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TENT CITY

Mellencamp: 'It's hard times'

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Ken Leslie: We first met two years ago when you made an unpromoted stop at the annual Tent City Project Homeless Connect in Toledo. You just wanted them to know they matter. Bob Merlis [Mellencamp's publicist] told me you were touched by the experience. How so?

John Mellencamp: When you see what progress can produce, and also what progress can discard, it makes a feller wonder ... calling it progress does not make it right.

In this country right now there is no middle class, no place for middle class. You are either really rich or you are really down and out. It's hard times in this country right now.

KL: When you were on stage at Tent City, you spontaneously decided to invite everybody there to your concert, all of the unhoused people.

JM: Right.

KL: About 70 people went and I understand you talked to them from the stage about hope. As you know, one of the guests came back from the show and said "Ken, John talked to us from the stage — I guess I really do matter." That was the founding moment of 1Matters and actually that's why we're here. Your whole career, you've had the compassion for and worked for those with little or no voice. What is the root of that compassion; where does it come from? Was there something in your childhood that started this feeling of compassion?

JM: Well for me, it started with race. I was in a band when I was 13, 14 years old and it was the mid-'60s and it was a racially mixed

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John Mellencamp (AP)

band. I was the lead singer and this black kid was a singer. He was a couple years older than me, really good. We'd play every weekend at fraternities and in hotels and stuff like that. It was a soul band. And I saw the way people treated him. It was like, 'wow, really?' Wait a minute, you loved him on stage but now he's gotta go wait outside? And so I think that made quite an impression on me as a young guy.

KL: How'd you respond?

JM: Well, there were times that there were fistfights. I remember in a little town in Indiana there was a fistfight in between one of our breaks because of his race. So, you know.

KL: Since then, you've carried on standing up for farmers, for the people.

JM: Well, I'm Sisyphus myself; I'm always the guy who's rolling the rock up the hill, and every time I get too close to the top, I either let it roll back down on purpose or it just rolls back, catches on fire and rolls down at someone. So I know what it's like to have to work at something. My struggle is obviously different than some folks' struggle, but, nevertheless, we all have our problems.

KL: How would you define your struggle?

JM: I'll answer it like this: A man writes to what he strives to be, not what he is.

KL: When I was unhoused and living in my car, you nailed the feeling of hopelessness in "Graceful Fall": "It's not a graceful fall from dreams to truth, there's not a lot of hope if you got nothing to lose."

Since 2007, foreclosures and job losses increased the number of families in shelters nearly 30 percent. Each night there are 640,000 unhoused Americans who have lost domestic autonomy and are living on the streets and in shelters, 15 percent are veterans.

As you did from the stage in Toledo, what are your words of hope to all of our brothers and sisters who are living on the streets of our country?

JM: Wow, that's a big question, that's an awfully big question ... See, the problem is, most people give up too early and I'm not talking about just the people on the street. I'm just talking about people in general. They give up on relationships too early, they give up on themselves too early, they give up on life too early. I mean I've been writing that since I was a kid.

In the song called "Jack and Diane," you know they were only 16 and already giving up. People just give up too early, they just quit, you know, "this is too hard," or, "I don't wanna do this anymore." I think that's a problem, and I think that's a problem our country has.

Over the decades it was allowed to happen by the work ethic and through capitalism, a lot of things that affect this country that allow people to think that way, that the world owes them a living. And as soon as you start thinking that somebody owes you something, forget it man, you're done.

And as soon as you start thinking you're right and everybody else is wrong ... It's like the guy who was married six or seven times, hell, I think it might be me ... I think this could be me, I'm starting to think this is my problem.

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