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Rising Star: Jeff Gray

By [Kirsten Ballard](#) July 23, 2018

Jeff Gray is on a mission to end homelessness. As the communications manager of Street Sense Media in Washington, D.C., he combines communication strategy, empathy and journalism to achieve this mission.

Street Sense Media provides financial opportunities to people experiencing homelessness. The biweekly paper is sold by homeless vendors who are allowed to keep the profit. Additionally, the publication serves as a platform for those individuals to share their experiences within the community.



“We believe that a big part of ending homelessness is building empathy — hearing stories directly, by [individuals experiencing homelessness], not about them. It allows a way to build that connection between [our vendors], the community and decision makers,” Jeff says.

Street Sense has grown beyond just a traditional newspaper, allowing its vendors to tell stories through film, poetry, theater and illustration. Jeff says the expansion has changed how and where they reach their audience.

As part of a small nonprofit, Jeff wears many hats. Some days are spent on creative side, writing stories about a vendor, or helping to shoot and edit video. He’s also in charge of social media and coordinating all email outreach. He works with the event manager to grow awareness of the mission and build engagement within the community.

Jeff left college interested in journalism and landed an internship at Street Sense in 2012. From there, he went to Vox Media, where he worked for SB Nation. It was at Vox that he developed his passion in communications. “I’m interested in the strategy that goes into creating content for a digital audience,” he says. He brought that strategy to Street Sense when he returned in 2015.

Since joining the Street Sense staff, Jeff has helped with the rebrand, moving away from the concept of being just a newspaper. As a media company, they offer a multi-pronged approach to ending homelessness, through content creation, digital engagement, performing arts and case management — where they connect vendors with social services.

Though he continues to juggle many roles, his favorite part remains writing. “My original interest in media was the storytelling,” he says. “I’ve really enjoyed the strategy of how you craft a message, but that core creative side remains my favorite part. I sit down and talk with these men and women, who don’t traditionally have their stories told. They’re so used to being ignored, so used to being passed on the street, neglected by the government and society at large. When you sit down and talk, they’re eager to share... It’s a cathartic process.”

His advice to journalists beginning to cover homelessness is to remember the individuals. “A big part is really concentrating on the effect on people,” he says. “It’s a crisis and there are a lot of overwhelming numbers, but keep in mind these are individual people with personal stories.”

He also wants people to understand that homelessness is a complicated issue and doesn’t affect everyone in the same way. “There’s not one cause, and not one solution,” he says. “But the more individual stories that are reported on, the more readers, the more unique and diverse the approach to solving the problem can be.”



Kirsten Ballard



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