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Homeless Reporter Gets Job, and Story, Evicting Others

'Street Sense' Investigates Hiring Practices, Pay; Restaurant Reviews, Too

By MICHAEL M. PHILLIPS
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WASHINGTON -- Early one morning this spring, Jake Ashford woke up, as usual, in an alley behind a downtown office building. He might have taken his schizophrenia medicine, or perhaps not. Sometimes, he says, he skips a dose.

Next, the 43-year-old Mr. Ashford headed to the headquarters of a nearby charity for a shower and breakfast. Then he joined a group of men getting into one of several unmarked vans cruising the neighborhood and began his career as an undercover reporter for Street Sense, the city's newspaper for the homeless.



Mr. Ashford's work that day helped the paper break the biggest story in its three-year history, an exposé of businesses that allegedly recruit the homeless to evict people from rental homes -- and allegedly pay them less than the legal minimum wage to do so. In light of the article, the National Coalition for the Homeless, an advocacy group, and a team of attorneys from the Washington office of Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton say they are investigating whether to sue the eviction firms.

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"I would hope and pray that homeless people are not being hired out to make other people homeless, but if they are, they should be paid minimum wage," says Michael Stoops, the coalition's acting executive director.

Street Sense was founded in 2003 by Ted Henson, then 23, and Laura Thompson Osuri, then a 26-year-old reporter for American Banker, an industry daily. Both were troubled by the plight of the homeless and together they raised money from friends, family and foundations to launch the paper. Mr. Henson, who bussed tables at night so he could put in days at Street Sense, now works as a labor-union researcher and volunteers on the paper's board. Ms. Osuri left mainstream journalism and works as Street Sense's only salaried employee, earning \$40,000 annually.

The monthly paper, run out of a rented room at the downtown Church of the Epiphany, follows the general business plan set by many of the 24 publications in the North American Street Newspaper Association, a trade group of papers focused on homelessness. Street Sense is sold by a roving crew of 45 vendors, most of them homeless, who pay 25 cents a copy and sell the paper on the street for a dollar. A diligent vendor with good curb appeal can make \$60 a day, Ms. Osuri says. Last month, the vendors sold 11,500 copies out of a run of 13,000.

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See the [front page](#) of the April edition of Street Sense, where the newspaper reported on the eviction story. [Read the full article](#) on Street Sense's web site. Plus, a [first-person account](#), describing life on an eviction crew.



The vendors write about half of the articles, with the rest written by non-homeless volunteers. "The vendors are really dedicated," says Ms. Osuri. "They'll call if they're in the hospital or in prison. It's a job, and they feel responsible for it."

The articles range from the mundane -- which shelters are open -- to the whimsical. Last month's issue examined executive compensation among directors of charities that work with the homeless. August Mallory, one of the paper's vendors, has written 31 installments of a mystery story, chronicling the adventures of Marvin Hammerman, an attorney who goes to bat for the homeless.

The homeless journalists also do restaurant reviews, accompanied by a non-homeless volunteer entrusted with the Street Sense credit card. They are told to limit the bill to \$70 -- and no alcohol. "This is indeed great service, I said to myself," Mr. Ashford wrote about an establishment called Georgia Brown's. "I was asked if I would like

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some sort of beverage while looking over the menu, and I asked for water and iced tea."

Another vendor, Donald Brooks, panned Zaytinya, a trendy Mediterranean-style restaurant, saying managers turned rude when they found out the diners were from Street Sense. "We would not eat there again if we were spending our own money," he wrote. General manager Sandy Lewis declined to comment on the Street Sense review.

The paper has broken a few notable stories, such as the piece about a carpenters' union hiring the homeless to staff picket lines. But none has made as big a splash as the article about evictions in April's issue.



Laura Thompson Osuri

Tipped off by a vendor, Street Sense sent 24-year-old volunteer Mark Youssef to a charity called So Others Might Eat, which has complained that eviction companies recruit workers near its headquarters. Mr. Youssef, wearing battered sneakers and old clothes, says he spent two mornings unsuccessfully trying to get hired onto an eviction crew.

Mr. Ashford had better luck getting hired. Born in Lumberton, N.C., he says he served in the U.S. Army in Germany in the 1980s and married a German woman. After a divorce, he returned to the U.S., beset by schizophrenia, he says. An African-American with flecks of gray in his black beard, Mr. Ashford says he was hired off the sidewalk by All American Eviction, a Washington company, and paid \$15 for six hours of work -- well below the \$7-an-hour legal minimum wage in the District of Columbia.

First, he and others, escorted by U.S. marshals who accompany eviction crews, emptied a rowhouse, Mr. Ashford says. As the crew worked, he says, the tenants -- a woman and five children -- arrived home to find their furniture on the curb. Next, the crew emptied a one-bedroom apartment while the tenant was away. Afterward, Mr. Ashford borrowed a cellphone, called Ms. Osuri and pretended to order pizza, his coded way of informing her where she could photograph the evictee's belongings piled along the sidewalk.

Ms. Osuri's article accused All American Eviction and East Coast Express Eviction, also based in Washington, of recruiting and underpaying the homeless to carry out evictions. Accompanying it was a first-person account by vendor James Davis, describing life on an eviction crew. "As I approached the little girl's room, she was standing inside clutching her dolls," he wrote. "Right there and then I walked out and decided this would be my last eviction. I just couldn't do it. Here I was homeless myself at the time about to make two more people homeless."

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When the issue hit the streets, Cleary Gottlieb attorney Lee Berger picked up a copy from a homeless vendor and read it on the subway ride to work. By the time he arrived, he says he was so angry about the allegations that he rounded up fellow lawyers and called the homeless coalition's Mr. Stoops, who also sits on the Street Sense board.

Both eviction companies denied wrongdoing, according to the Street Sense article. Ms. Osuri says Caroline Lansford, chief executive of All American Eviction, told her that the company sends only staff members to carry out evictions.

Contacted by The Wall Street Journal, Ms. Lansford denied having spoken to Street Sense and said the company hadn't done evictions "in quite some time." She wouldn't provide more details. The company's Web site, however, offers a price list for evictions. A person answering the company's phone this month said it would provide a 15-person crew to empty a two-bedroom apartment for \$200.

Nelson Terry, chief executive of East Coast Express Eviction, told Street Sense that he hired workers through a temp service, not off the street, according to the article. Street Sense noted that the rates charged by the temp service he named are several times higher than what East Coast Express Eviction charges clients.

East Coast Express Eviction managers didn't return calls from The Wall Street Journal. A man who answered one call said the firm had stopped doing evictions. On another call, a different man quoted a \$200 price for a two-bedroom eviction. "If you have someone other than East Coast handling your evictions, you may want to reconsider because at East Coast we offer professional service with a savings," its Web site says.

Word on the street is that some eviction companies are still recruiting the homeless. "I would imagine that 80% of the evictions in the city are conducted by independent eviction companies, rather than any in-house crew," says Robert Brandt, supervisory deputy of the U.S. Marshals Service at District of Columbia Superior Court. "Those eviction companies are almost without exception ones that pick up crews at the homeless shelters as their primary source of labor."

Mr. Brandt says U.S. marshals accompany eviction crews to keep the peace and make sure nothing is stolen, not to enforce minimum-wage and other labor laws.

Mr. Berger, the attorney, says his legal team has been interviewing homeless men in shelters around the city, trying to verify the Street Sense findings.

As for Mr. Ashford, the Street Sense vendor and reporter, he says he'll take eviction work only to further expose the companies' practices. "Money like that isn't worth making somebody else miserable," he says.

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