Sounds From the Street: Wendy Oxenhorn on Founding the Street Paper Movement

Transcribed by Natalie Chen

Wendy Oxenhorn

They have to pay us a quarter for every paper and this way they sell it for $1. So they make 75 cents. And then the quarter we ended up getting back so that we can produce this.

And ironically panhandling on the trains had just been made illegal. All of a sudden you're starting out and you're selling papers.

Adam Kampe

That's co founder of the first street paper and Executive Director of the Jazz Foundation of America, Wendy Oxenhorn, and this is Sounds From the Street, a podcast about homelessness and life on the margins. I'm your host, Adam Kampe. As a young girl growing up in New York, Wendy Oxenhorn dreamed of becoming a professional ballerina, and she was well on her way to until tragedy struck and shattered her dream. But the devastating injury that sidelined Wendy also catapulted her into a life of social work that's touched 1000s of lives. Instead of telling you what happened next, I'll let her. On the heels of being named a 2016 NEA Jazz Master, I caught up with Wendy at her favorite Italian cafe "Buka" in New York City. I mentioned where we are because well, you're gonna hear a lot of kitchen noise and sounds from the city streets— real live ambience. Without further ado, the indefatigable and angelic Wendy oxen born in the moment when everything changed.

Wendy Oxenhorn

I was a ballerina. And I had already performed some ballets with New York City Ballet, and I was just about to get into the company. And we discovered that I could barely walk. It was a systematic wearing away of the inside of the kneecap. And it got so bad that he said, "If you continue, you'll be crippled by the time you're 30." So I did what what any American drama queen would do. I called up a suicide hotline. I really did think that life was over. If I couldn't dance, then this is it. So when I called up, it was a lovely woman. And halfway through the conversation, she started telling me her troubles, which, you know, people always told me their troubles. And three days later, I was working at the suicide hotline, having counseled her successfully, and it was just it was a beautiful solution. Because I was so full of, you know, how could life, how could the creator do this to me, you know, dance was really everything. I'd been doing it since I was four years old, I was now 17. This was something that not only did I love, but it was something I was really good at, you know, and that's not easy to say, when you're 17, you know, everyone's always so insecure, you don't think of yourself as good as anything, but the love of it, and you just got you get lost when you dance, you just lose yourself in it. Because there is nothing that is completely mental, emotional, spiritual, physical, like dances. It's your entire body, and your soul, you know. And so I started working at the suicide hotline. And then I started finding young women with children, single parents living in abandoned buildings. So I started getting into the system with them and finding them housing. So now all of a sudden, I was becoming a social worker finding housing, you know, dealing with a lot of homeless people. And, you know, of course, everything always leads you to

the next thing you're supposed to be doing. And somehow, even when it feels tragic, it pushes you to go into a different direction you never would have thought to go into because you'd be complacent or comfortable. In your old. You know, this is true for relationships especially. And it pushes you to get out and to make a direction that you never would have made otherwise. And it's hard to be talking about the hungry and the homeless, and I'm sitting here smelling great pizza, but I remember often myself being in that position, I think my daughter was two years old. And I was single parenting her and had a little organization with a woman named Carol Ann in in the 30s. We took on a welfare hotel, and we took care of about 31 kids and when I say took care of they were living in the most tragic circumstances. A lot of parents who were dealing with drug addiction. And one of the biggest issues was you'd have parents, you know, a single mom is prostituting in the park and in the welfare hotel, a child is not allowed to be alone in the room. So they'd leave the kids outside, you know at 11 at night jumping rope, you'd have seven year olds jumping rope in front of these places. These places were horrendous, the city was paying $2,000 a room to the hotel. There was no kitchen, they had a hot plate. And kids were warming up hot dogs under a hot water of the faucet. You know, I remember one time, these four brothers and sisters, the oldest was 11. He called me up and he said, you know, his parents haven't been back for two days. And that's what they were doing. They were warming up a hot dog. And I said, you know, one, one hot dog between the four of them in two days. And I just said, that's it. I said, jump the turnstile on the train station, and you come on over to Wendy's house. And I had a little apartment. While I was I was barely paying the rent. In fact, it was my MasterCard that allowed us to eat that night. And I made an amends to MasterCard years later, and told them all the good that they did with it.

And we fed the kids I remember picking nits of lice out of the little the six year olds hair. And I mean, just you know, I would I would go to sleep crying every night, you know, wishing I could do something. And then the city finally got wise and did away with these awful hotels and got people into low income housing. But first they ended up in shelters, and they took all our kids and put them in shelters. And I do want to say there were a couple of really wonderful parents, not everyone was addicted or dealing with that. There were parents that were incredible, just found themselves in these circumstances. But I think my, for the most part, I have been able to witness homelessness, and to say that there is a very large percentage of mental illness involved. And what happens with mental illness is you self medicate. So there's a lot of addiction. And if that had been addressed, that was my one regret with Street News, that we had this opportunity to have, you know, like AA meetings in the warehouse, where the guys would come and pick up their papers, just as an option if they felt that it was getting in the way of their life, you know. And, and that was something we never got to do. But you know, like I was a kid, we were both kids, my partner and I Hutchinson. And you know, we really did the best we could and it was a very beautiful thing, because I remember when when my all the kids were sent to different shelters, and we lost touch with all the kids from my little organization I was doing. And mind you at the time, my daughter was two I was a single parent, I did not make any money from this, you know, I remember renting a room was like, it was 89. Well, Hutchinson had sought me out because he heard of my work with these kids and dealing with the homeless,

Adam Kampe

Hutchinson persons?

Wendy Oxenhorn

Yes. And sought me out and said, I have this idea for another organization, I want to do this big concert in New York and have like a canned food drive. And I remember, I had an issue with that. Because I

honestly didn't think a canned food drive would would be solution oriented. And I learned as a single parent, you really need to be solution oriented. It's not just the band aids.

We were trying to figure out what we could possibly do that. And one day, he came back with an idea. And he said, you know, what about a newspaper. And I said, Well, you know, you just can't give it out because it will not be valued. I said, we have to we have to do this like a business, we have to make this something of value, or else you're just giving paper and it will be thrown out. So let's give the first 10 for free. They have to pay us a quarter for every paper and this way they sell it for $1. So they make 75 cents. And then the quarter, we ended up getting back so that we can produce this. And then I went to the president of the New York Times was amazing. What a beautiful man Lance Premise. I told him about this. And he met with us. He didn't want to at first but I just said please just give us two minutes, we're starting something and we need your advice. And by the end of it, he was on the board of advisors. And he said look, I can't force the press to do anything on this. And it turned out the building. I was able to get us free space in Times Square. The building we had gotten space in was the original offices for the New York Times. So he loved that. He got hats for the for the homeless Salesforce. He got Canvas bags for them that said Street News to carry their papers in, which is isn't that just amazing? So they they come with tools that show instead of just you know, when you're homeless, you don't have an address. It's not like you're applying for a job and you can fill out paperwork you know, it's it's down and dirty business and you usually haven't had a bath recently. Your clothes are not clean. Your shoes are mismatched. You know, it's a mess. And it's pretty hard to get a job like that. So this was the beauty of all of a sudden you're starting out and you're selling papers, which is so great, because you're working for your living, which is the big complaint, most person on the street always says about someone who's begging, you know, get a job, you know, that old thing, not realizing that you're dealing with mental illness, you're dealing with struggles that most people could never even get up and function. And here are these people, they started selling the paper, and they were doing great. Matter of fact, there was a point they were all making more money than me. I remember we finally got to a place where I could take like, $200 a week, and I was supporting my two year old. And I remember just we had macaroni and cheese every night. You know, Kraft macaroni and cheese, and maybe sardines on a good day. And ironically panhandling on the trains had just been made illegal. So there was a big article in The Times that said, you know, what are these guys gonna do, and they did interviews of two men that were wonderful. It was Sam Roberts, who wrote the article. And at this point, no one knew what Street News was. People weren't buying the paper. So I went to the MTA. And I said, You know, I understand that begging is not allowed. But imagine if there was something the homeless could sell, that would give them work so that they could get themselves together and get off the streets. And the MTA loved it. And they gave us 3000 posters in all the trains and buses, they funded it themselves. And it was like my forgot, don't give change, make change, something like that. And they had these Street News posters. And so I called up Sam Roberts at the New York Times, who had just done the article that these two homeless men are really going to be out of luck now that they can't panhandle. I said, Look, I got I got a job for those guys, you guys, really. So I invited him over to the office told him what it was. And the next day in the metro section on the cover, we had our first story well, and people knew. And then it went to the Wall Street Journal cover, Herald Tribune cover, so people around the world started. And it just, it was one of those things I I remember, you know, the press getting involved. And, and that's a strange thing when that happens. Because, you know, at first people always want to report something in a very good way. And then after a while, you know, there's this they want the other side. Oh, what's behind it? What's the dark side? What's the,

Adam Kampe

Which I think goes back to the skepticism that I find in DC where people were like, Where's that money really going? Who are these people?

Wendy Oxenhorn

Where's the money going? I mean, someone selling a newspaper, and they're keeping we had we had guys coming into the office saying I'm eating I'm bought my own food today. I didn't ask anyone for it. Or the best part was when they started doing these little fly by night hotels for $20 a night back then that was still in existence. And and they were they were sleeping in a hotel room from their own work was really special. I wouldn't even say flop houses, they were just cheaper hotels, you know? Those Salesforce, a homeless Salesforce was making between 200 and 800 a week, the really, you know, go getter guys were working crazy hours a day, and the guys that were able to function, minimally, we're making between two and $400 a week. You know, that you could you could get by on that.

Adam Kampe

So what a game changer and now you know, this, this model is being replicated. It's stunning. And that's all because you you all had an idea and you follow through on it and and it still lives.

Wendy Oxenhorn

The fact that it's there is comforting. I was in Paris last year, someone came up with a street newspaper, selling it to me and I just I took out my euros and I was just like, I got weepy. You know, I really very beautiful, quiet private moment. Street News ended up being taken over by the homeless salesforce, which is wonderful. That's so beautiful. And I can't remember the name of the wonderful man who took it over and I will— Lee Stringer, Lee Stringer took it over. But um, you know, when one door closes, another opens but it's held in the hallway. You know, like we forget there's all the way to all this. And there's a process with marriage with divorce with relationship breakups with changing jobs, or getting fired. You know, there's a process and you have to just wait through some of that .I had my next experience Which which ended up with what I'm doing today. But yeah, yeah, I had a really great love affair. This guy was from Italy. And he took me to hear all these jazz greats. And he really opened me up to music. I was always a blues man, but I didn't know about jazz, and we'd hear Ivy Lincoln, and we'd hear Hank Jones, and we'd hear just amazing people. And who knew that, you know, a year after that, I'd end up getting this job and saving their lives. And and again, of course, you know, it was after that tragedy that really ended tragically. And right before it did, I picked up a harmonica he had on the table, and I fell in love, I got bit with the greatest thing since my ballet, it was the first thing that replaced that feeling of freedom and flying was the first time I found something that I loved so much, I could not put it down, I'd get on express trains, and go up and down from 96th Street to 14th Street, and then crossover and back again, right between the cars, and play all day long. You know, while the kids were in school, and then I started working with an old man from Mississippi in the train stations. And that was really beautiful. That was where I got my, my master class in blues. And he really just, I was terrible at the harmonica first, and he really just wanted me to pass the tip bucket, you know, the little blonde in the dress. And, you know, I joke and say that's where I learned to fundraise, but you know that I would get the tips. And we started I then produced a, I got I recorded one of our live gigs in the train station, made a CD and we became partners. I was making 200 bucks. Every time we would play like three or four nights a week. It was amazing. No, no babysitter, no club owners cheating us out of money. Nothing, you know, just no middleman, no middleman. You know, I'd be home in time to make dinner for the kids. And they learned to count on the $1 bills and the $5 bills. It was great. I loved it. And then, and then tragedy struck yet again. And he found himself his first woman. And in quite a long time, I think it had been 15 years. He was in his 70s, she was in her 50s. And that was it. He was in love. And she didn't want a woman in the band. So I was out. And that was the blues.

So I was really quite devastated. I was supporting my kids on this. Playing in the train station. That's how we were getting by. So for two weeks, I was like, couldn't buy groceries, it was getting a little crazy. And someone saw me sitting in a cafe and said, You know, I've seen you play, I know your charitable background with Street News and everything, and the other organizations I have seen you play in the subway and there is a there's a job for you. I'm telling you, this is for you. And sure enough, I went for the job interview. And it was helping elderly jazz musicians in trouble. So after they interviewed me, and I told them, I played a little harp in the train station with the old man from Mississippi, and I'd been taking care of him for a year or two. And they saw my other, you know, charitable efforts. They stood up and shook my hand and said, you know, you got the job kid. And that's how it happened. And that's when I found out we had 7000 in the bank. And I found out we were helping only 35 people a year. So I opened it up to the blues, I started hearing about people no one ever came in. That's the great thing about musicians, no one ever comes in with an open hand looking for help. You'd have to hear that so and so, you know, I know so and so is suffering they'll never say. But I watched him he's lost his eyesight. He couldn't get out of the airport, he couldn't find his way out of the airport. And he had a two hour train ride to Jersey, you know, and then I would start investigating. And it just started building up the cases like that. And then just going to people for money just to get the initial funding. And then we started the concert at the Apollo, which is what's been funding us every year with our big money. Yeah, and allowed us now we're up to like 5000 cases. 5000 assists a year, which means 5000 emergency moments come through our door every year now it's national. It's very beautiful. How and look at that all because I had a heartbreak over an Italian. And you know, I picked up the harmonica.

Adam Kampe

That was executive director of the jazz Foundation of America, co founder of the first street paper, Street News and blues harmonica player, Wendy Oxenhorn. Yes, that's Wendy aka the Barefoot Baroness breaking it down in the background at the jazz Foundation's great night in Harlem at the Apollo in 2015. Shoe jam with Paul Schaffer, Manu Lambin, Steve Jordan, and Joe Gray. Special thanks to Wendy to learn more about Street Sense, the nonprofit Media Center dedicated to creating economic opportunities for people experiencing homelessness go to streetsense.org. To hear more Sounds From the Street, find us on SoundCloud, Stitcher, or subscribe in iTunes. You can also stream the show on streetsense the site at streetsense.org /audio. Please keep the conversation going on Facebook and Twitter @streetsenseDC. *music credits*

Wendy Oxenhorn

My name is Wendy Oxenhorn and you are listening to Sounds From the Street.