the village VOICE

Trials and Hot Dog Tribulations in the Street-Vending Trade

By Sarah DiGregorio

published: June 17, 2009

From Bangladesh to Liberty Plaza: Mohammed Ali

Mohammed Ali (no, not that one) is trying to sell hot dogs and be a voice of reason at the same time. "No price list, don't buy," he says to the British couple who are waiting for their two hot dogs at his street cart. The couple looks puzzled. "No price list, don't buy," he repeats, as he pops the hot dogs onto buns and squirts ketchup on top in a practiced, one-handed move. "I don't know what you're saying," the woman says. Ali looks tired. He stares resignedly at his nearest neighbor, a cart halfway down the block that hasn't posted the required price list and is charging $3 for the same hot dogs Ali sells for half that. Ask Ali his feelings on vending, and you'll get an earful about illegal vendors, unpredictable police, and a baroque regulatory system.

The street vending system in New York is incredibly complex. It's regulated by as many as seven different city agencies, and vendors are broken up into different categories, all of which are subject to different rules. The exact positioning of the cart—inches from the curb, from a store door, and more—must all be carefully measured. If a vendor is breaking any of the many rules, he or she is subject to a fine that's probably at least a week's wages, and can be up to $1,000.

But almost everyone agrees that the biggest problem in the vending world is the black market for licenses, resulting from the low limit set by the City Council in 1979. Food

vendors must get a food-handling license, which is available to anyone, but they must also get a food cart license, restricted to 3,100 citywide. There are thousands of names on the waiting list, and only one or two licenses become available every year. There's so much demand for the cart licenses that those who have them can sometimes earn as much renting the licenses out illegally as they would using the permits themselves—a license can go for up to $10,000 for two years. The vast majority of unlicensed vendors just want to make a living and try to follow the rules, but inevitably, a minority don't, which makes things difficult for vendors like Ali.

A bill introduced by Council member Charles Barron, which is currently in front of the Committee for Consumer Affairs, would increase the cap on food cart permits to 25,000 and provide for a 5 percent annual increase. Giving all vendors the chance to sell legally would eliminate the black-market system. Bloomberg's office didn't respond to a call for comment, but the mayor is thought to be against the bill.

Ali got a visa to come to New York from Bangladesh in 1990. "My future changed," he says. "My sons can go to college, speak good English." For a long time, he worked as a deliveryman at a Financial District restaurant. Now, standing behind his cart, tending to a bare trickle of customers, he whips out a worn ID card from his wallet that identifies him as a registered visitor to Cantor Fitzgerald, in the World Trade Center. In the aftermath of 9/11, the restaurant closed. Ali was lucky enough to get a vending license.

The Urban Justice Center's Street Vendor Project, a vendor advocacy group, says that this year, they've received an unprecedented number of calls from aspiring street vendors. As traditional jobs dry up, many people think of starting their own street business. But it's virtually impossible to gain the right to vend legally, and even if you find yourself with a cart and some hot dogs, the fact that the city has made so many streets off-limits means it's difficult to make a living. In a 2006 study on the state of vending in New York, conducted by the Street Vendor Project, vendors reported a median net income of $7,500.

Brick-and-mortar business groups often oppose vendors, though they are rarely direct competitors. Ali Issan, the staff organizer at the Street Vendor Project, says that many business improvement districts feel that vendors give a more downscale feel to a neighborhood. And vendors have always been unfairly stereotyped as dirty or degenerate, a sentiment that has more to do with prejudice against immigrants than reality. Even now, people talk about "street meat" as if it's sketchy—which it isn't.

Ali gets up and leaves his apartment in the Bronx at about 9 a.m. He takes the subway to a garage on Canal Street where vendors keep their carts and refrigerate unsold food. He cleans his cart, gets fresh ice, stocks the drawers with hot dogs, sauerkraut, onions, sodas, and pretzels, and rolls the cart down to Liberty and Broadway, hoping the tourists gawking at Ground Zero will want to experience a New York City street dog.

Liberty Plaza is also home to at least a dozen other vendors. From behind his small cart, Ali ruefully regards the bigger, shinier chicken-and-rice trucks, some of which he believes are operating with illegal licenses. "All it takes is money," he says, referring to

the black-market system. I ask him why he doesn't branch out into other kinds of food. He says that the bigger carts with griddles inside cost $20,000. He speculates that maybe someday, when his son has a good job, he can get one of those carts and sell his wife's pakoras and biryani out of it.

Ali believes in rules. He loved Giuliani, and is in favor of a bill currently in the State Senate, opposed by many vendors groups, that would fingerprint vendors who violate regulations. Why? Ali says that an undocumented vendor stole his son's food-handling license. He digs into a drawer in his cart and takes out a handful of worn tickets—violations sent to his house, committed by whoever swiped his son's identity. It took him months to successfully fight the tickets at the Environmental Control Board. Fingerprinting? "Yes," he says. "Yes, I like fingerprinting."

It's after 2 p.m., and Ali has made about $40 so far, from a slow trickle of pedestrians, mainly tourists, stopping by for hot dogs. On a good day in June or July, he earns up to $125, but usually it's more like $50. He says he relies on loans to support his family. At 4 p.m., Ali rolls his cart over to a spot on Wall Street that he shares with a Greek woman. He hopes to make another $20 before he packs it up around 6 p.m. It's not exactly how he envisioned the American Dream.