

## JUST WORDS

### The Stories of Working People In Our Community

#### Episode 53: Robert

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Welcome to Just Words—stories of working people in our community.

Over the past year on this series, we've followed the campaign run by cleaners at Camden Yards, as they've worked to win a raise from their wage of 7 dollars an hour. On September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2007, the Maryland stadium authority voted to give cleaners a living wage of \$11.30 starting next spring—giving the workers a victory they had worked for since 2002. Last March we talked to one of those workers—Robert, a father of three children who spoke about the dehumanizing experience having to clean feces without proper protection, and the stress of trying to provide for his family on just a few hundred dollars a month.

#### What different will this new wage make in his life?

Phew. The difference that would make. Okay, 7 dollars an hour, you can go to McDonalds on 7 an hour. I can go to Applebee's on 11:30. That is the difference. Its more afford. I can go out and take two checks and combine those checks and get at least a one bedroom apartment, where I couldn't do it with 7 an hour. I can go out and take one of my paychecks from one week and go shopping for clothes and take the next one the next week and pay the bills with, whereas I couldn't do that with 7 an hour.

**But as excited as Robert is about the changes this raise will make in his life—he's far more focused on what it will mean for his children.**

11:30 an hour will change the lives of my children because now they can get some of the things they want. Some of the things they see other kids with that I haven't been able to get for them. The first thing that is going to change is that I am going to be able to get them a place of their own. See right now I am traveling between two different places. I am practically, I am functioning homeless. I haven't been able to get established the way I want too because I don't have the income that I need. I have one child with me, two children that is with their mother. I want to bring my children together. 7 an hour, I can't do that, 11.30, I can do that.

**Robert knows his life will change. But he's changed inside, too, over the past couple of years. This victory has transformed him.**

Well at first I just thought that big businesses can do what they want. As long as it doesn't, if I cant see it affecting me it doesn't affect me, I don't care about it. When I got involved I started seeing that even the little man can make a change. As long as you consistent with what you are doing, you can make a change. So its given me a better perspective on the fact that—if you see injustice and you attack it, you can change it. As long as you keep going forward with it. So it built my self esteem up, because I am part of something that has never been done before. And I'm like, woah. Now we up there with the historians here. People can look back and say, it was a small organization that did something humongous. Right here in Baltimore. Unheard of. Right here in Baltimore. Most people walking around the streets think you can't accomplish anything in Baltimore. We did. Things will change. I am very very convinced that things will change in Baltimore. We are already on the path of changing them. It just takes one step at a time. First Camden yards—who knows what's next? Who knows what's next.

**Music: *Working on a Building*, *The Cowboy Junkies*.**

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Through a grant by the Open Society Institute-Baltimore. Visit them on the web at [www.osi-baltimore.org](http://www.osi-baltimore.org)