

Community Conversations: NJ's COVID-19 Storytelling Project

Participant Number 197: Jon

Interviewed by Y.K., November 2020

Transcribed by J.K.H. on January 20, 2021

[0:00 – 2:25]

Interviewer: Um, see, I mean, minute ago you just kind of were talking about how the system's really fucked up. So just kinda, go ahead--

P: I mean, in my personal experience, how is it fucked up? I've been homeless since August 1st, I would say.

I: Since August 1st?

P: Yeah, I've never been homeless a day in my life. This is my first time. Um, I've been coming--a month after me being homeless, so maybe a month and a half after me being homeless, is when I found out about this spot. I used to come here, they--it's not only them. Most of the spots, all they do is give you the run around. I don't know why, maybe it's 'cause--I don't know exactly what it is, but they just--they like, send you on a rabbit chase a lot. "Go here." They can't help you. "Go to this spot." They can't help you. It's just a whole lot of time. You look at what you're doing, it's a fuckin' waste of time. You can actually do something more productive than just running around. So that's what I mean by the system is fucked up. You just do a whole bunch of running around. Nothing is accomplished, and then by the time you notice, fuckin' four months has passed by. Then they will put you in shelters that I mean--of course you gotta deal with whatever comes, but it--I'm telling you, that can be in a certain spot, due to the fact that there's a conflict of interest. I'm telling you that I need help, you still wanna send me to the spot, knowing that I'm telling you that if I go to the spot, I'm gonna either fight or get locked up or something. I don't wanna--I'm trying to avoid problems, I'm really trying to get custody of my daughter back. You guys still want to send me to the spot, I don't think that's right, know what I'm saying? Like they keep trying, you could ask them, they kicked me out. I didn't want to go to a shelter. I never been in a shelter, was my first time, only lasted four days. They made up an excuse that I didn't clean my bed which was bull shit. As soon as you go into the fuckin' building you have to sign a clipboard that states in order for you go upstairs you have to sign in. So, when they said that I didn't clean my bed, it was bullshit. They just wanted me out of there, and the reason being is--like I said, was a conflict of interest. Like, I had a problem with people in there. That's what I told them here and they still trying to send me to the same spot. That's what I mean. They will send you to, either they don't help you or when they do the help they give you is, you know, I don't know how to explain it. You know I appreciate everything that's given to me. I need help. They just sending me to the same spot, over and over.

I: Right. They're just trying to give you the same answer again and again. And it's not...

[2:26 – 4:50]

P: Basically the same answer. That was my first time at that shelter, my first time at any shelter. I would rather sleep in the streets than go back over there. That's why I didn't go for the past two weeks. What did I do since I got kicked out? Bought a freakin' tent and a sleeping bag.

I: A tent and a sleeping bag. I hear ya. What's the answer you are looking for?

P: What do you mean, what's the answer I'm looking for? For what? I just want help.

I: You just want help.

P: There's no specific answer. I just need someone to point me in the right direction for me to start getting on my feet. Like right now literally I'm wasting, I feel like I'm wandering through life, I'm wasting time. My daughter's starting to catch on. Before it was easier hanging out with my daughter 'cause it was summer time. I would go to the park, do activities with her. I was cold. I have no money. I have nowhere to take her. She wants to come home with me. She used to live with me last year before I got infected. She's asking, why can't I come home? I don't know what to tell her. I can't spend as much time as I want to 'cause what am I gonna say? It's fuckin' cold out here. So now she's asking me--you can see it in her that the relationship has changed. I'm trying to get back on my shit before it really change [sic].

I: I hear ya. How old is she?

P: Nine.

I: Nine.

P: She'll be ten in March.

I: Ten in March. Yea, no, I hear ya, it's like an important age for her.

P: Yup. (background noise and wind – participant inaudible) That's what I mean by the system is fucked up. With all due respect, it's fucked up. The same shit that helps you is the same shit that makes you comfortable. Keeps the same cycle going and going and going.

I: If you were to kinda change the system, it sounds like you're getting to know up close, like what are some things that you would change about it?

P: I wouldn't even know where to begin. To be honest, I wouldn't even know where to-- 'cause I don't exactly know how things work inside here. I just know what I see.

[4:51 – 6:21]

I: Yea, I hear you. Do you think, do you think that anything's kinda changed just like because of COVID, because of coronavirus?

P: I can't say yes or no 'cause--

I: 'Cause you didn't, you weren't experiencing it before.

P: I was never homeless. I mean, COVID was one of the reasons why I became homeless, that's not the only reason. I blame mostly on myself. I take full responsibility, but COVID did play a part in it.

I: COVID plays a big (laughter)...can I ask what happened?

P: What do you mean...with me?

I: Yeah.

P: I lost my job. I wasn't...well I didn't lose my job. I quit my job.

I: You quit your job. What kind of work were you doing?

P: Uh, I was doing warehouse.

I: Yup.

P: My older brother and I started a construction company and when COVID hit we was losing contracts so he was just paying me just to pay me. After a while I'm like bro like it makes no sense. If you keep paying me and paying me, we're both gonna be fucked up. You know what I'm saying?

I: Sure.

P: It makes no sense. So, I just little by little I moved out here to be closer to my daughter. So I moved out here little by little, my savings, (inaudible due to background wind noise). It's not like I had a lot of money but...(inaudible) little by little, then I had my things in storage. I couldn't find a job. I couldn't pay the storage. Ran out of money. I had to take everything out. I had to stash all my things. Try to do little things here and there, like, just on Monday I did a little gig for a hundred dollars that I'm relying on DMV for somebody.

I: Sure.

P: 'Cause it's getting cold. Nobody gonna be outside the weather's getting cold. So I charged somebody a hundred dollars just to hold the spot for the DMV. I've been trying

[6:22 – 8:10]

to do things like that. I'm still going online on Craigslist doing things like that. But after a while, how can I put it, like for example my case, I have my shit in an abandoned building. They locked the abandoned building and took all my shit. So now I'm looking like this, three months, four months later, (inaudible). Now when you do your interview, people are gonna tell from the way you look, by the way you smell, by this and that, which is fucked up, but it's the truth. People are going to judge you. So, it's hard for me to land a job now, at least the type of job that I do. The first thing they [sic] gonna do is judge you as soon as the appearance. 'Cause I used to be the same way in this situation. I would judge somebody right off their appearance. That's the same thing that's happening to me now. I'm just trying to get on my (inaudible). I'll stay on the streets if I have to. I just want a job.

I: You just want a job.

P: Yea.

I: Yea.

P: The only way I go back to that shelter if I could have my daughter in and out with not exposing her eyes to other things. That's the only way I'll go back to that shelter. Other than that, what the fuck am I going back to the shelter for? It's like being in the fuckin Twilight Zone. Seriously, it's like the Twilight Zone. Everybody, it's the truth, it's the reality. Seriously. They don't even know it. That's the sad part. They don't even know it. That's my little issue.

I: I hear you. I hear you. What are...

P: And to ease their own I'm saying whoever be on it (inaudible) I never did the drug. I used to fuckin' sold [sic] drugs from (inaudible), but I left that lifestyle a long time ago when my daughter was born, I left that shit.

I: Once your daughter was born, you left it.

P: Yea, I let all that shit go. I don't sell no drugs. If I was to sell drugs I would have never been in this situation.

I: Yea, no, I hear ya, and you have, besides, in addition to your daughter do you have other folks you can count on. It seems like you have friends.

P: No, I don't have no (inaudible) all my friends years ago. Before I was in this situation, I cut them off.

I: You cut them off.

[8:11 – 9:34]

P: And before I was in this situation, like, when I was, when I left that, when my daughter was born, is when I tried to reprogram my way of thinking, I left. If you wasn't good for me, whether we had problems or not, I cut you off I don't care. I feel like if it's a negative influence for my daughter, gotta get out.

I: Sure.

P: And do I have a family? I have a huge family. Nobody knows I'm going through this. Why? I don't wanna tell nobody.

I: You don't wanna tell them.

P: I don't wanna tell them about it.

I: I hear you. I hear you.

P: The only one, the only person that knows is my baby's mother. The only reason she knows is 'cause I have to communicate with her because of my daughter. I gotta co-parent.

I: Because of your daughter. It sounds like you guys, you gotta co-parent. It sounds like so much of your life, it's around your daughter, like everything. Everything.

P: Everything. I moved to Florida, what was it--in 2018. No money, no family in Florida. I moved to Florida, that was the first time I experienced a little bit of homelessness. I stayed on the street for like a week until I found, within a week I found a place to stay and I found a job within a week. That was the first time I experienced like a little taste of this. I moved to Florida for a year and half. No family, no friends, no plans, just to be with my daughter.

I: That was for her.

P: Yeah, for her. As soon as she moved back up here two months later, I came right back up here. I've been out here ever since.

I: And you've been out here ever since.

P: Yeah. Wherever my daughter go, I'm gonna go. Shit.

I: Yea, sounds like you're pretty incredible dad.

P: I wouldn't say incredible 'cause look at the situation I'm in, but everything I do is for my daughter.

I: Everything you do is for her.

[9:35 – 11:36]

P: My daughter is my priority. Everything, like I said, since she was born, I had to change my way of thinking. Why? 'Cause every decision you make, you gotta think...are you a father?

I: Uh hu. Yea, I got three.

P: So you should know. So you should know. Every decision you make in your life is how does it affect your daughter, it's how you think, how does it affect your kids, that's how you think, right? So that's the same way I think. Everything I do, how does it affect my kid. How does it benefit her, how does it affect her? Those, that way of thinking, that's how I make my choices in life.

I: Yup, yeah, I hear you. I mean, amidst all of this is there a way for you to find joy or comfort or just even like a little bit of rest?

P: I stay positive all the time. I try to stay positive all the time.

I: How do you stay positive amidst all of this? It's a lot.

P: What do you mean how do I stay positive? It's easy bro, like I said, I'm really from the hood, I was raised from the fuckin' floor. I got a lot of friends who dead [sic]. What is there not to be positive about? I'm still alive.

I: You're still alive.

P: Know what I'm saying? It's the little things in life that really matters. To be honest, it took me years to realize that, it's the little things in life, the only way you find happiness is the little things in life. It ain't no materialistic things, it ain't no money, it's the people you have around you, it's how you feel within yourself. You gotta be comfortable with yourself. Know what I'm saying? All that of that money shit come and go, that materialistic shit. For me, an example, I lost everything. Once I get back up on my feet, everything I had guaranteed I'll have it again, probably ten times fold. Then still that possibility that I might lose everything again. So why am I gonna (inaudible), like my daughter, spending time with my daughter, build memories with her, that's what makes me happy.

I: Building memories for her, that's what makes you happy.

P: Yea, it's the small shit. Know what I'm saying? If you think about like other shit like materialism, you ain't never gonna be happy. Even if you have a million dollars, you ain't never gonna be happy, if that's what you value. If that's what you value and that's your priority, you ain't never be happy, bro. Trust me. I been around. I used to, I mean, I

used to, when I had all that money I was never happy. What you have is a whole bunch of leeches that wanna feed off you and what you got.

[11:37 – 13:18]

I: I hear it. I hear it. Oh gosh. I mean, thank you. Any kinda--dad to dad, any last words of wisdom?

P: To you?

I: Yup.

P: Any last words of wisdom? Just appreciate life, bro. No matter what the fuck happens in your life, appreciate it. Life is beautiful. There's so much more than Newark. That's what I try to tell a couple people out here. There's so much more than Newark, bro. If you just stay stuck in one spot, you never gonna experience nothing. The first time I travelled was to Florida. That's when I used to sell drugs. Nobody told me, I ain't have no family, I just wanted to go experience. Once I went to Florida, that opened up my entire mind. It's like I was in a whole other country. After that I never stop traveling. I love to travel now.

I: Love to travel.

P: That was right here in the U.S. Imagine if I went to another country, how it was gonna open up my mind. To learn from different cultures, like that shit's dope, bro. Like when you go down south, at least to me, there's like a whole different culture compared to here. I don't know if you been to Florida or Georgia, especially Georgia, they really country. They really country. It's a whole different world than over here. Things like that, I love it, bro.

I: That's awesome. Well, gosh. I hope that you get to keep traveling. I hope you guys are able to get together, you and your daughter.

P: I see her every day.

I: You see her every day.

P: Yea, I see her every day. The whole thing is, how can I--I don't spend the time, like I was a hands-on father, you know what I'm saying, like hands-on.

I: I hear it. It sounds like you're still very much so.

P: Now I can't do what I used to do. I can't. Even if I want to, I can't. But that's the only thing that bothers--I do this shit for my daughter. If it wasn't for my daughter, I probably would have been right back to Florida.

I: Yup. I hear it. I hear it. I mean I hope you get kinda like the help here that you deserve.

[13:19 – 13:58]

P: Na, eventually I get the help. I have no choice but the will, I can't lose. No seriously you can't lose. I have a nine year old depending on me. I can't lose.

I: Oh gosh, yea.

P: There's no, there's no losing, whether you sick, whether you're hurt, no whether what it is, go make yourself productive. No matter what it is, no matter if it's raining, you gotta do something.

I: Yea.

P: 'Cause you can't lose. You got somebody a little something depending on you. You feel me?

I: I hear you. No, I hear you, man. Thanks so much for taking the time. Thank you for taking the time here. I'm gonna take this out, and uh, turn this off.