes it was blankets or winter coats. Sometimes it was emergency care packages, sometimes they just wanted to talk with the students.

“One of my stereotypes. I had this one mindset that people experiencing homelessness needed one thing, which was food. I realized that people experiencing homelessness, they may have lost their homes, their jobs, many other reasons. It's not just food, they don't have other things, and I realize that.

“Originally, I thought some of them were frightening because of their appearance. I didn’t want to seem that way, it just seemed that way. After hearing the stories, poems, and talking to old, or former homeless people. I understood a lot better. I regret looking at them that way.

**SG:** Can I add? I want to add onto your comment on how you thought they are frightening. I also thought that. A person experiencing homelessness, if you get to know them. If you have a job somewhere and you pass them everyday, then you two can possibly start a friendship. It’s not in their control to seem frightening with other people.

**(Music)**

**SG:** I want to go back to the comment about how long a person experiencing homelessness wants to just sit on a bench. I’m not sure what the gentleman’s name was, he came in one time and he told us that he had a friend that told him a story. His friend told him a story when we was at a library. His friend was experiencing homelessness. He was leaning against the library wall. A library staff came out and told him he couldn’t lean against the wall.

**NF:** He said he wasn’t sitting, he was leaning. They kept trying to find rules that he was breaking. They couldn’t find one so he eventually left so he wouldn’t get banned. I think he used that library a lot.

**AK:** Do you think other patrons in the library were getting called out for leaning against the wall?

**SG:** Not at all.

**AK:** That’s what opened my mind. This is an issue that I think is important for the community to care about. Of course, it’s important for the people experiencing homelessness because not enough citizens in our community are speaking out for these people experiencing homelessness. No one is even looking, or even acknowledge them. As we talked about before like walking down the street.

**NF:** I want more people to care. All of us said that people can just walk by not really caring. I just want them to acknowledge them and feel that they can be in a bad situation, and hopefully they can change their situation.

**MM:** I learned that there's so much more potential in a lot of our young people in this country and i'll be particular and talk about in my classroom, then we adults give them credit for. I've learned to look at my classes, even when I meet them on the first day, I look at them thinking that they have a lot more potential than I even imagined. Not just the academic potential. At the end of the year, I teach them, I get them there. We work on a lot of stuff. But the potential to be

better people. To really care about others. To care about human life. Especially at such an important developmental stage as middle school, I really see how great people can be. Through my students caring about issues like these. Like students like Nico and Sophia, giving up recess for months on end, to plan this event. Their hearts are often bigger than we can give them credit for. Even when their minds are telling them to do silly things, when they make mistakes, the troubles they might get into. Their hearts are still there and are bigger than we give them credit for.

**(Music)**

**THAT WAS TEACHER MICHAEL MARTINI AND HIS STUDENTS, NICO FOXLEY AND SOPHIA GIORGIANNI TALKING ABOUT THE POWER OF ACTIVISM. TO LEARN MORE ABOUT STREET SENSE, THE NONPROFIT MEDIA CENTER DEDICATED**

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**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]**

**THE FOLLOWING INSTRUMENTALS USED COURTESY OF CREATIVE COMMONS. “ALONG THE HIGHWAY” BY ALEX FITCH “NAVY BLUE” BY ADAM SELZER “THROUGHOUT THE CITY 2” BY DAVID SZESZTAY “DEEP POOLS” BY PODINGTON BEAR “AN UNEVEN LIE” BY ROBIN ALLENDER AND “THE BREAD IS HARD AS CRACKERS” BY VELELLA VELELLA SPECIAL THANKS TO WFMU’S FREE MUSIC ARCHIVE AND THE NEEDLE DROP COMPANY @NEEDLEDROP.CO**

**AND A SPECIAL THANKS TO TWO VERY IMPORTANT PIECES TO THIS PODCAST PUZZLE. ERIC FALQUERO, EDITOR IN CHIEF AT STREET SENSE AND JEFF GRAY, THE COMMUNICATION AND SALES MANAGER. FINALLY, THANKS TO MICHAEL MARTINI FOR THE AUDIO FROM THE PROTEST.**

**NF:** My name is Nico Foxley

**SG:** My name is Sophia Giorgianni

**NF and SG:** You're Listening to *Sounds From the Street*.