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Ice cream man brings sweets to the streets

Sjhon Brown's truck offers another view of Hamilton Hill

By Anne Miller

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SCHENECTADY - The little girl with braids had four pennies. The ice cream treat would cost at least \$1.

Sjhon Brown, the ice cream man, told the youngster to keep her money, but she insisted. And how could he deny a little girl who refused to take a handout?

Brown has piloted a Mr. Ding-A-Ling ice cream truck - first through Mont Pleasant, now through Hamilton Hill - for three summers. The windows of his truck offer a different view of this neighborhood that has been labeled among the more dangerous ones in the Capital Region.

Brown's white truck provides a contrast to the boarded up, burned out shells of former homes. While the drug deals happening within feet of the mobile freezer exemplify the bad in the neighborhood, the children - clutching quarters and dollar bills, their eyes the size of those on the "Dora the Explorer" pops - are the good.

"People think that the ice cream business is about making money," Brown said. "That's not my purpose. My purpose is good customer service."

Take the tyke with the braids. Brown had seen her before - her face pressed to the window of her home. One day, Brown parked his truck and knocked on her door. He wanted to know why she and her brother always looked out so longingly but never indulged.

Their mother said she had no money. Brown said that didn't matter. Brown wants to show the children what a dollar means, but he also wants them to see what it means to be treated right.

"I always thought it was important to give (children) a sense of the power of purchase," he said. His most expensive item costs \$3. Most cost \$1 or \$1.50.

Brown's truck is owned by Brian Collis in Latham. He leases 64 trucks to drivers in a 150-mile radius, from Utica to Rutland to Great Barrington. Drivers buy the ice cream from Collis and keep the profits.

"There's a long tradition of selling ice cream on the streets of America," said Anne Cooper Funderburg, an author who's written about the history of ice cream and soda fountains.

The tradition began with ice cream sold from the back of horse-drawn carriages, she said. Then came the Good Humor men of the 1950s and '60s wearing their white uniforms and following a code of conduct. Competition and slimmer profit margins led to Good Humor getting out of that business.

That left room for other entrepreneurs, Funderburg said.

Like Brown.

Brown, 37, wears his hair in thick cornrows. On one recent afternoon, he sported an oversize black Bob Marley T-shirt, cargo shorts and white sneakers. The musky smell of lit incense wafts through his truck. Photographs of his 3-year-old daughter line the space above the windshield. One of her drawings hangs below the stick shift.

Brown, who hails from Harlem, lives in Troy with the child and her mother. He lost his mother and his brother to drinking - his brother to a drunken driver and his mother to liver disease. His strict, maternal grandmother raised him. He figures 90 percent of kids he grew up with are dead or in jail.

He moved to Troy, graduated from Schenectady County Community College, and has completed course work in massage therapy while working on a bachelor's degree at the University at Albany.

From the view of his truck's window, Brown's afternoons unfold like a series of photographs in an album, every stop providing a snapshot of the best and worst of a notorious neighborhood.

On Emmett Street, the area Brown calls the hustler's block, at least four people have been indicted on felony drug charges since February. Earlier this month, someone was robbed there. Last year, at least three shootings happened on the block. And that's just a few of the recent crimes.

As Brown drove, a girl dashed out of a well kept white house. She hopped from foot to foot, leaning away from the truck so she could grab her ice cream and race back home as quickly as possible.

Down the street, Edwin Reyes' family rushed the truck. "You gotta see how hard this man works, dealing with all these kids," Reyes said.

Around the corner is the block Reyes calls home, with the little girl who pays with pennies and the Andersons, who always invite Brown to barbecues.

"If we have a party on this block, he will donate his time and effort. And when I say donate, none of the kids will pay," said Rodney Anderson.

Back on Emmett Street, Brown tried not to see too much. A handful of children approached.

"What's up, little man? What you need?" Brown said. He calls everyone brother or sister, or little man.

"Cry Baby," the boy answered.

"That's how you feel today," Brown joked.

"No," said the serious child.

Nearby, a group of grown men drank 40-ounce beers, a police cruiser idled and a passenger in a green sedan flagged down Brown. He stopped and left his truck for the only time that day, to give the passenger an Oreo bar.

Someday he will stop delivering ice cream. He wants to give massages, which is more lucrative. He wants to finish his college degree, and every day that he drives his truck is another day away from his daughter.

But he isn't in a rush, he said as he turned another corner, sucking on a watermelon pop to keep him going.

"That time will come," he said. "Right now, I was meant to do this."