



PHOTO BY ZENGZHENG WANG

Gay Talese in the living room of his New York apartment.

Gay Talese

He was famous for defining literary journalism with his profiles of Frank Sinatra and Joe DiMaggio, but then he met a homeless woman near his house in East Manhattan

BY ADAM SENNOTT
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The first encounter was on a cold Autumn afternoon in 1989. A woman carrying two bulky bags over her shoulders caught the attention of legendary journalist Gay Talese as she stood on the corner of Lexington Avenue and 59th Street in New York City.

She appeared to be in her early 40s, with delicate bones, blue eyes and short curly blond hair. Talese continued on his way, but the image of the woman stuck with him. A

few blocks later he turned around and walked back to ask her an awkward question. "Are you homeless?"

The encounter was striking. Her appearance wasn't that of the stereotypical homeless person and neither was her story. She was a married hair stylist who once owned her own salon. Her husband lived in Queens with their three children in one of the two homes they bought together. The other was in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania. But she left it all behind for reasons she didn't say.

Talese wrote "The Homeless Woman with Two Homes" in New York Magazine and it was recently republished in his latest book, "High Notes: Selected Writings of Gay Talese." While her story was unusual, he also noted at the time that "urban destitution and despair are now spreading to the degree that identifying their victims visually is often impossible. Increasingly, the victims in our streets are looking like the rest of us." It was the first time Talese, famous for defining literary journalism with his profiles of Frank Sinatra and Joe DiMaggio, had spoken to someone experiencing homelessness so directly. But it wouldn't be the last.

Talese has since gotten to know some of the individuals on the streets near his third-floor apartment on the East Side of Manhattan, where he has lived with his wife Nan for almost 60 years. One such person panhandles in front of a bakery two blocks from his house. Another is on Madison Avenue.

"There are people that have been in my area who have been here for years," Talese said in a recent interview with Street Sense. "There's certain streets that I know certain individuals. You see them there, it's their turf."

He sees them as businesspeople who are just trying to make a living.

"When you see a business from year to year still located in the same place, you have to say they're doing business," Talese said. "Whatever it is they're selling, it's selling enough they're paying the rent. Well, when you see the same faces soliciting funds with their hand out begging for a dollar, or maybe settling for less, they must be doing enough to keep themselves from starving to death. That's not a comforting thought."

In 2009, around the height of the great recession, Talese decided to lend his writing skills to some of the panhandlers in his neighborhood by helping them make their cardboard signs more timely and attention-grabbing.

He had been on his way to cash a check on Madison Avenue when he stopped to ask a panhandler, "How's the economy affecting you?" Talese wrote in his column for The

New York Times.

"No different," the panhandler said. "It's always lousy."

Later, Talese saw another panhandler, this time with a sign that read "Homeless. Please Help."

"I dropped a dollar into his container, but at the same time thought that the sign might benefit from updating — it needed a touch of stimulus, that word that dominates the headlines," Talese wrote in his column.

He pulled out a strip of laundry board and wrote: "Please Support Pres. Obama's Stimulus Plan, and begin right here ... at the bottom ... Thank you." The panhandler promised to copy it to his sign the next day.

"The next day, on Sunday, and during the Monday holiday as well, I handed out these boarded messages at random to people who approached me for money, explaining why I thought their economy would be stimulated by my street signs," Talese wrote in his column. "I further pointed out that the big bankers and industrial leaders the government was bailing out had lobbyists and public relations companies doing their bidding; but these wandering men who were seeking handouts in the street had to tap into the topicality of their plight, had to link themselves into the headlines and the top priority of President Obama. Stimulus, stimulus!!"


He later went back to see the panhandlers he had given signs to.

"Some of them said they had a lot of conversation with people," Talese said. "They saw this sign and it was different. And this prompted conversation. So those people, seeking whatever kind of financial help they could get, were not faceless."

One of the reasons homeless people have become faceless is because they don't have anyone to represent them, according to Talese.

"The people that are homeless are very often quiet people," he said. "They don't have lobbyists, they're not organized in a union, so they don't have a spokesperson, you don't know about them, and sometimes they don't want you to know about them

See TALESE, page 13



peOple's
FOOD CO-OP


FARMERS' MARKET
WEDNESDAYS 2-7PM



UP TO \$10 MATCH WITH EBT CARD

We're passionate about helping our community access healthy food that they can trust. By shopping at our market, you'll get extra food dollars while supporting local farmers and community.

3029 SE 21st Ave. btwn Powell & Division



Did you serve in the
Armed Forces
and are experiencing
or at risk of
becoming
homeless?

**Transition
Projects**

Please call 855.425.5544
or visit 650 NW Irving Street