Worldwide vendor spotlight: Hiroaki Kashiwagi sells street newspapers in busy Toyko, Japan

In front of the Expressway Bus Terminal at the west exit of Shinjuku station in Tokyo, Hiroaki Kashiwagi sells copies of The Big Issue Japan. The 66-year-old man stands from 8p.m. - 10p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and from 5pm every other day. While big stations are popular spots for vendors, it is quite rare to find someone selling The Big Issue at night in Japan.

But why does he sell at night? Because Kashiwagi is busy during the day. From 8a.m. - 5p.m., he does cleaning work at seven different parks in Tokyo. Then he travels to Shinjuku to sell copies of The Big Issue to commuters making their way home. But his day doesn't end there. After returning to his neighborhood late at night, he voluntarily cleans up the litter from a local bicycle shelter before finally heading home for the day.

When asked why he pushes himself so much, he replied: "Fortunately, thanks to the support I received, I was able to find housing after being homeless for about a year. That's why I would like to help other people by doing whatever I can."

Kashiwagi was born on Awaji Island in Hy go Prefecture in 1948. His father was already absent when he was born. His mother remarried when he was 13 years old. He felt that there was no space for him, so he began to avoid going back home.

"I was a homeless kid. I picked up anything I could exchange for money. Back then, lots of people used to push around carts full of things they wanted to sell and to collect scrap. I used to push other people's carts up hills to get some extra money. This money helped me to buy some food. I didn't ask my mother to give me some money. I just couldn't."

Before he graduated from junior high school, he had left his home and had started working as a carpenter. "I used to stay at one job site for four to five months. We'd build buildings and then move on to the next site," he recalled. Kashiwagi had worked for his last employer for about 20 years, but after the recession he was only offered low paying contracts and eventually, he had no choice but to quit his job. After that, he searched for a new job while living off his savings, believing, "It will be alright."

Work was about to getting arder to find as his hearing deteriorated. "I remember seeing homeless tents on my way to work, and I always thought to myself that I didn't want to join them," he said.

In October 2003, Kashiwagi found himself homeless and living in Toyama Park. When he became homeless, he promised himself, "Never steal from anybody," and "If I find something with the owner's name written on it, I will return it to them." After Toyama Park, he moved to Shinjuku Central Park, where he was introduced to The Big Issue. "I started selling on Dec. 23, 2004, so 2014 was my 10th anniversary. It was a bit of a memorble year for me."

Kashiwagi feels he has seen all aspects of Japanese society while living in Shinjuku. He is sometimes harassed by drunks in Tokyo's biggest downtown area. But even when someone laughs at him and says "he is a beggar," Kashiwagi never shows anger. He simply holds out the magazines and says "Please check it out if you want."

He added: "Recently a young man grabbed a magazine from my hand and threw it away. When I tried to reach out and pick it up, the man spat on me and ran away. Of course I felt annoyed, because that means that some people don't accept us as part of society, but I have to keep my chin up."

"We are not selling the magazine inside book stores. We are selling them on the street. Some of my peers can't take a bath every day. Some can't wear proper clothes. That's why I respect people who come to me and buy the magazines to help them."

Kashiwagi feels concern about the way he and his peers have been harassed by drunken people. He feels that today's Japanese society needs a "heart and dreams." He attracts customers in his own unique way, writing down a poem on a Japanese folding fan to convey his message to the people he meets. When selling the magazine, he says "From Hokkaido in the north to Kyushu in the south... From our neighboring country Korea and from Norway, I'm selling The Big Issue. Magazines like it are sold in 35 countries all over the world."

His voice is rhythmic and pleasant to hear. "I mention the different countries The Big Issue is sold in when greeting people in the street to let them know how big the organization is. I feel that raising public awareness of the good things The Big Issue has achieved will help my fellow vendors around the world feel better. My wish is for all vendors to become self-sustaining. I believe it's possible after the kindness shown to me over the last decade."

In the end, there's one message he wants to tell all customers: "I appreciate from the bottom of my heart everyone who has helped me in the last 10 years and those who continue to do so."

Translated from Japanese into English by Chisa Nishikawa. Courtesy of INSP News Service www.INSP.ngo / The Big Issue Japan