

AARON HARDING: I've always loved the street, when I had the store I would work a full 8 hours on the street and then go open the store. So the transition for me was relatively easy because I was doing it all the time.

JACKSON ELLISON: That's Aaron Harding. He's worked with some of the biggest names in New York City streetwear. His store Family Affair used to be a mainstay in Harlem. But Harding was forced to close his store during the pandemic. He quickly switched to street vending. He sells face masks and other PPE on 86th St. in the Upper East Side.

For Harding, it's not just a way to make a living - it's a public service.

AH: Maybe for about five months by myself, it was just me and customers looking for masks, it was just unbelievable. I think the humanity part took over because the profit sure wasn't there.

JE: I'm Jackson Ellison, on this episode of Ominmonipeia, how someone went from a streetwear mogul to street vendor.

Aaron Harding is in his early 60's. He is dressed in an argyle sweater and is wearing gold spectacles. He is standing behind a pile of clothes, everything from handmade hats to designer sneakers. He's considered to be high risk for covid because of his age. But that didn't stop him from selling on the street.

AH: There was no hesitation, no doubt in my mind that I wanted to truly get out here and come down to 86th st.

JE: Harding closed his store in Harlem in Fall of 2020, because he no longer could afford to pay rent. He decided to bring his clothes with him to sell alongside the face masks.

AH: When you're helping somebody with a coat, jacket, shoes, you're going to receive some money, but you're not out here to make a killing, you're out here to soothe somebody's soul.

JE: Harding pays \$35 for a box of fifty masks. He sells them for a dollar a piece. While masks sold out quickly, That's a \$15 dollar profit - but he's got to sell 50. Tha

AH: Now if that is not community service I don't know what is and dedication to your business. Life will put you in a pivotal point where you want all, I want fame, I want fortune, I want glory, but what are you giving back?

JE: Now over a year into the pandemic, masks and other ppe are still necessities- and that keeps Harding in business.

AH: The need for PPE is still there, people are buying in record numbers because the pandemic is not stable yet, it hasn't been stable for a while.

JE: When it comes to selling PPE other street vendors have started marking down prices in order to attract customers. Harding says one street vendor told him directly his goal was to take away Harding's customers.

AH: He told me he wanted to corner the market, and I'm like we're helping people. If you're spending \$3.50 a box you at least have to sell it for \$7 to make your profit back. But some people would rather lose the money, gain the customer, and unbalance the situation.

JE: Zambia King, sells jewelry JUST 40 yards from Harding's stand.

King is much younger than Harding, She sells an assortment of necklaces, rings, and bracelets. Her stand has a constant flow of customers and onlookers.

Despite the competition on this block - King says Harding was the first person to help her when she returned to the street WHEN? She was having a hard time carrying her merchandise.

ZAMBIA KING: And I called Aaron and I was like Aaron it's just too heavy it's too bulky, I know it's one block but I have to redo it, it was already 12 o'clock and I was like I'm just not going to come. He's like no way and he got someone to watch his stuff and he came to my apartment and he helped me and since he brought it out here, in the evening time he waited for me for almost an hour and then he brought it back

[TAPE] Brass covered in gold, some are stainless steel, some are gold plated and some are gold filled.

ZK: He's become a close friend, he has a lot of stories. You know he's in his early sixties, don't want to age him, but he has a lot of stories. He has so much experience in life.

JE: It's meeting people like King that keeps Harding coming back to 86th st.

AH: Every day it's something new, something exciting, some days are not so exciting, some days can be borderline depression. But when I talk to another human being, and get that feedback the exchange is there.

JE: And there's something else that keeps Harding here....

AH: I think this is like my calling, and I like it, it's like I don't have a problem coming here you know. As long as I can get home at night I'm good

JE: This episode of Onomatopoeia- was created by me, Jackson Ellison Onomatopoeia is a production of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. Joanne Faryon is our executive producer and professor. Original theme music by Lee Feldman. Our graphic was created by Sunni Bean. Special thanks to Columbia Digital Librarian Michell Wilson.