

WeHome, Episode 2 Transcript:
Memory Keepers

ERICA CICCARONE: “There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you,” writes Zora Neale Hurston in her memoir *Dust Tracks On the Road*. Today on WeHome, we’ll hear from two people who know what that means first-hand.

FRANK WHITMORE: People say what they want to about prison. Prison will do one of two things: it will either break a man or preserve you. I sit and wonder about that. It broke me, but yet on the other side of the coin, it preserved me.

EC: WeHome is a podcast about the Wedgewood-Houston and Chestnut Hill neighborhoods in Nashville, Tennessee. We get strangers talking. Each episode, two community members tour each other’s lives and tell each other stories. I’m Erica Ciccarone. Today’s episode is called Memory Keepers.

But first, an update: On episode one, you heard from a guy named Bill Perkins who started South Nashville Action People in the late seventies with three of his neighbors. Although Bill is an artist and art collector, he had never been to the monthly neighborhood art crawl. Anna Zeitlin, gallery manager of Zeitgeist, interviewed Bill for WeHome, and the next month, he came out to the crawl. Before I knew it, he was delivering homemade jam to other galleries in the neighborhood.

EC: What do you love about Wedgewood-Houston?

CHORUS OF VOICES:

I like it when I see people who see a need and are willing to go out and actively fill in those gaps. I like movement. I love the fact that we’re growing because I like seeing areas that we’re in...cleaning it up and making it work.

Even in the late ’90s, this was already an art destination for people that were following the contemporary art scene that was happening locally in Nashville.

I think the thing that I’m most enamored with is the quilt of opportunity that shines through in the community provides the opportunity for a lot of different neighbors.

I love that everything’s so close to the epicenter of the city and that there’s an actual feeling of a neighborhood.

Love being part of a neighborhood that is constantly changing, constantly growing, real easy to meet people.

I really appreciate the opportunity to reach out to people who are in need or reach out to people who might need a new friend.

I love Wedgewood-Houston's dedication to its uniqueness and its identity. This neighborhood knows who it is and wants to ensure that continues while welcoming lots of new people in. And then I also love Fort Negley Park. It's a beautiful historic site and explains so much about how this part of town go to be what it is.

EC: We're going to head to the northeast of the neighborhood to a nonprofit called abrasiveMedia. It runs out of Houston Station, an historic factory structure that was built in the late 19th century. It's been fully restored to house a whole menagerie of businesses: artist studios, bars, co-working spaces, boutiques—even a members-only coffee club—and they rent the ballroom out for wedding receptions. It still features thick, exposed timber beams, original bricks, and hardwood floors.

AUDRA ALMOND-HARVEY: My name is Audra Almond-Harvey. I'm the executive director of abrasiveMedia, and we're an arts organization that's actually pretty close by. We do a lot of work to help artists of all kinds in various stages of their careers, helping them to grow as an artist and connect to their community.

EC: Audra and her partner Justin founded abrasiveMedia 2004. Back then, it was events-driven, without a physical location to act as a hub. But its mission from the start was to support artists and create opportunities for creative people of all stripes. In 2013, they moved into Houston Station. Their three-thousand square foot space hosts aerial dancers and martial artists, painters and writers, theatrical productions and artist residencies.

AAH: So, above everything I've always been a storyteller. I was dancing professionally for a while, and I grew up in theater, so I did a lot with that. I'm a graphic designer for the art that pays the bills. But in the middle of that, I have always been a storyteller, and one of the things that was impressed on me very, very young was that the first step in being a storyteller is to listen, so listening is a large part of my creative process. I don't really walk into a project or a program with a whole lot of preconceived ideas about where things are going to end. I really like being able to kind of take stock of the people involved and the resources that we have and the limitations we have and see what can grow out of it.

I am from rural Louisiana, so everyone was a cousin or an uncle or an auntie. It was just a family gathering. These things happen all the time. You go over to someone's house. You pack far more people than should ever be in that size of a building by any measure. And then you make a lot of food and you all hang out, and then we'd tell stories.

This one time, I remember very vividly. There was an empty chair and I was really tired. You know, I probably skipped a nap because I was really excited and I was also really stubborn. And

so I decided I was going to climb up in this chair and have a rest. It was this beautiful old wooden rocking chair. I was sitting in the chair and looking at the grains of the wood, and I remember stroking my hand along the armrest. One of my relatives came over, and he told me that I couldn't sit in that chair, and I remember that feeling of affront. I was like, "But it was an empty chair. Of course I can sit in that chair. I'm tired." And he said, "Well that isn't your chair. That's her chair."

And he pointed at this woman that—again, I was like three or four—in my mind she was like 400 years old. She was old looking. She was being led over all hunched over to the chair and she sat in the chair. And he said, "This is her chair."

I said, "Well when do I get to have a chair?" He said, "When you can listen as well as she can listen. Then you get a chair."

Later on, she let me climb up in her lap when we were in the storytelling part of the evening, and I remember falling asleep in her arms, and I had this whole thought process that I decided she was magic, and she was clearly a witch, and I wanted to be just like her. Because she didn't tell the loudest jokes, she didn't tell the longest stories, she wasn't the most engaging speaker. But when she responded to everyone's stories, you could see them light up. If a kid made her light up, that was this amazing experience. And I decided that that was the kind of witch I wanted to be at the age of four.

EC: Now I'm going to take you south on Rains Avenue to another nonprofit that doesn't have a lot in common with the arts district—at least not on the surface. But that story that Audra told me really got me thinking about the practice of telling stories—not just writing them or reading them, both of which I do a lot of. But telling stories. Putting them out in the world with your own voice.

We paired Audra with a neighborhood resident who is associated with Tennessee Prison Outreach Ministry.

FRANK WHITMORE: I don't know my name. [laughs] My name is Frank Whitmore.

AAH: Can you tell us a little bit about the Tennessee Prison Outreach Ministry that you're connected to? How did you connect to them, and then if you can tell me what they do?

FW: OK. TPOM. Tennessee Prison Outreach Ministry. I got involved through the chapel at Riverbend. I was at no end. I didn't know what else to do. I just asked for help. The chaplain and I got talking and he put me with a volunteer from TPOM. We got to discussing the program, the

re-entry center, help ex-felons, help guys coming out of jails, they even help children and families that are incarcerated, either the mother, the father, whomever. It intrigued my curiosity. I was like, "How they doing that?" You sit and think about it. How is this possible?

EC: It's possible because TPOM has been working in our state's jails and prisons for five decades, growing the organization from a grassroots level. Today, the ministry has programming in nine state prisons and 25 county jails. They offer life skills classes in parenting, anger management, and substance abuse; they teach career and vocational training and financial literacy; and they provide mentors to men and women who are preparing to end their incarceration terms and come home.

The ministry opened its re-entry center on Rains Avenue in 2008. They work with 300 employers across the state to help people post-release to apply for jobs. And they keep up with them for a year to check in and see how things are going. They also offer a variety of youth programs for kids with incarcerated parents. In June, they opened a sixteen-bed transitional house on Rains Ave, where Frank lives. It is gorgeous with high ceilings, sinking couches, a big front porch, and a roomy kitchen. Frank and Audra will take it from here.

FW: You need to know a little more about me, in a sense. This will probably sting, OK? I'm just gonna be honest about it. Had a life at 20-year old. Had everything that I wanted paid for. Done cocaine and heroin one time. Four days. So-called friend was not a friend, he was a fool. Killed a man. He signed papers stating that Frank didn't have nothing to do with it. He manned up as we called it, but he admitted it. They sought the death penalty after us. That scared him. Scared his lawyer. His lawyer had never fought a capital offense in this life and talked my charge partner into pleading guilty to first degree murder charge. When he pled guilty, it annulled everything that he signed to help me out of my murder charge. Therefore, my lawyer had no time to re-direct his offense, so therefore, when I walked in front of twelve people and the judge, I was the killer. They would not let any of his testimony or statements come out. It was sequestered. I was convicted in 1991 for first degree murder.

I didn't kill nobody. I was just blown away.

I lost everything. I lost seven acres of land, home, cars, motorcycles. I lost everything I had trying to get a lawyer to push the issue. There was no issue. You can't get it. That's basically what I kept hearing. I fought for 17 years for somebody, an authority, to acknowledge that paper existed. I know it did. My lawyer knew it did. And a couple family members knew of it. It was just black. That part of my life is...kind of in a sense what made me what I am now. I was a fool.

They started drug testing about '96, '97. They started zero tolerance drugs in prison. In April of '98, April the 1st, I'll never forget it. I thought the officer was playing jokes with me. This was a step that changed me. They come to tell me they wanted me in the gym. I was like, "OK." Everybody knew when you got called to the gym or the visitation gallery, it was a drug test. I was like, "It's April 1st. You're playin'. Quit playin'." He said, "Frank, I'm not playing." I was like, "OK. Seriously?" He said, "Yeah. For real." So he went on, and I got up, got my clothes on, got my blues as we call 'em. I went to the gym. Sure enough, they was. I was like, "Oh man." And I'd been getting high. It was party time, party central. I didn't pick up no new drug habits. I stayed with my marijuana. That was the biggest thing, I'd smoke. He said, "Frank, we're gonna have to cap this up and send it to the lab because you're hot, you're dirty."

I was up there, rippin' and runnin'. I hadn't stopped smoking weed. I'd just done ten days in the hole. I was wanting to get high again. Smoke a marijuana cigarette and relax. Went to the yard. They want to shake everybody down in the yard 'cause they had an altercation, blah blah blah. Just the way security ran. And Frank Whitmore gets pulled over, and Frank Whitmore's got a 20 sack of marijuana in his pocket. I wrestled two officers to the ground. High. Didn't know where I was at. We wrestled three, four, five minutes. Seemed like an hour. Then I had one officer finally just...He knew me well enough that he thought he could just rationally talk to me and bring sense back to me.

He told me, "Frank, what you got in your pocket?" I told him, "My hand," which I had my hand in my pocket. I'm a jokester in some sense. He said, "What's in your hand." I said, "I can't tell you." He said, "You're gonna go to the hole. You not only got on assault on staff, you got two. What's you got in your hand?" I said, "I got a 20 sack of marijuana in my pocket." He said, "All this over a 20 sack of weed."

I gave him my dope. I went on back to the house expecting for them to come lock me up. They called me back to the captain's office. Captain C's sitting there. He told me, he said, "What's going on." I looked at him, I said, "Captain. Tripped out." He said, "Oh yeah." It happened so quick that I really didn't process what he was telling me. "I'm gonna drop these assault charges, but I'm gonna charge you with possession. You need to get help. You need to stop."

After I got my discipline hearing, I went to the hole. I don't 20 days in the hole this time. I come out, I had a whole new plan. Frank's gonna get help. So I started asking the drug counselor, and she recommended me take anger management. That's a good skill to learn. There's a lot of people that need to evaluate their anger.

AAH: Oh yeah. I really feel like anger management training should be management training should be mandatory for all Americans. [laughs]

FW: Exactly. Exactly. [laughs] The instructor had some health issues. We were right in the middle of the program, and they shut the program down on us. I kept going to the drug counselor. To the drug counselor. To the drug counselor. "No Frank. Your parole date is 2023. This is 1999." A year went by I was asking for help and wasn't getting any kind of response. I'm thinking, "Don't you remember what happened June the 16th going to the ball field? I do. I lived it." And they're like, "Well I ain't got time to deal with you." And I'm like, "OK."

I kind of walked around lost. Wanting to get high but not getting high. I had a guitar, and it was collecting dust. I had a guy to assist me. He told me, "Frank, get your guitar and come to the ball field." I said, "Man I can't play with y'all." They'd been playing 30, 40 years. It was older people. And he's like, "Man, go get your guitar. Come to the ball field." So I went to the ball field, and I had a blast. I had more fun hanging out with the squares, as they're called, than the rounds. I didn't have to be high to have fun. Joke and laugh. It was like, man what are y'all on? Prayin' before y'all get to playin'. Prayin' when y'all get done when they call the yard. What are y'all on? He said, "Man, it's God."

I said, "God? Humph." It put a different perspective, put something that intrigued my curiosity. I knew God when I was younger because I went to a private Christian school until the sixth grade. I understood it. Was baptized. I learned about Jesus, but yet I left him back there at that crossroads. And I'm looking at all the devastation that I've done to my life, so I really got to paying attention and asking more questions. One guy, he's gone on home now, Art Mays. He told me, "Come go to church with me. Come go to church with me." Every time I seen him, it's, "Come go to church with me." I tried to come up with some excuse. Well, I went to church. I was a backseat baptist. As soon as the service is over, I was first one out the door.

Well, I got to playing my guitar more, got better. More practice, the better you become. Art told me, "Bring your guitar to church." I was like, "OK..." He said, "No seriously. I'm gonna bring mine. We'll get up there and play. Let the guys sing. We'll play the music with 'em."

I took my guitar over there, and it wasn't Frank playing. I never played that good. I always missed the beat, missed the music, missed the note and had to stop and then catch back up. No, I played right on just like I'd been playing for 80 years, it seemed like. I knew everything that was going on with the song, and I was like, Wow. I didn't say nothin' to nobody until I got home to my unit, to my living quarters. I really paid attention. I seen what God was doing in my life, so I re-dedicated my life back to him.

At first, it wasn't...I still wanted to hang out around the poker games. I still wanted to play the parlay tickets. I still wanting to gamble. Do the hustling, as they called it. It was a hustle. It was so many years of doing it to survive.

To say my heart would hurt. People don't understand what God can really do. I was going to church, and I sit there. I play, and I listen to the scriptures that he would read. I'd listen to the messages. And I'd read 'em when I got back home just to see if I could heard what he was actually reading and preaching on. God started convincing my heart. I gave it all to him. I walked away from selling drugs, making my money, hanging around the poker game. I walked away from all of it.

It stings to hear your dad tell you that in a sense he's kind of glad you're in prison, instead of in the graveyard. At least he can come see you instead of putting flowers on your grave. It took me some years to understand what he was saying. I heard my mama tell me about my daddy's health deteriorating. He's slipping. He's not remembering things. But I couldn't hear it on the phone. I didn't see it when they'd come to visit me. By summer 2010, I called home, was talking to daddy about the races—he's a big race car fan—just asking questions. "What's going on with the races, daddy?" We didn't have cable, so I didn't get to see many. Daddy was telling me, and he stopped and got real quiet. I said, "You still there?" He told me, he said, "Who'd you say this was?" I lost it. Just as soon as he said that, Mama was on the other end of the line. I was just floored.

I knew when I gave my life back to God about six months prior to that, that's where I'm gonna be. I wasn't backing up; I wasn't changing my mind no more. I had to ask the chaplain for help. Like I said, my mother and father were getting elderly and not able to do a lot of traveling. He told me, "I got something that's interesting for you." He brought paperwork on TPOM, on the re-entry program. From what I'd gathered through the paperwork, they had leased houses for a transitional home for guys getting out of prison and jails. It intrigued my curiosity. I'm like you. What are they really doing? The more I got involved with the mentoring program, the guys coming from their home and their family coming in talking to me kind of spiritually guiding me and becoming a real friend, like the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, but it had God was the twist. It was more enlightening. The more my mentor would come, the more free I was able to discuss what I wanted to share. Like I say, I've been involved with them since 2014, and it's just been phenomenal of the support. "We've got you. We can help you do this. We can help you do this." It was like, OK. I'm looking at a life sentence. I'm not looking to get out. Other than helping me understand my bible more, helping me understand my Lord more, what are you really offering?

I really started paying attention about the last part of '15. That God was working through the program to orchestrate what he wanted me to do. I sit back and I analyze TPOM. Tennessee

Prison Outreach Ministry. When I really got involved was because I'd watched guys get out and turn successful going through the four day re-entry center. They help you get a job, they help you write resumes, they keep you on the spiritual path. That's free choice. All the programs have that Christianity twist that really keeps you grounded. I'm so grateful that I'm signed in on them. I graduate the 8th of next month, and I've already assigned for an additional two months. They built a beautiful house. They've got CR, the Celebrate Recovery program, is phenomenal. All the volunteers are so loving and caring. It seems like every time they touch anybody's life, family, kids, anything around them, it's so loving and caring. They feed us. It's a beautiful place.

AHH: There's a lot of contrast between being in prison and being out of prison. There's also contrast between growing up in a rural community and then being in a place like Nashville. How is it for you being here? What is your Nashville experience like?

FW: You know, I've not taken the time to really live me, do me, per se. I've done more to help other people. I guess that's part of the program. I'm doing everything on point for the TPOM program. I'm using all the access, all the hands. I'm touching everything that's offered to me to assure my success through this program. I really just, to say what I think about Nashville, it's a beautiful city. But I haven't had time to take it in on myself. I've been carrying for everyone else, trying to help everyone else instead of helping myself. That's a little overwhelming because most of the time it'd be about me. I wasn't selfish, but it was about me. If you helped me, I'd help you. It's a beautiful city. I'm now learning it. I've been out of work just this last week just to process, to get ready to go home last weekend. A lot of caring people. A lot of sad things, when you pull up to a red light and see someone standing there begging for money because they don't have a job, don't have a home, that's kind of touching.

AHH: I feel like a lot of times when you're reading in the news about issues of inequality, be they homelessness or affordable housing, it seems like a lot of those stories are coming from people who have enough privilege that that's a really distant struggle for them. I'm curious...what is your perspective on that? If you were gonna say, "Here's some thing that we need to focus on even in this particular neighborhood in terms of connecting to people in a better way..." What would you say?

FW: Be more caring and understanding. That's the way I was brought up. I'm very family-oriented, but yet I care for my neighbor. Love they brother.

AHH: That's awesome. I really love that. So you were talking about how you graduate the program soon and are going to stay on a couple more months. What does life post the program look like?

FW: Positive. Successful. I want to become more involved in it as a volunteer. I'm not saying I would like to go back to prisons, but to outreach to the community to say, "This works. Invest a little time to come and listen." I want to stay tight with the program Sunday nights with the church service. Thursday night with the Celebrate Recovery and to even come back to the program to be a positive role model and a mentor to some of those guys. I mean just positively staying in the program itself to help out. They've helped me.

AHH: I think that's really important. That's one thing my parents talked to me a lot about as a kid. We were really poor. But we always volunteered in the places that served the poor. They always really strove to motivate me to look at how I can give no matter how little I have. That definitely motivates a lot of what I do now working in our arts organization. We don't have a lot. We're not huge. But I have more than others have still, and so I always have an opportunity to give.

FW: I'm going to put the buggy in front of the horse in a sense, but hear me out when I say this. I'm gonna get with Mr. Snow next week and tell him how I feel this went. You can give Ms. Erica some feedback and get back in touch with me. I'm gonna ask him if I can further this in as far as bringing the community to gather 'round the ministry just to not to say give us a foot in the door, but let people learn a little about what's going on in our community and for the outreach. I'm gonna get with him to see what his input will be as well.

AHH: That would be amazing.

FW: Kind of being the spokesman, per se.

AHH: Well, one thing that we have been talking about doing and we're just beginning to investigate because we're wanting to bring in some funding so we can really fully support a program like this. One of the things we're talking about is that we have a venue that we've created. We have programs and processes that we've created. We have relationships that we have built, and what it look like to really focus on storytelling, which is my passion anyway. It's what I love to do, and I love to listen to other people's stories. I feel like there's a lot of people in our city who maybe feel like Nashville moves a little too fast for them to be able to have a voice in most of the conversations that are happening. That's the question we're asking ourselves right now. What can we create to create a pipeline for storytellers from all walks of life and all backgrounds? What it would be like a gathering place for that? It's what led us to develop our own podcast. I think what you're talking about in terms of outreach and wanting to connect people to a larger story...I think that would be a really interesting connection.

FW: You said something there that really made me think about other people thinking Nashville's too fast for them. I was one of them. When I first got out, I walked down here to the store and it was like, everything was just moving so quick. I was like, hurry up and go to the store, hurry up and get back to my little safe spot, and then I got thinking. Where's everybody going so fast? You go from A to B, but yet when I really pay attention, it's part of life. Not to say I was stagnated, but yet, I was in a world that was inside of a world. The world that I was involved with was rotating slowly. The world outside was steadily growing. When you said that about the people, some of them are willing to share their stories and some would like to share their stories, it's kind of double bladed there...I see that. And I see that Nashville is moving too fast at times. But I catch myself wanting to get in the fast lane and have to step back and pump the brakes and take a deep breath, and I see that everything is actually moving at a normal pace. It's just the way you react to that pace.

AHH: I absolutely agree with that. I used to move a lot faster, and I developed a disability which literally forced me to slow down. It's definitely affected the way that I see even the passage of time. It's affected how much I feel like should be shoved into one day. That self-reflection that you've been building, that taking stock of a moment, that has really been the only thing that's kept me going—that ability to stop and think about what just happened. So you are on a really great path for your future ambition and future goals.

FW: Thank you.

AHH: You're welcome.

FW: I'm just trying to stay positive. Trying to stay busy and trying to stay positive. Now, I'm gonna ask some serious questions about you. I heard you was ministry.

AHH: I am. I'm an ordained pastor.

FW: How did you come into that?

AHH: So that's a little bit of a story. I'm going to try to think of the best way to tell it. I'm a pastor's daughter. I have to start there. I grew up in the church. All of my memories of my dad for the most part--

FW: Was at a pulpit.

AHH: Behind the pulpit. He was also a really angry person. He had experienced a lot of abuse. We were from really poor folk. My dad's people were sharecroppers. We were really, really poor. His childhood was far worse.

He had a lot of anger, and he took his anger out on me and my mom. And then he passed when I was 11. Sometimes when someone is about to die--I've lost a lot of relatives, so I've seen the several times--they have a couple of days that are really good right before the end. He hit that time. He hit some days that were really good. He had me come into his room, and he took time for the very first time in my memory of him, and he told me why he was the way he was. He told me why he was angry. All he had wanted was more for me, but he didn't have it in him to get any further with his anger.

That just really took me on a very circuitous spiritual journey, which I'm not going to outline in detail because I have no way to summarize this for a podcast. It was not a straight line, we'll say. And in that, because I always ended up being in some aspect of leadership. I always ended up taking care of other people. Because of that, a lot of times I got to see the uglier sides of a lot of churches. And that made me really cynical for a long time. I had some conversations with a friend of mine who was a pastor way back in the early 2000s, and he was regularly encouraging me to do more in terms of ministering to people. I was not having it because I had seen so many pastors wound people. My father was a pastor, and he literally wounded me. So my friend made a point that I hadn't ever considered before. He was like, "Have you thought about what it would mean, especially to other girls, other women who have gone through abuse, other women who have experienced something that you've experienced...have you thought about what it would mean to them for you to be here and for you to have the voice that you have? To serve people from that place?"

I really hadn't because I hadn't thought that I had anything really of value. I very much disparaged myself because that's what my parents taught me to do. Thinking of it that way, that I know a lot of people who have left the church because of a lot of the controversies that are happening right now, and I totally understand where you're coming from because I wanted to as well. But at the same time, there are a lot of really amazing opportunities that I have to get to tell my story, to hear other people's stories, and just to be a person who, I don't care about your background, I don't care about all the superficial trappings of life...I don't care about any of that.

When people are struggling through things like their identity and the things they've experienced with their parents, there is something really beautiful to be like, "I totally understand why everyone is leaving, but I'm staying for you. I'm not here for any other reason except for the people who need somebody who is kind of on the inside to be the person to say, 'You are valuable, and you are important, and you are essential.'" And to say that from the position of

being in a church because most pastors are not speaking that message very loudly right now. It's a lot about, "You are horrible because of fill-in-the-blank." So that's really my journey, if that answers your question.

FW: Have you shared your story with someone and watched them prosper off of something you've shared with them?

AHH: Oh yeah.

FW: How did that make you feel?

AHH: It makes you feel like everything had a meaning. It's not necessarily that I feel like that retroactively fixes anything I experienced at the time, but it...I can go through a lot if I believe it can help even one person.

FW: I have watched and ministered and shared my story to some of the younger guys. I'm 47-years old. I have no kids. I envy these younger fellas that have children. They're in prison. TPOM helps families with fathers, mothers, daughter, brothers, sisters in prison. It helps not only the family but the children to cope.

AHH: It's really an amazing program. I didn't know all the comprehensive background. So they started relationship building with you well before you got out.

FW: Yes.

AHH: Nobody does these things. It just makes me happy when people are thorough.

FW: They did not miss a mark. With me ministering and sharing part of my story with some of these guys that have kids. They're young, they're 25-ish to 30-ish. They still have a life ahead of them, but yet, they've been in prison. Their child only knows them in a visitation gallery, behind the glass in jail. Not to try to get in their business; I don't care what they're in there for. My job is to make sure that I do what God wants me to do to minister—share my story.

EC: TPOM helped Frank get a job as soon as he got home. He works on maintenance in an apartment complex in northern Nashville. He likes it—he did maintenance work all throughout his sentence and is good at it. He didn't say so, but I suspect that there's nothing that Frank can't fix. On the weekends, he spends time with his parents and goes to church. Residents can live—and pay rent—in the transitional house for six months. Soon, Frank will be out on his own.

The challenges of re-integrating into the world after 25 years are, to me, unimaginable. But I'm not worried Frank.

I caught up with Audra after their interview to ask her what she learned.

EC: You're both spiritual and religious in that you're involved with organized religion, but you seem to have some differences. I was wondering just what you made of that.

AHH: I had a whole process in the back of my head about that actually during the conversation. I was just talking with a friend the other day about this idea that our own personal experiences very directly inform how we interpret even a shared experience. We can all have the same information that we're working from, but the backgrounds that we have are really going to affect our interpretation. One of the things that I very much strongly believe is I don't believe God is punitive, like I don't believe that God needs to punish us. Life is hard enough. A lot of people disagree with me, but I also introduce myself as my church's favorite heretic because I might be a heretic, and I'm really fine with that, and they love me anyway.

But that's gonna be largely informed partially by our experiences. He came through a completely unjust conviction into the prison system, so that's his frame of reference. I have had challenges in my life, but they're coming from a very different place. I have been at the mercy of other people's decisions very frequently as well, but I lived a different reality as the ramifications.

My favorite thing about getting to listen to people's stories that there's so many layers to every person, right? You can hear someone talk, and you can hear the words that they use. Especially because I grew up in the church, I know based on certain key phrases, I generally have an idea of what that person believes, but there's so many layers beyond that once you actually start talking to a person and see them as an individual more than the collection of the sum of their experiences or situations or whatever.

EC: Do you think that meeting Frank and learning about TPOM might change the way that you think about or interact with this neighborhood.

AHH: Absolutely. I've had several conversations with one of my board members with abrasiveMedia about the idea of what more should we be doing in our neighborhood. He's really been challenging me to think beyond, "We're a small organization, so how much can we really accomplish?" He's really challenging me to think, "Even though we're a small organization, look at what we already have accomplished. Let's see what differences we can make."

One of our strengths has always been building relationships with people and then from that connection, figuring out what cool thing that we can make with it. It was interesting when you brought this to me, my plan for this fall was to take time to make connections with people in all the different places in the neighborhood, and just see where that takes us.

I think another thing that really stood out was, I talk to a lot of people who are creative, who are artists. It's always interesting to me the reasons why people create. I feel like I personally just end up working with and running into people who create as a mechanism of survival. It's more than just, this makes me feel alive or this brings me comfort. It is an avenue into a different way of living. That's very much been true for me in my own experiences going from being a very physically strong person to having a disability. Being a creative person is what got me through that.

I heard a lot about that in his story when he was talking about his music and his passion for it, that the connection to the act of creating something in the middle of a really difficult circumstance, obviously, that was just really beautiful.

EC: A big thank you to Audra and Frank for their openness and their exceptional listening skills.

Audra recently launched podcast of her own. It's called The Mixer: Legal to Brew Since 1967, and it's Audra and four of her multi-racial friends rapping about their life experiences, pop culture, current events, nerdism. It's fun and smart. Find it on iTunes and Stitcher and at legaltobrew.com.

WeHome is produced in collaboration with Nashville Metro Planning Department and Seed Space and is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts' Our Town granting program. Tony Youngblood composed our theme and original score. Micheala Intveld-Sutherin designed our logo and built our website. Joseph Bazelais is our community coordinator. Courtney Adair Johnson is our social practice consultant. Carolyn and Brian Jobe are co-directors of Seed Space and our project coordinators.

We record our interviews at Nashville Public Television. Please check out their awesome video series, A Word on Words, where authors talk to authors about all topics literary. Find it at [a word on words dot org](http://a.wordonwords.org).

Finally, Lauren Cierzan illustrates every episode of WeHome. You can view them online at our website wehomepodcast.org and learn more about Audra, Frank, and our team.

Thanks for listening. I'm Erica Ciccarone, and here's how Frank described me.

FW: She's a good little dictator, too. You just direct us how you want this to go.

EC: Next time, we'll hop over to another South Nashville neighborhood to talk to two longtime residents in Chestnut Hill.

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