



PHOTO BY DREW AMATO

# DeVon Pouncey

Street Roots' new vendor program coordinator emphasizes communication in challenging role

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STAFF WRITER

There is anticipation in the early morning air. Vendors gather on the sidewalk, looking up and down Davis Street for the delivery truck that will bring the latest edition of Street Roots. Inside, old and new friends unload their bundles and catch up around the tables while pot after pot of coffee streams through the well-worn machine.

Another Friday morning is in full swing in the Street Roots' vendor office.

DeVon Pouncey helps hold down the front desk, greeting each vendor by name with a heartfelt smile and a booming voice. Since his arrival in July, there's a different vibe around the vendor office, the music, for starters. Pouncey doubles as a DJ on the weekends, and he has a wealth of excellent music at his fingertips. He is related, on his mother's side, to the Family Stone of Sly and the Family Stone fame, a pivotal funk, soul and rock band from the 1970's.

DeVon was born in Berkeley, Calif., and grew up in the Bay area. He was a three-sport athlete, playing baseball, football and basketball. "Growing up I had the privilege of traveling all over the country playing high-level sports. I narrowed it down in high school to basketball, I just love the game."

After high school, Pouncey attended Diablo Valley Junior College in Concord, Calif., and then transferred to Pacific University in Forest Grove to play basketball. It was there he honed in on the intersecting passions that led him straight to Street Roots: activism, media and social service.

It was the advice of a college academic advisor who put him on the right track and

told him to do something he wanted to do. "I knew I liked to talk and communicate with people, so I ended up majoring in general media."

Pouncey soon became involved with the campus radio station and started a Sunday hip hop show called "Vibin' with Pouncey."

As graduation neared, Pouncey needed an internship to complete his requirements, and he landed a coveted position with John Canzano, lead sports columnist for The Oregonian and one of the most prominent sports media personalities in the nation. "Canzano and I ended up being very close that summer," he said. Pouncey completed his Bachelor of Arts in General Media and walked the stage to receive his diploma in May of 2017. A week later, Canzano helped set him up as a cohost on a local sports radio show.

As he worked to complete his degree, Pouncey was increasingly drawn towards another of his life's passion – social work. He started working at The Albertina Kerr Center as a life enrichment specialist. The Albertina Kerr Center is a celebrated Oregon nonprofit organization that provides services for children, adults and families with mental health challenges and developmental disabilities. DeVon was assigned to a residential group home for teenage boys. "I still work there," he said. "I make sure they are fed and taken care of, they need to be watched 24 hours a day."

In March 2017, Pouncey launched a podcast called "Wake Up and Win with DeVon Pouncey."

"I am still doing it to this day," he said. "The podcast focuses on the intersectionality of sports, politics and urban and pop culture," he said.

"My podcast just got picked up by a network here in Portland," he said.

Pouncey also expanded his media interests and began freelancing for Street Roots in early 2018. His first cover story was an interview with former NBA star Eton Thomas on the intersection between athletes and politics.

Joining the staff as the vendor program coordinator is "a perfect match," Pouncey said.

"I could be in a newsroom and also work with the social skills I have experience with," he said.

Since going weekly at the start of 2015, Street Roots' vendor team has doubled, with approximately 160 regular weekly vendors selling the paper. Pouncey's position marks the first full-time expansion to vendor staff – bringing the number to two. The Street Roots vendor office is open 365 days a year.

So, what's it like, working at Street Roots?

"It has exceeded my expectations on a lot of levels," Pouncey said. "Getting to know the vendors I think has been one of the most joyous parts of working here. It's been crazy, just kind of seeing the family-type atmosphere that's here at Street Roots, that definitely caught me by surprise.

"I've never really been around a homeless community," he continued. "I expected it to be everyone in it for themselves because they are living a tough life out on the streets. I came into it thinking I would be dealing with individuals case by case, survival of the fittest in a dog-eat-dog type of environment, but it's really not like that at all.

"A lot of these vendors are family. They stay in these communities together, just like any type of family. The family atmosphere just blew me away. There are people trying to survive in what can be a harsh environment, but here it is more loving and caring and compassionate, even with the turmoil they go through day to day. People will literally give you the shirt off their back."

But there are hard parts of the job, too, Pouncey said.

"This is a place where (people) feel safe, but the reality is they are dealing with traumatizing situations out there, and sometimes they bring that into the vendor space," Pouncey said. "It's not intentional, but it's the reality. Usually you can have a fun and vibrant relationship with them, but sometimes they've been dealing with something super traumatizing outside of the space. So it's definitely tough to try and balance when it's time to laugh and smile, and when it's time to try to emotionally connect with these vendors who are dealing with something I don't have a clue about."

It's also been a particularly challenging year for the vendor team, with the deaths of numerous vendors from many causes.

"Since I've been here there's been a lot of deaths. I got acclimated to that real quick. Most people don't have to do that in their job. That part is definitely hard too, knowing this community just lost one of their soldiers, their friend, their family they see day to day. It comes with the territory.

"This job has grown to be more than I could have ever imagined. It has enhanced everything about my life, my interactions with people, my care for people. It's crazy how much I refer to things I see and learn and deal with here at Street Roots."