



Photo by Todd Cooper

From Pizza To Protest

ERIC JACKSON CAME TO ADVOCATE FOR EUGENE'S UNHOUSED *By Donald Morrison*

Six years ago, Eric Jackson was a successful East Coast businessman living in New Jersey. He had a wife and two kids and had owned several pizza shops throughout the '90s and early 2000s.

This was before he decided to leave everything behind in 2014 — from family and friends, to financial security — to come and live in a tent on the streets of Eugene and incur upward of \$12,000 in fines in less than three years.

Jackson, 51, says he came to Eugene for one purpose: to make a lasting difference in the homeless community, by any means necessary.

After arriving, Jackson became one of Eugene's most active homeless advocates, leading public demonstrations and protest camps around the city. His continued refusal to move his camps in the face of exorbitant fines is meant to bring attention to the absence of realistic alternative housing in Lane County. The argument he makes is that if the city can't provide shelter for its homeless, then it can't fine the homeless for sleeping outside. His argument is not unlike the one made in *Martin v. the City of Boise*, in which the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that it's unconstitutional to prevent people from sleeping in public spaces without offering a viable alternative.

Jackson's presence has made such a stir that in March 2020, Eugene police Chief Chris Skinner blamed the large increase in prohibited camping tickets between 2018 and 2019 on Jackson and his camps alone.

His camps thrust forward a community-wide conversation surrounding Eugene's homeless and their lack of adequate housing and resources. After five years living in tents, tickets, lawsuits and even some time in jail, Jackson is still pushing for change and local governments are slowly making changes.

The Entrepreneur

If you've lived in Eugene for any length of time since 2018, you've probably seen Jackson around, either on the streets or in the news. He's got understated dreads,

constantly reeks of marijuana, if he can help it, and usually travels by bike.

A simple "hello" can easily turn into a 20 minute conversation. He talks quickly and with confidence, and he's always smoking, quick to offer a drag to anybody within earshot. You might think you were being hustled if he weren't so charitable.

Jackson was born and raised in New Jersey, where in 1987 he opened Echo Pizza & Wings in Echelon. In 1994 he sold it for the first time.

"I sold it to an attorney," Jackson says. "Because I had my second kid on the way. I had 13 drivers on the road on a Friday night. I was like, 'If they bump into one little kid in the neighborhood, I'm done.' There's no insurance that could cover that."

Jackson has two kids, Max Jackson and Jake Jackson. They both spent most of their time growing up with their mom in Florida, although they'd visit their father in New Jersey when they could. Max even moved in with Eric Jackson during his high school years.

"There's definitely pictures of me as a kid while I was there throughout my whole childhood," Max says. "As long as I can remember, my dad has been an entrepreneur."

In 2012, Max Jackson was just beginning a career as a photographer. He had taken some photos during The Color Run, a popular paint-themed 5k race, and soon discovered that The Color Run was using one of his photos illegally.

Max, still a college student at the time, was originally offered \$5,000 to settle, which his stepdad had urged him to take. Later, The Color Run sued him over the issue. Having always wanted to be a lawyer, Max felt confident he could fight his own case, with the help of his father, Eric.

"I made a GoFundMe and it went viral overnight and then we settled," Jackson says of the legal battle. "We settled within 36 hours of it going viral."

Max Jackson says that his decision to be a photographer was one of the biggest reasons his father decided to leave New Jersey.

"Once I told him that I wasn't going to be a lawyer, he

no longer needed to stay in New Jersey for me to maybe go to Rutgers with in-state tuition; he decided he wanted to go live somewhere where he couldn't go to jail for having a joint in his pocket."

Eric Jackson says that people who knew him as a pizza shop owner in New Jersey are surprised with the direction his life took in Eugene. He's almost a completely different person externally. He says people from his high school reached out via Facebook after somebody stumbled upon his face in an article about homelessness in Eugene.

"I told them that I looked at the 1,500 homeless in Eugene and said, 'That's the size of our graduating high school class,'" Jackson says. "How could they not house these people? It's fucking ridiculous."

There were 1,642 unhooused people in Lane County in 2018, around the time Jackson got to Eugene, according to data from that year's Point In Time survey. In October 2021 there were 3,450 unhooused people in the county, as per the homeless-by-name list, which uses data already tracked from the Homeless Management Information System.

The King of Stoner Hill

Before Jackson began his protest camps in Eugene, he had spent some time in Denver, Colorado, some of it at Commons Park — at the time nicknamed "Stoner Hill."

The park had become popular among smokers, grifters, hippies and the homeless after recreational marijuana was legalized in 2014. People came from all over to inhale America's first legal pot; one of those people was Jackson, who had recently been arrested in his home state of New Jersey for smoking a joint.

"I'm not getting handcuffed to a fucking bench again by a 26-year-old punk that thinks it's cool because I have a joint in my pocket," Jackson says. "I mean he had no business going in my pocket to begin with."

Jackson felt a sense of community at Stoner Hill and began advocating for the rights of his fellow campers when police would get called. It was his first taste of the