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Pearl Jam's Stone Gossard, left, interviewed by Real Change vendor Derrell Wrenn.

Stone Gossard *Pearl Jam's guitarist talks about homelessness and the impetus behind Seattle's Home Shows*

BY DARRELL WRENN
REAL CHANGE VENDOR

I am a Pearl Jam fan, but more importantly, I understand the impact they have had, over a decades-long career. The group has been inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, donated millions to their Vitalogy Foundation, and given voice to some of the most important issues of our society.

Earlier this year the band announced they planned to perform in Seattle for the first time in five years. The two shows, dubbed The Home Shows, were held to unite the community around the cause of ending homelessness. The band has pledged \$1 million to local organizations combatting homelessness and hopes that they will be able to up that figure to \$10 million.

Recently, I interviewed Stone Gossard, Pearl Jam's guitarist. He talked to me about how excited he was to be doing some upcoming concerts, designed to bring awareness to and start conversations about Seattle's growing homeless population.

Derrell Wrenn: So what inspired you to get involved with the homeless crisis here in Seattle?

Stone Gossard: I think there are two specific things. The first is just the specific ... the real obvious, evident, visceral experience of seeing it and experiencing it on a daily basis. Just seeing people standing at the end of freeway ramps, hanging out in the streets, sleeping in their cars, sleeping wherever. I don't think you can be in this city and not be taking that information in and kind of going, "wow."

It's different than it was five years ago. It's certainly different than it was 20 years ago.

And there's a real specific thing that's going on. It's related to economics and an emergency situation with people not being taken care of.

I think, also, on a personal level, the thing that's impacted me the most was meeting a homeless person who became a friend about 10 years ago.

I met a guy named Dee when I was walking my dog every day. He was living in a tunnel. He was there every morning and we just started talking and we became friends. I'd bring him a little money every once in a while. I'd bring him blankets when it was cold. I watched him go through, you know, full winters and summers, living outside.

D.W.: Oh, wow. Ok.

S.G.: During that time, I was talking to him, kind of asking if we could get him inside. And he'd always say, "I don't want to go to shelter. I don't want to deal with anybody."

I knew he had some mental health stuff going on. And I remember asking him about it, once we got to know each other better, about who else would come talk to him. And he said that DESC (a Seattle organization that helps homeless and recently homeless individuals) would come out and visit him.

That was a big moment for me, realizing that the DESC was out there meeting with people and connecting with people. And for him to kind of tell me that – if there was going to be anyone to help him, those were going to be the people. That really inspired me and got me supporting the DESC and wanting to recognize who is on the front lines of what's going on.

Over the course of four years, before he decided to move inside, I got to know him pretty well. Eventually, he went down to

check out his options and he's now been living in (transitional housing) for three years.

This is all over the course of a decade. And what knowing him helped me see was the complexity and the reasons that someone may not want to or be able to go into a shelter. You know, the intense pressures ...

D.W.: And the stigma.

S.G.: And the stigma of it! He felt more secure where he was than in a shelter. He probably had more privacy. But also, how difficult it is to navigate getting somebody to get inside.

The friendship that I had with him – I still see him periodically – he's a great guy but really needed a lot of help. But he's stable now and has a spot. And that was a big moment for me to go like, "this is a tough thing, but it's also doable."

D.W.: What's been the response to the Home Shows?

S.G.: I think, overall, most people are excited that we're putting a spotlight on something that, clearly, again, most people in Seattle know that it needs to be addressed.

We could just do the show and that would be fine, but over the years, we've usually given away almost all of the money that we've made here locally on our Home Shows, to our foundation or different charities.

So, this was one where we said, "let's definitely do something different." And overall, the response has been positive.

D.W.: Do you think people in positions of power are doing enough to resolve the homeless crisis?

S.G.: I think that everyone wants to

resolve it. I don't see people fundamentally not wanting to resolve it. I just see it as – and this is coming from somebody who doesn't have a lot of experience in government or a lot of experience in anything other than being in a band – everybody having to get a lot more serious about it and having to really make compromises. There's got to be some new alignment that allows a new energy and a new perspective.

That's one of the things we've been hoping that we could do, because it's so easy for us to get a spotlight. We may not have all the answers, but we're going to throw out this issue and we're going to try to bring as many people as we can.

But (people) need to get together and start to work it out with each other...

I've heard over and over again, anecdotally, that there are opportunities for the city and the county to align with each other and, if they did, I think that would signal opportunity. And if the city and the county were on the same page, and we get the nonprofit world backing the plan, you'd have the political will to really do something and pay for what needs to be paid for.

There's going to need to be sacrifices. We're going to have to revisit taxes. Everyone needs to kick in. Rich folks like me need to pay.

D.W.: What inspires your writing? Has the homeless issue inspired you at all?

S.G.: It definitely has. One of our biggest songs of all time is called "Even Flow," and it's a story about us when we were writing songs up in (Seattle's) Belltown in 1989 and we used to see this guy every day. I think it does influence us.

I'm a tinkerer. I love picking on my guitar. I'm not a trained musician, so I'm still doing the same thing I was doing in high school –

D.W.: You're not a trained musician? And you're in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame?

S.G.: Ha! Yeah, I'm the luckiest guy in rock, I'm telling you. I can play our songs and I can work things out. But it comes from tinkering. It comes from picking something up in high school when your friends are like, "you gotta be in a punk rock band because that's how good things happen" in 1982, 1983. All my friends were getting into rock and heavy metal and the joy was only playing a few chords and being really loud and not really listening to what anyone else said. And that ... that was the first thing that really inspired me.

Hanna Brooks Olsen, Real Change Interim editor: As you're doing all of this work on homelessness, you're moving in the world of artists and people with means ... does it come up? Do you talk to people about it? How do you approach that topic?

S.G.: I think us doing this show gives me the opportunity. They hear about it, they ask me about it. That's the easiest way. But I also just think that ... I hope that there are some ideas that come from these shows. Things that follow that allow Seattle to take one more step toward being real with what we need to do. (Pearl Jam) isn't going to solve anything, but we're going to add additional pressure. And eventually pressure builds up and things can change.

Courtesy of Real Change News, Street Roots' sister paper in Seattle.