

WeHome, Episode 6 Transcript
Trendsetters

Papa Joe Bradford: In South Nashville, just because it was considered the craziest area of town, I wanted to be there. The well people don't need a doctor. Send me where somebody's sick. I need to meet young men—not just young women, but young men—who can take a stand and change these communities, and that's exactly what's happening right now.

Erica Ciccarone (host): WeHome is a podcast about the Wedgewood-Houston and Chestnut Hill neighborhoods in Nashville, Tennessee where history, policy, people, business interests, and housing intersect in a way that says a lot about the future of Nashville. If you don't live here, you might find that the stories we uncover apply to your neighborhood, too. Each episode, we bring you on the ground to hear from a chorus of South Nashville voices. Then, two community members tour each other's lives and tell each other stories. I'm Erica Ciccarone. Today's episode is called Trendsetters.

Back in November, Metro Development Housing Agency put on an event at the Pruitt library branch on Charles E. David Boulevard. It was packed with adults and kids from the two MDHA housing complexes, Napier Place and Sudekum Apartments. Representatives from agencies that serve the community had set up tables around the auditorium to advertise their services with brochures, bracelets, candy—even sweet potato pancakes. As neighbors collected information, they also made their Thanksgiving dinner shopping lists. MDHA had a pop-up supermarket set up on the stage, where staff members scurried around collecting items from the grocery lists. Here's some of the people we met that day.

CHORUS (various voices)

EC: What are you putting together here?

—So this is a grocery order from the folks. After they go through and get all the check-offs from all the service providers, they get to choose what they want to fix their Thanksgiving dinner. So it won't be a complete dinner, but we're trying to help make sure everyone has enough food for this holiday season. Based on household size, they get to pick a number of items. So this family's getting 14, which is outstanding. It's a variety. Anything from stuffing mix to cranberry sauce to cake to iced tea and macaroni and cheese.

—My table is about the Church of the Messiah and all the ministries we have. One of the ministries is Positively Authentic. It's a ministry for people with HIV and other chronic illnesses to come together, meet, talk about it. It's really for empowerment, not so much for complaining. We want to empower people that they can go on and live, even if they have traumatic events in their lives that stop them at one point, they can continue to live and really live through Christ.

—I'm representing Express Employment Professionals, North Nashville and Downtown office. A staffing company located in Metro Center, and they provide short term skill training and office administrative employment for local residents in the area.

—So this is the Tennessee Department of Military. We have a youth academy called the Tennessee Volunteer Challenge Academy where we're giving youth a second chance to getting their life back on track, dealing with academic excellence, life coping skills, setting their future up for success and not failure. Teaching them how to rebuild that foundation, giving them the tools to be successful, and not expecting someone to save them but giving them the tools to learn how to save themselves.

—My name is Verla Malone, and I'm the vice president with the association with the Hubbard House. I'm also a member of C. Hubbard United Methodist Church, which is both together. Hubbard House was founded during the time of Meharry Hospital, and the president lived there—Dr. Hubbard. And so we're in the process of renovating the home in order to make it available to the community. The same things, the services you see here, we're trying to make it available over there at the Hubbard House. We already will be working with Meharry Dental, they're going to provide dental services. But we want to make it available there for the people in the community. You know it's a food desert. We can have people come in and have little gardens around there. A food truck can come. And also, for education, for young adults that want to come get their GED, work with Cameron Middle School. They can do tutoring there. And also just for job information and a resource center. A lot of people don't know where they can go to get certain services. So the Hubbard House we see that what the mission was some years ago was to make services available to everybody. With our church, and with the Hubbard House, we hope to make a difference in the community.

—Come on down to Pruitt Nashville Library on Charles Davis!

We're gonna stay in that neighborhood today. Back in episode 3, we heard from Andrea Evans and Ms. Leola Cullom, two residents who have seen it change over the years. They're doing well, by the way, and staying on the move. Both performed in an arts showcase at the library in

the beginning of December. Last I talked to Andrea, she was raising money to bring some neighborhood kids to see Alvin Ailey at Tennessee Performing Arts Center this coming March.

For now, we turn to another person who grew up in J.C. Napier.

Joshua Martin: All right folks, I'm Joshua Martin. I'm from South Nashville, one of many representatives of South Nashville wanting to change the neighborhood. I'm a mentor and musical artist. I'm into hip hop.

EC: As you'll hear, Joshua is repelled by stereotypes. He sees the damage they can do to individuals and communities. And he's the opposite of a stereotypical rapper. He's soft spoken and polite—though he opens up quickly. He has sparkly gray eyes and close cut beard. He came to the interview dressed in jeans, black t-shirt and baseball cap. Nothing showy about his appearance but a gold crucifix around his neck. And he held the hand of his very sweet young daughter.

Clip of Joshua Martin's song, "Knocking Down Doors."

JM: I've always been a music baby. I'm not just talking hip hop. I can't sing, so hip hop was my only other choice. I can't sing to save my life. I used to ride with my father, he used to throw the newspapers. I'd listen to everything from Shabba Ranks to the Isley Brothers. Before he passed, his friends become my friends. I'd hang with older guys. At that point in time back then, music was for the soul. Music was what you were going through in life. A long time ago, we used to do freestyle battles. We didn't have much to do, but we find us some fun. When Rocketown was on another street, I done did shows down there when I was a teenager. I used to walk from J.C. Napier to down there. That would get me on a different side of town. Kids would come from East Nashville and they would know me. "That big dude with the pretty eyes? He cold. He good!" So, music was always something that I was into, but like I say, I got into hip hop because I couldn't sing.

June 8, 2003 I had a cousin Eric Brown, he died in a car crash on his way to come pick me up. We were supposed to go to the lake that day. I stopped rapping. He was my motivation. He was more like a brother to me. I didn't want to do it. I just lost my father a little over two years ago. I needed some medicine. I wasn't going to no counseling or taking no depression medicine. Music

was my medicine. I wrote my first song and people said, "I love it. I want it. Where the album at?" I was like, "Album? I wrote this cause I miss my daddy." That's how I got back into this. That's how I got into music, and I love music, and I'm praying that my music puts me in a position to help my community.

EC: And helping community is the focus on today's episode. My collaborator Joseph saw an opportunity to link Josh with a man named Joe Bradford—who everyone calls Papa Joe. It's even embroidered on his hat. Papa Joe and his wife Denise run a ministry out of the community center in Napier Place, where Joshua grew up. It's called Elijah's Heart. Their work includes a youth choir, literacy program and a volunteer based food delivery program for families in need. But Papa Joe's path from a small rural town west of the city to a community center in South Nashville was a long and difficult one. He sat down with Joshua to tell his story.

Papa Joe Bradford: My background is crazy, but I know the key to helping is to become a brother. Not that I'm more than you. To me, poverty over there is less than when I grew up. See, my poverty is different. I'm an old man. I didn't even have running water. My neighbors had a dirt floor. That's what "dirt poor" is. We didn't have an indoor bathroom until I was 12 years old. The type of poverty I saw, it was even deeper than what I see over there.

I wasn't always Papa Joe. I almost killed a man in prison. I almost stayed there the rest of my life because of that. I wasn't fighting, I was trying to protect somebody. But the thing about it is, my record, my experience in prison has given me an opportunity to talk to some of the guys. They found out that, "Oh shoot. You got a little story, too." I had to go through that pathway. When I go into the community, I see in the eyes of the some of the guys, they've done been through some stuff. I've been through some stuff, too. Don't be ashamed where you come from. If you've transformed, if you've been changed, you can help the community.

It was sometime after the turn of the century. We lived at Preston Taylor. See, I lost both my kidneys. I was on dialysis machine nine hours a day. We had two kids, so we moved into Preston Taylor. We only had two kids. My little girl was in the first grade. I would walk her to class, and her best friend and her best friend's dad would walk with us. One day, this little girl—my daughter's best friend—and her dad walked a different route home. Later that day, the girl comes running back to me, says, "Mr. Joe! They just killed my dad in front of me!" So this child

watched her dad, a guy I saw every day walking to and from school, killed in front of her. Now, I didn't know what to do with that. I hadn't been long out of prison, so the only thing I knew was fighting with these, my fists. I thought, "God, what am I going to do?"

Two weeks later, we were at another inner city area over at Jo Johnson before they rebuilt it. About 60-70 kids we were teaching choir to cause they were gonna be singing at the Ryman auditorium. Well, a 12 year old girl comes walking in. Her face was swollen. She had been beaten, and we prayed for the child and tried to console the child. The kids were over there eating lunch, like I said 60-70 kids. The girl's little sister, about nine, comes over to my left side and says, "Will you be my dad?"

I looked at the child, I thought she was playing with me when her best friend comes to my right side saying, "Will you be my dad?" I'm thinking they got this together and were just messing with me. They didn't ask me for my qualifications. They didn't ask me if I'd been to prison or not. They didn't ask me if I was a good dad. They just saw me loving on this child and thought, Oh. Will you be my dad? Before I knew it, it set off a chain reaction. I was surrounded by 30-40 kids, and my team is watching this.

"Will you be my dad? Will you be my dad? Will you be my dad?" I'm like, "What in the world is going on?"

I was messed up. I had to call off rehearsal. The next week I came back. "Mr. Joe, Mr. Joe! We want to know!" I didn't know there were that many fatherless children. See, when I grew up, being a fatherless child—my dad left, I saw him two times until the age of three. I didn't see or hear from him again until I was 23. When I grew up, there was only one other black dude in the area that didn't have a dad. So things turned around. They said, "Will you be my dad?" I just think that my name was changed that day. I said, "All y'all can call me Papa Joe." And that's how I became Papa Joe.

EC: Soon after, Papa Joe and his wife Denise founded Elijah's Heart. Their mission is to provide resources to underprivileged kids and their families.

After that, we started helping in the community. We were living in there. My wife had this crazy idea: Why don't we take flyers around the community and see who's hungry? There's

300-something homes over there. We actually took flyers. People were calling us saying, "We hungry, Papa Joe." We were talking to businesses, churches getting food for these kids. After that, they did a movie about me. This guy spent \$4 million to make a movie, and the movie's all over the world. Now we get food, we get all kinds of stuff for these kids. So I put all that in one little box, but that's what happened.

EC: The movie is the real deal. It's called *Unconditional* and stars Michael Ealy as Papa Joe.

PJB: *Unconditional* is in 21 different countries, y'all. I didn't do nothing to make this happen. I'm an ex-convict. I hacked into a bank. I stole money out of a bank. I was doing it for fun. They locked me up, I almost killed a guy, but still because God can use your testimony to change the life of a child, but you've got to be active. You can't be still and expect something to happen. You've gotta put one step in front of the other and get things going. When you do that it forms a momentum and people will get behind you.

Winter of 2016 around February or so, a report came out on Fox that Nashville is second in the nation for murder growth rate. Second only to Cleveland, Ohio. The majority of these killings were happening on the south side. One thing they said, these kids ain't got nothing to do. They said that they need something in this community to help the kids out. So they asked me to come in and take over the community center, but at the same time people are saying, "Papa Joe, you don't go over there, it's crazy over there." I said, "How crazy is it?" They said, "It's pretty crazy." I said, "Well, great. That's exactly where I want to go."

The one thing I knew was they just need some love over there. The love is in there, it just ain't being highlighted. They're highlighting is all this mess. A lot of the crime is from people outside the community coming in doing this stuff. Some people knew me because the counselor over there had shown the movie, but they didn't know me personally. When we got over there, I just wanted to be a friend. That's it. I think I can be a friend, and we can do what we do.

Guy on megaphone: J.C. Napier! We're gonna go pack up a few more and then be back on the flip side! Walk of Love! Come on out a say hello to Papa Joe!

EC: A couple times a month, always on Saturday mornings, Papa Joe brings a legion of volunteers to Napier Place. They wear yellow shirts, and they bag up donated food and personal

hygiene items and distribute them throughout the community. Joe and Denise call it “love in action.” Here he is in the pre-walk huddle.

PJB: Are y'all ready to roll?

Volunteers: Yeah!

PJB: Everybody say, "Free bag of snacks."

Volunteers: Free bag of snacks.

PJB: "It's the Walk of Love team."

Volunteers: It's the Walk of Love team.

PJB: Say, "Free bag of snacks!"

Volunteers: Free bag of snacks!

PJB: "It's the Walk of Love team!"

Volunteers: It's the Walk of Love team!

PJB: You're gonna knock on the bottom of the door. It's just louder, OK?

PJB: People give me stuff. We give away about 15-20,000 of food every month. I knew this: We couldn't go in and say we love you and the next day we gone. We had to be consistent love. Consistent I'm your brother. I have my megaphone. They all know my big mouth. We come out there in the community. It ain't because we over there, but I hope to think we have a little to do with it, there's less killings over there now. Killings still happen, but it's spread out over Nashville instead of in that one area. This Thanksgiving, we had the biggest meal they ever had over there. I think it's the biggest one they ever had an inner city community. The whole community came out, around 500 or something people. It wasn't even just people in Napier. People in neighboring areas came too. Cause it's not just food, we were showing love over there.

JM: You definitely have to be consistent. It's like a relationship with a significant other. If you start a pattern, you have to keep it going. You can't change it. I'm hopeful and hoping that it starts trending to the other sides of town. I'm hoping that other people that can help. There's other guys my age that I come up with, people walk past them and stuff, because they don't put out there their experience. They don't put out there their intelligence, but I know they have it. I'm hoping that on my end, it starts trending. Guys that are active, that are powerful, that have a story to tell, get out and tell their story to let these kids know what you see on TV is bull. I'm a rapper, but what you see is bull. What I'm rapping about is my past. What I know now, I'm not doing

what I'm rapping about. It's entertainment but I'm telling you, it's bull. So I'm hoping that it starts trending. I wish, I hope and pray one day I'm able to do what most people, small minded people think is small, walk through my neighborhood where I come up at, and knock on doors and hand a bag of food. "Hey, you can cook a meal." You just saved someone. You can't calculate it, but there was kids that wasn't gonna eat that day. To know that you're doing that, if no one has told you, thank you. I'm telling you thank you.

PJB: We are really privileged to have young men like Josh who actually grew up in the area who know the story of the area and not just the stereotypes. With me being in the community now, I'm getting to see the truth behind the community versus what you hear on the newscast. Just the bad news. There's a lot of good news going on, and I think that's one of the reasons I'm here talking today.

JM: That saying, you can't judge a book by its cover. South Nashville doesn't have the best cover of the book. To get the full definition of anything you have to read it in its entirety. So, you have to know the full story, have to be in the story active. If you're not active, you know nothing about that picture.

I'm 30 years old. Out of those 30 years, 21 of them were spent in South Nashville. Come from Baptist Hospital to South Nashville. I didn't complain about poverty until I got older and started learning the difference, learning what I wanted out of life. Even though I was raised in South Nashville, I went to school in Donelson. It was taking me out of my element. I loved going to school. I didn't want to skip school because it got me out of South Nashville. I got friends from the suburbs, I didn't know nothing different until I had those kind of friends. Honestly, I didn't know racism outside of the movie Roots. Things I'd heard. I didn't know anything about racism or poverty until I got older and started getting some understanding. I didn't know we didn't have nothing. At that time as a kid, we had the world. Back then, we were family. In a poverty stricken community, we were family. My mom might run out of food today, but we don't miss a meal because guess what? My next door neighbor, we're gonna come together as one family.

We had Boy Scouts. I got a picture on the wall. If you go to JC Napier Community Center. You probably wouldn't know it's me unless you really looked at the pictures. I was a Boy Scout in the

projects. They used to take us to Cheekwood. I would be a part of anything just to get away from out there.

PJB: If you come to another Walk of Love, just watch what happens with the kids. They'll be all out together with us man. [laughs]

JM: I'll be out there. I see you and up until today... I knew of you. I sat up for your movie. Today's a great day for today, to actually get to meet you and converse with you. I love that. I've seen you from afar what you had going on. Anytime I'm out there... I'm telling you what I know. Ain't nobody else out there showing no love.

PJB: We've been out there for two years. We really believe someday we're going to have more of the black church come out. I really believe that. I hope some of them are listening to this podcast because the door's wide open. We shouldn't be afraid of our own people.

JM: They're supposed to be a beacon of God and to fear no man. They're scared. I'm telling you what I know.

PJB: Like you said, the stereotypes just mess me up. What people believe about other people...you've got people trying to survive in the community. It's a bunch of kids. Sometimes you don't even see them because the parents are scared to have them come out. And sometimes they're all out there.

JM: Not you, you got people that say they want to give back, but they scared to get active. There's guys sure enough who have a lengthy criminal record. Prison's supposed to be a rehabilitation. A lot of people it does; a lot of people it doesn't. But I know people that are powerful. Their words are powerful. But you got your pastors and people of power are scared to talk to them. But they would love to get a story. They would love to get a story. I would have to bring them in. Don't treat 'em like they're background. Treat em like the man they is. Give them a chance. There's ways to get these communities back.

PJB: What's great, Josh, is people are so thankful, you know. They thanking God, I'm just an instrument, my team is just an instrument. We're helping bring the community together. I don't

want to go over there and people give me something and share...no. We all come out together. That's what's starting to happen. It's starting to trend right there in the community.

JM: It's trending.

PJB: We did lunches this past summer in both Napier and Sudekum. Kids were really hungry, but kids gonna be kids. Kids love each other. What's cool, we had parents bringing some of the kids out. Fellowship is all about relationships. 9/11, September 11, Sterling had me come out to give hotdogs, hamburgers. You could call them gangsters and so forth, but they were all out together. Out there eating hot dogs and hamburgers. Something about using food...[laughs]

JM: It's a blessing, man. If food wasn't important, they wouldn't say food for thought. I'm 30 young, but an old soul...How do keep a man, the way to his stomach...in a relationship, you're in the belly of a beast. How do you keep control over it? Through the stomach. Show love through food.

PJB: That trending thing you were talking about. We want to make sure people see what's going on so they can serve and give back. Winter of last year, we were out doing Walk of Love. We saw a lot of kids didn't have coats. Somebody heard about it while we were doing Walk of Love, and they donated 300 coats. A lot of people outside the community have a coat on and don't think nothing about it. When you have a little child walking to elementary school, freezing their tail off, something needs to be done about that kind of a thing. But when you do that, it builds relationship.

JM: Yes, trending. What you got going on I hope it's trending. What I got going on, I hope it's trending. Anybody that wants to help, I hope it trends where they pitch in. You can change this picture. You can really give back.

PJB: The most powerful time we have, Josh, is when we have neighborhood guys come out and walk with us. It changes everything, especially guys. It's one thing to have women, but so much stereotypes and criticism on the guys. We love having them help us unload the trucks. We get guys to do a whole lot of stuff. Everybody knows me over there. They know who I am. I know some people, but I really want to connect. We're gonna be showing Unconditional in the center a bunch this coming year. Just like a movie day. We'll have popcorn and everything. I really want

to get the guys out there to have some fun and actually see I've got background, too. But just because you got a background—I believe in no excuses. [laughs]

JM: I'm with it!

PJB: Even help us go around. We've had it happen. They become heroes in the community. When we do some sort of giveaway, we call it Walk of Love—we don't even put Elijah's Heart on it—because it's not focused on one person. It's focused on whoever's out there showing love to each other.

Like I said before, in South Nashville, just because it was considered the craziest area of town, I wanted to be there. The well people don't need a doctor. Send me where somebody's sick. I need to meet people like Josh, like Sterling, like Larry Turner. I need to meet young men—not just young women, but young men—who can take a stand and change these communities, and that's exactly what's happening right now. I'm meeting young men and saying, "Let's make a change" and actually being active with that. That's why I'm in South Nashville.

That's right. I'm not the greatest example over there. The greatest example is somebody that grew up in that community.

JM: For you to take your time though. You don't have to. For you to take your time out. See, I'm from out there, I want to be able to help. I ain't in the position to help but my knowledge. My knowledge and wanting to see you do better. All I can do is talk to you. I can't give you anything. I can barely feed my family. At the moment, I'll take "can't" out of it. It's not my time right now. God hasn't put me in the position now to feed all those families. But I will one day. I'll keep grinding.

PJB: I really believe you have one of the greatest gifts. We're destroyed by the lack of knowledge. Because of lack of knowledge is why the kids are being destroyed. Their belief in lies, that drug dealing is actually going to make them successful. [laughs]

JM: It's gonna get you a bunch of numbers, a number that will always follow you.

PJB: If you live through it. The knowledge that you have, that's worth a whole lot. I can give them food for a day and they can eat, but unless they get that knowledge, their life ain't gonna change. What I'm doing is satisfying something on the spot. They need something that's going to let them fish for a lifetime. That's what the knowledge does. We help in that area, too, but for somebody that grew up in the community and knows who you are... "I heard about you! You over here to help us, for real? You gonna teach us something?" Come over when I'm doing lunches. I'm gonna have you talk to them. I'm so glad we're here today doing this, cause you're a weapon. I see you as a weapon for the good that can help these kids.

EC: A big thank you to Joshua and Papa Joe for spending time with us, and for all the people at the MDHA event who contributed at the top of today's show. You can visit elijahsheart.com/walkoflove for details about volunteering at the next walk. The movie based on Papa Joe again is called Unconditional and it's streaming on Netflix. Joseph Bazelais did all the field recording at the Walk of Love. Another thank you goes out to Rachel Bubis for helping me transcribe interviews this season.

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BURNAWAY is an awesome contemporary art magazine, and they're helping us spread the word about South Nashville. Read their reviews, news, and interviews at burnaway.org. Lauren Cierzan illustrates every episode at www.wehomepodcast.org. If you like us, please show some love with a review on Apple Podcasts. We're also on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram at @WeHomePodcast.

Reporting from South Nashville, I'm Erica Ciccarone, and I'm asking you to be like Papa Joe and Joshua: get love trending. Keep listening for Joshua Martin's song, Knocking Down Doors. See you next time.

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