

Street papers and relationships

By [Debra Bendis](#)

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I'm a big fan of street newspapers, and in particular of *StreetWise* in Chicago, one of [100 such newspapers](#) in over 38 countries.

From the vendor's point of view: A homeless person can acquire pride and success--and a few dollars. Being a vendor empowers someone who has been removed from society to find the courage to speak up and engage the public, one person at a time. This is a huge step for someone who's been the victim of eviction, neglect, theft, abuse and more. But in the vendor/buyer exchange, there is a ritual to follow. The vendor knows a script--and may be able to get past fear and build up confidence and self-esteem.

From the buyer's point of view: *StreetWise* enables the

buyer to assist someone one-on-one instead of with an impersonal check (which is also welcome in most instances). As a buyer, I greet someone whom I might otherwise

hesitate to speak to--because I don't notice him or her, because I hesitate out of fear, because I'm in a hurry or because I've removed myself from the street scene via my cell phone or iPod. When I buy a newspaper, I initiate a relationship, however fleeting or superficial it may seem.

Often I see the person again, and we share greetings. We may talk about Chicago sports (I mostly listen), about weather, or introduce ourselves to each other--as neighbors do. The relationship can lead to further involvement--to tutoring, to sharing a cup of coffee, to listening to discouragements--and yes, sometimes I've discouraged further communication or hurried the transaction because I felt uncomfortable. But sometimes, on the other hand, *I'm* the one who conveys weariness or discouragement, and I receive a blessing or encouragement in return. All this for a measly \$2--and a sudoku puzzle thrown in.

These words by Arkady Tyurin remind me of the vital importance of the street paper. Tyurin, who was once homeless, is now the editor and publisher of *Put Dumoi*, the street newspaper of St. Petersburg, Russia.

This is what I learnt when I lived in a basement on Seventh Line on Basil Island.

That rats can fall down from a ceiling.

That even a small piece of cheese every day can prevent your teeth from falling out because cheese contains calcium.

That it is better not to steal at work, even though the employer bluntly dupes.

That one does not have to shave provided he brushes his teeth twice a day.

That
it is better to go without than allow yourself too much.

That
big wounds are not suitable for disinfection by petrol.

That
it is easier to smile when your footwear is clean.

That
when loneliness is stronger than any other feeling, you can always talk to your
dog, which you have not got.

That
if you really want it, it is possible to leave a basement.

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