

WHAT'S SO SMART ABOUT STREETSMARTS?

This new not-for-profit South Florida magazine empowers the hard-core unemployed with training, dignified work and immediate income. It's a smart idea that's already helped thousands to self-sufficiency.

BY CAROLYN BLAIR, PUBLISHER

You see a person wearing a badge, selling copies of StreetSmarts with Santa on the cover. You buy one. It's just a buck. It only takes a second.

And with that buck, you're participating in a growing movement that's helping poor and homeless men and women win self-sufficiency across the nation.

Here at home there are at least 15,000 persons without homes in Miami-Dade, Broward and Monroe counties. Many are families down on their luck. With kids. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, the average age of a homeless person today is *nine years old*.

StreetSmarts was created to help these folks to get back on their feet, financially, emotionally, and psychologically.



Chicago's *StreetWise* (tabloid, shown folded here) gives the poor a voice. It has helped more than 4,000 homeless men and women earn the money and skills needed to win dignity and control over their lives.

Not a new idea. Just a great one.

In 40 US cities and over 100 worldwide, publications like this are providing income to men and women who can earn money no other way. Chicago's *StreetWise*, for example, with its monthly circulation of 120,000, provides income to 350 to 400 active vendors at any given time. Many earn \$1,500 a month or more working whenever and wherever they wish. Over 4,000 hard-core unemployed, mostly homeless persons, have gone through the *StreetWise* program and are now employed in full-time, living-wage work.

Many have never earned money on their own before
Selling StreetSmarts is often a life-changing experience.

Basically, street publications are all about helping the less fortunate to help themselves. They create dignified work founded on the principle that most of us want to help people who are helping themselves. Coincidentally, many poor and homeless men and women want to work, to enjoy employment that offers independence, flexibility, and immediate payment.

How it works.

Of the buck StreetSmarts costs you, the vendor keeps 60 cents. The rest

helps pay print and production costs. Before becoming eligible to sell *StreetSmarts*, our vendors are given up to 12 hours of basic business and life skills training. Upon graduation they're given an ID badge and a initial stake of 20 copies.

Once sold, they have \$20 to begin their own business. Vendors operate as independent entrepreneurs. However, they sign an extended version of the Vendor Code of Conduct on page two of this magazine, and if they break that code, they may lose their badge and the privilege of selling the magazine.

Magazine distribution centers are available throughout South Florida. To help prevent overcrowding downtown areas, vendors are encouraged to sell in their own neighborhoods, peddling the magazines where their customers are: at Dunkin' Donuts first thing in the morning, luncheonettes at noon, the local bank on paydays.

Why me?

Two years ago my husband (the editor of this magazine) and I first became aware of the street publication phenomenon when we bought a copy of *The Big Issue* from a formerly homeless lady in London. Heard her story. Cried.

From 300,000 to 450,000 *Big Issues* are sold weekly there; thousands of poor and homeless are earning their way toward independence and self-sufficiency.

By the time our plane landed, we knew that the idea would be perfect for Miami, especially in light of the thousands of hard-core unemployed soon to come off welfare in this *fourth-poorest city in America*.

It was a challenge that would occupy and entangle us full time for two years. And *challenge* it has been.

What we saw as a simple and effective way to get folks back on their feet was not so simple when we returned to Miami.

As we attempted to gather support from the homeless-helping community here, there were times—many times—when we felt the only ones who



London's Big Issue has now expanded to L.A.

wanted to see StreetSmarts succeed were South Florida's poor and homeless.

Editor formerly homeless

But we stuck with it. Perhaps because we're both recovering addicts and have worked with homeless addicts for years. At one time Frank was homeless in Honolulu. Been there. Done that.

There were days when we'd spend hours at Ft. Lauderdale's Tent City or around Miami's Camillus House talking to the hard-core unemployed, the homeless, migrants, recently release convicts and the elderly—all possible future vendors—making sure that we weren't somehow deluding ourselves.

Our conversations continually reinforced that the need is there. Of course, some of those we spoke with felt we were just like so many others, out to con them. But most saw StreetSmarts as a tool that could get them out from under their current smothering finan-

cial problems. They eagerly embraced the idea.

Who's funding you?

We thought it would be a cinch to get financial help. But the homeless-helping community ignored the idea.

Many we spoke with did not get the concept. Others simply were negative and fearful of a new project, even a project like ours that could only augment their clients' continuum of care.

Three times we offered the Miami-Dade Homeless Providers an opportunity to list their volunteer and gift needs, not to mention listing their missions, addresses, hours, etc. No one ever responded.

We applied for and were denied government funding. So far, with the exception of a few hundred dollars Frank raised from his fellow board members at the Miami/ACLU, everything has been out-of-pocket.

It seemed the only ones who wanted to see StreetSmarts succeed were the poor and homeless.

On the other side were the angels who appeared and simply set themselves to the task of helping make all this a reality. You can see some of their names on our advisory board listing on page two.

We've been to Chicago twice learning how StreetWise works. Frank recently spent a week in Montreal at a convention of the North American Street Newspaper Association soaking up how 40 other editors and publishers succeed in helping their community's poor and homeless with their newspapers and magazines. Success stories of these formerly homeless people are truly inspiring.

Our pledge to you

We can't wait to relate in these pages our own vendors' victory over poverty.

COMING SOON

A VENDOR NEAR YOU

Standing just beyond the famous lions in front of Chicago's Art Institute a StreetWise vendor shouts, "OK folks, you've seen great art, now buy a great paper!" Selling a homeless paper, he earns an average of \$600 a week..

Sure he hustles. His line of patter and ease of interaction with the public is awe-inspiring. I stood beside him on a recent trip and was amazed that people went out of their way to buy the paper from this guy because the paper is a good read and because "their" vendor was selling it.

I don't remember the vendor's name, but StreetWise's publisher told me that the guy earned enough to move to a great apartment on Chicago's Near South Side, then took a 9 - 5 job.

But he was soon back hawking papers outside the Art Institute. Like many of the homeless, he couldn't handle working for someone else. Being your own boss is integral to the success of street publications.

So this vendor just keeps on selling to be his own boss. And where else could he make easy money like that, thank you.

StreetSmarts' pledge to you, our reader, is simply this: We'll do our best to give you a good read. To entertain as well as inform. We'll be a voice of, for, and about our poor and dispossessed neighbors. We'll be there with a hand up rather than a handout.

Above all, we'll help empower those hard-core unemployed who want a dignified job, to be their own boss, to earn immediate income, to control their own destiny.

If you would like to join us, give me a call at 305.754.8833. We're nonprofit. And we need all the help we can get. ©

In her spare time, Carolyn Blair is president of Kaiser Communications Inc. in Miami, creators of compelling print, collateral and direct mail advertising for fine high-tech and healthcare companies like Cordis Corp., Softsync, Expert Software and Formulabs.

Where your dollar goes...



- 60¢ Directly to vendor
- 08¢ Vendor services, editorial and misc.
- 10¢ Training and distribution
- 22¢ Production and printing costs