

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project

Don't Talk About Us: Talk With Us!

The Housing Campaign



Darlene Bryant, PTH Housing campaign press conference, rally and City Council disruption. September 29, 2010

The Picture the Homeless (PTH) Housing Committee began in 2004. Analysis and actions during PTH's earliest days highlighted the fact that instead of creating housing for poor and homeless New Yorkers from vacant buildings and lots, NYC had created a “homeless industrial complex” including supportive housing and voucher programs for “sub-populations” of unhoused people. PTH believed that housing is the solution to homelessness.

Rising NYC rents, decreases in the number of rent stabilized apartments, federal cuts to Section 8, Bloomberg’s ending the homeless preference for Section 8, and the abandonment of policies and funding to create housing for poor people at all levels of government meant that homeless New Yorkers were stuck in the shelter system with few options. Although PTH’s shelter campaign ended in 2007, the direct link between shelter and housing meant that the housing campaign would continue to organize to end an abusive shelter system.

Housing Not Shelters, Housing Not Warehousing and People Without Homes and Homes Without People were common sense public policies. PTH identified solutions to the housing crisis and became a grassroots think tank. PTH’s analysis resulted in the emergence of the New York City Community Land Trust movement, and created space for organizing to end property warehousing and democratize land use decisions.

PTH’s Housing campaign utilized direct action, civil disobedience, street theatre, political education, participatory action research, self-published ground-breaking reports, legislation and litigation, media, coalition work and popularized alternative models for housing development. This zine provides an overview of PTH’s housing campaigns, the tactics used and what was achieved. It is based on oral history interviews with housing campaign members, staff, allies, archival materials, and public documents. PTH’s CLT work is covered more in-depth in our CLT zine.



Marcus Moore: You know, when I'm riding the trains and I'm going places and coming from places, I'm seeing people just collapsing and taking a snooze right where they're at. That could be on the staircase, the corner, by the ATM machine or the card machine. It has increased in a tremendous way, and it's really disappointing to see. Where do you want me to go? Where do you want me to go? You're not building nothing for me, but I can't be nowhere.



Anthony Williams: Every time we talk about the homeless, the first thing they say, "What about all these abandoned buildings. Why don't we just fix them and move people in?" What's the problem? You've got more abandoned properties than homeless people!



CONNECTING VACANT PROPERTY AND HOMELESSNESS

Anthony Williams: The Martin Luther King Day of Action was some squatters occupying abandoned property. They were going to take over this building, and dedicate it to Martin Luther King. And so, we're outside. They're inside. It was a whole organized thing with the Lower East Side, and D.A.N. [Direct Action Network], and a few other folks.

They had it all chained up and everything to hold it down. Me and Lewis were outside, Picture the Homeless. I'm standing outside, and he starts bringing the media to me, and I talked about the significance of abandoned property and about homelessness, and how we need housing.



Andres Perez: When I was young, we really didn't understand about abandoned buildings. I didn't understand the reasons why a building would sit there dilapidated like that or sit there boarded up for a period of years, with no one living in there.

When in the meantime, where I'm growing up, there's a whole bunch of us living in a two-bedroom apartment, all cluttered up, and that's how most families were living there in the neighborhood. There were not enough apartments for people to have at that time. But I didn't know so much about it until I became a part of Picture the Homeless, and that's when I started to learn more what it's about.

THE SYSTEM CREATES HOMELESSNESS

Jean Rice: When you do the research, the housing crisis started in the eighties. Prior to the eighties we had unemployment problems, but the unemployed had housing. Prior to the eighties, we had substance abuse problems, but the substance abusers had housing. So, there's something far more profound, not as simplistic as substance abuse, not as simplistic as dysfunctional families. There's something at the crux, at the root of why—even as we devote more taxpayer dollars to the homeless situation, homelessness continues to escalate. Something is wrong at the policy making level.



Kay Samuels: Homelessness is created by the city itself! So, you have people who get put out by the city, paying maybe five, six-hundred-dollar rent, to put you somewhere where you're in a room with four other people and they're willing to pay two thousand dollars a month for you. So that whoever's running that boarding house or whatever, gets paid eight thousand dollars.

Why would you create homelessness? I mean, this is the craziest thing to me. Why would you pay all this money, when you can just keep people wherever they are for six hundred dollars a month? Who are you making this money for?

And all the agony and pain that goes along with that. They're telling people, "Oh, you just go into the shelters, and you'll be there only a few months, and you'll have housing." People are in there for four years! Or more! No housing! How can this happen? This does not make sense.

Anthony Williams: I knew guys that went in prison with a lot of money. But when they came out they were probated to the shelter. They were told they could not go back to the old neighborhood.

When a guy told me that, I was like, “Damn. The system just can make you homeless. When you got released out of jail you could have went home with your family and all. But no! The system is telling you to go to a shelter and be homeless and get an HA number and sign for a bed.



DeBoRah Dickerson: People of color are one of the main ones that happen to be homeless. There's all kinds of statistical information that says that. I can't exactly give you the percentage—and sometimes I don't like giving out percentages because we get caught up in the number game, and the number game makes me mad. I'm going to do, what I do. I got two eyes, and I see.



A CRITIQUE OF “HOMELESS VOUCHERS”

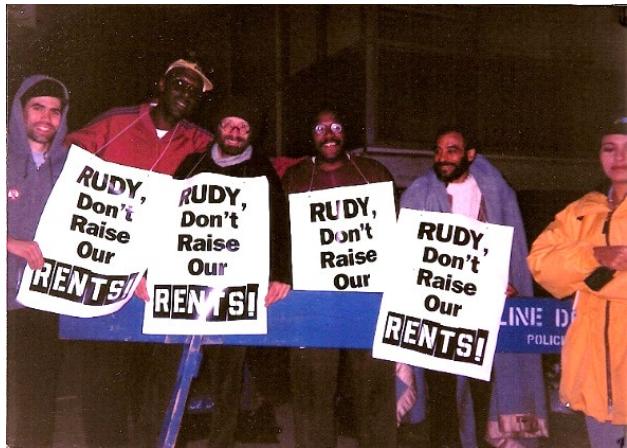
In 2000, PTH began testifying at hearings of the NYC Continuum of Care. With NYC AIDS Housing Network (NYCAN), PTH co-chaired the new “consumer committee” and trained

hundreds of homeless New Yorkers on the process of how HUD homeless funding is distributed.

At the same time, PTH continued to critique the approach of supportive housing and voucher programs that were based on narrow eligibility criteria instead of addressing the root causes of the housing crisis that produced homelessness.



Anthony Williams: New York City AIDS Housing Network seemed all right, but they had different fights going on because of the AIDS epidemic and the crisis with AIDS, and that's when we had to come to some conclusion in our Wednesday meetings. We invited Joe Capestany to talk to our folks, because our folks were very adamant about people with AIDS getting the upper hand, or getting housing before, because they're sick.



PTH co-founder Lewis Haggins, Dave Powell, and others, with Met Council on Housings sleep-out protesting proposed increases in rent stabilized housing. 2000

2003 PTH'S "Public Policy Position Paper"

Before PTH had a housing campaign, housing issues and solutions were brainstormed during General Membership, Civil Rights and Shelter campaign meetings. PTH created a Public Policy Position Paper in 2003 to clarify and communicate PTH's collective analysis. Many of these demands stayed consistent throughout PTH's long history. The housing section [excerpted below] called for an emergency plan to address the housing crisis by:

- Identifying the number of empty residential units in city owned and privately owned buildings
- Turning over vacant buildings to homeless people to develop, using sweat equity
- Ending the practice of paying landlords for "shelter apartments"
- Making sure homeless folks living on the street have the opportunity to apply for housing without going through the shelter system
- Top priority for housing is street homeless, in shelter and doubled up, second priority all other people making \$11,000 per year or less



Jenny Akchin: I just really appreciate our members for always being really clear that you can't depend on a voucher. That that's not a reliable source of income for housing, and that without some sort of guarantee, that was going to leave people in the lurch, and leave people shafted. I never would have had that level of critique without hearing it from our

members and seeing it in our reports. I mean, what is the report called? *Time's Up?*

No one ever talks about supportive housing in the way that our members talk about supportive housing, and it like drives me crazy. It drives me totally crazy.



Sue Lob: One of the things that I was really conscious of was that I didn't want to fight for housing in a way that was going to pit one group against the other. So, I didn't want to say, "Oh, you know—make battered women a priority and screw everybody else." There needed to be a bigger pot of affordable housing that everybody could get access to. So I wanted to be allied with other groups that were fighting for affordable housing and I guess that's how I ended up with Picture the Homeless.



2003: AFFORDABLE FOR WHO?

Dave Powell: It's Picture the Homeless that we have to thank for really driving home the phrase "affordable to whom?" Picture the Homeless held successive mayors accountable for that phrase, or at least wouldn't let them off the hook for it. "Affordable to whom? Who are you talking about? Who are

you talking for? Who do you think you're housing? I can't get into that housing. Bullshit-bullshit-bullshit." You know, calling them out! That was super important!

And then, more than half of the affordable housing world is running scared because they know that these policies are inhumane. But they don't want to say anything, because they don't want their funding cut. They want to build whatever they can build, right? So they're not going to say anything. So, it was up to PTH to step out and call them out and PTH did that.



Jean Rice: Contrary to public opinion, there are a lot of working New Yorkers that can't afford market rent, that are undomiciled. Not because they are lazy, it's just because the wages have not kept up with cost.



Dave Powell: I vividly remember Jean Rice speaking at a rally we had in support of the rent laws in Union Square, in 2003. I remember just being like, "Wow, okay. So this is like a new and important part of this coalition." You know, that's just really drilling down on the cause and effect of these things and just standing up as homeless people.

Marcus Moore: I was really open to this place called Picture the Homeless, because I was kind of unbalanced. I was working two jobs, and still couldn't find a decent apartment for myself, for my monies. I figured that if I get another job, or whatever the case might be, I can afford to be able to have an apartment for myself! But unfortunately, it led me to the shelter system.



William Burnett: I was part of the housing committee because that was the real issue that I was concerned with. I was working at the time and so there was no reason for me to be homeless other than the fact that I didn't have enough money to pay rent. And so, I was really upset about the fact that we've allowed the city to become so expensive and not recognize that people working for lower incomes still need a place to live. So, my big issue was wanting to find a way to change housing policy in New York so that housing is available to everyone.

Picture the Homeless's thing is we need housing for the *poorest of the poor*, and I agree with that. That wasn't my position when I first started with Picture the Homeless. I'm thinking, "I'm working, why can't I afford housing?" It's true on one hand, that people do work but can't afford housing, but on the other hand there are people who have impediments to work that still, as human people, deserve a place to live.



Robert Robinson: I remember numerous fights around what we call “affordable.” We all looked at it different ways. Some people had a certain income limit. Some people had no income at all, right? So, what is truly affordable? And affordable to whom?

I think one of the biggest fights that I can remember is understanding Area Median Income and folks interpreting it different, but us having to figure out what it meant *to us* as homeless and formerly homeless folks, and what it meant to affordability, and there were differences in the room, right?

We had to go out and educate ourselves. So, popular, and political education became a forefront of that organizing training. We saw that there was a need for that. And then I think leadership says, “If you understand this issue, then how do you get other people to understand it? What is your role in helping people to understand it?” So, I think a lot of the time at Picture the Homeless involved thinking through that stuff.



Kay Samuels: I feel like Harlem is in the epicenter of a lot of these changes that have been taking place, primarily relating to housing. And if you look at even what the Furman Group is saying, a lot of people in Harlem have been pushed out. It's almost as though we're disappearing out of Harlem, and it's primarily the housing that's doing it. We can't afford to live in our own community, and the sad part about it is that the people that we elected are a huge reason why we are being pushed out of our own community.

James Tracy: When people think about housing, it's not simply a tenant's right issue, even though tenant's rights are enormously important. If we had better ones, we would have less homelessness in the first place. But the homelessness question is part of the housing question. That's something that Picture the Homeless reminds people of. Sometimes, it's a gentle reminder and sometimes it's a loud reminder.



2003/2004 PTH'S FIRST SURVEY OF VACANT BUILDINGS AND LOTS

In November 2003, PTH moved to 116th Street between 3rd and Lexington Avenues in E. Harlem. There were hundreds of vacant buildings within walking distance of PTH's new office. Other buildings had busy stores on the first floor, and vacant apartments above.



Leaders of PTH's civil rights committee were mostly street homeless and questioned why people were being arrested for sleeping in public spaces while there were hundreds of vacant buildings and apartments that should be opened up to create housing for the poor. Some leaders were squatting vacant buildings and knew that these buildings could be rehabbed, and that doing so would create housing and jobs.

PTH designed a simple survey tool and counted 109 vacant buildings in just a couple of weeks. Owners were identified from the HPD website. Many of the results from that preliminary count in E. Harlem are strikingly similar to the findings of the 2006 borough wide building count conducted three years later:

- 94% were privately owned
- 40% had commercial storefronts on the ground floor
- 9% had visible structural problems
- A random sampling of buildings revealed that each building owed an average of \$2,200.00 in taxes and fines, indicating that the majority of these landlords are financially capable of maintaining them.



Rogers: As Harlem was becoming more and more gentrified, gentrification and homelessness both seemed to be increased. It's no accident that those two things increase at the same time. I saw a need for intelligent, planned responses to the displacement of people that was happening because of gentrification.

I didn't see enough people being organized. There were disparate voices, but I didn't see enough people being organized into one voice until I was reading some of what Picture the Homeless, some of what Anthony and Lewis had done and were saying. Because that was the coming together of united voices against the gentrification, against the profiteering, against the elite landowners and, if you want to call it, the municipal land barons.

That was part of what was being done by Picture the Homeless in many ways better than anyone else was doing it. So, I said, "This is something I see, I understand, and I agree with." That's what would have drawn me to Picture the Homeless, to their meetings, and then eventually to 116th Street.



William Burnett: There originally wasn't the housing campaign. Because, remember, in the beginning they were trying to sort out, "Well here's our experiences in the shelter system. What can we do to improve the shelters?" And again, it was a collective process. But eventually we were to the point, "Listen, we can spend our time trying to improve the shelters, but how many people in this room really want to live in a better shelter! We want our *own housing*.

So, we could spend our time demanding improvement of the shelters, or we can spend our time fighting for housing and we chose to fight for housing. I got to be on the ground floor of that decision and participating in the drafting of the original Housing and Jobs Platform. But this all happened organically from the experiences of homeless folks. There was no top-down policy analyst telling us what we need.

2004: THE HOUSING COMMITTEE

Sam J. Miller: I just started doing outreach and got a lot of support from staff and members. I would go to the Wards Island bus stop, or the park, or Holy Apostles and talk to people. Picture the Homeless already had members, had a database, so I was calling people and bringing people in, saying, "I'm the new housing organizer, I would love to meet you. I would love for you to come to this meeting." So, we had a meeting pretty early on.

You hear the word housing and what does that mean? There's a lot of problems when it comes to housing. So, hearing from people about what to them were the biggest obstacles to getting housing, and there was a lot, right?



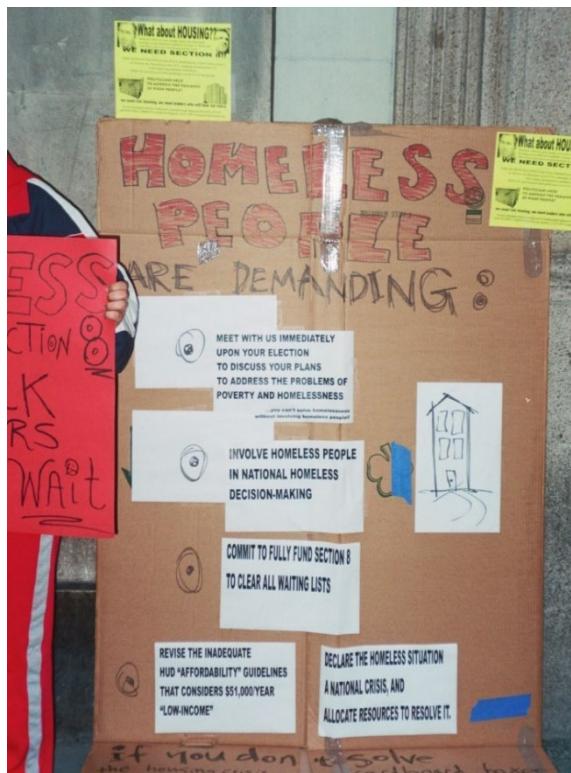
PTH Housing campaign's first action: occupation of Department of Homeless Services Lobby, demanding Housing not Shelters, and inclusion in planning processes. June 10, 2004

Housing Not Shelters has been a consistent theme since the earliest days of PTH.

PTH Housing Campaign simultaneous protest of Bush and Kerry presidential campaigns' silence on the housing crisis. October 29, 2004



In October of 2004, the Bloomberg administration made it harder for homeless New Yorkers to exit the shelter system, removing the priority for homeless families to access Section 8. He and his DHS Commissioner, Linda Gibbs, believed that homeless families were gaming the system by going into shelters just to get Section 8 vouchers.



LINKING VACANT PROPERTY, RACE, POVERTY AND HOMELESSNESS

From a Vera Institute report published in March of 2005,
UNDERSTANDING FAMILY HOMELESSNESS IN NEW YORK CITY: An In-Depth Study of Families' Experiences Before and After Shelter:

The strongest indicator of the number of families a neighborhood produced was the number of people receiving public assistance in that area. In addition, the number of homeless families a neighborhood produced was also associated with the number of families living below the poverty line, African-American residents, and vacant housing units.



PTH's housing campaign was learning about vacant property, how much there was, who owned them and what we could do to end property warehousing. Over the years, PTH slept out, took over, wheatpasted, testified, educated the community, published reports, introduced, and passed legislation, got a lot of media coverage, catalyzed the NYC Community Land Trust and anti-warehousing movements, researched, and proposed alternative housing models and created popular education materials to educate ourselves and the community.

Nikita Price: It's one thing to say, "Okay, you know we're getting fucked, we're getting fucked..." But we had to come up with—what's the next step? So, we know what the problem is, so what do you do? How do you fix it?

I think that was when we would then introduce the issue of all this abandoned property, and that's when we're also doing our abandoned building count. The City does own some of this property and there are this many people in the fucking shelter, and on the street.



PTH Housing Campaign Vacant Property Speak-Out, 125th St and Malcolm X Blvd. July 8, 2005

2005: THE HOUSING AND JOBS PLATFORM

MISSION STATEMENT: The solution to homelessness is housing. Housing for poor people is cheaper than shelter. Housing is absolutely essential for homeless people to build a stable, productive life—normal, real housing: not SROs, not supportive or transitional housing. Homeless people have the need and the ability to control their own housing. Supportive and transitional housing is one model of housing; however it is not appropriate for a huge portion of the homeless population—and mutual housing associations (MHAs) and other self-managed housing models are another important element in the process of providing housing options for all homeless people.

GOAL: Creation of innovative models to provide housing for people with incomes of \$11,000 (or a full-time minimum wage worker's salary) or less, who will pay no more than 30% of their incomes in rent—such as MHA's/self-controlled housing.

MEASURABLE OUTCOMES: Reduction of the number of unoccupied buildings warehoused by private landlords in poor neighborhoods. Creation of 80,000 new units of housing for people making \$11,000 or less from this underutilized stock.



PTH Housing campaign members, from the Housing and Jobs Platform, 2005/2006

2006: WHEATPASTING

Nikita Price: Our office was in East Harlem, and at the time there were all these *abandoned buildings*. The thing that I was made aware of by you, Lynn—and Picture the Homeless, was the fact that we were passing by all these fucking stores that were open every day, and people were shopping as if everything was fine and then it was like, “But look up!”

And when you look up on the second floor on up, everything was fucking abandoned. It was boarded up! I'm like—boy! Those were all apartments! And these stores were actively thriving, and I don't know what the number of shelter folks was then, but it was a high number, and it's just like—what the fuck?

So, how are we going to bring the attention to the fact that this city is housing all these people in the shelter and there's *all this available land and property and buildings around?* I don't know who came up with it, you might have come up with it. But it was like—why don't we let the public know, because I don't think the public is looking up either. Let them know about all this abandoned property.

Well, how are we going to do that? Well, we could spray paint on the buildings. We could do this. We can do that. Or we could put up signs that this property is abandoned, and it *should be* for homeless people! Then we had to design what would that look like. What would this sticker look like? Would it be small, would it be big?

I don't know how we came up with the design, but we said we could silkscreen, and I think that was something that was really impressive to me.

We didn't have a lot of money. So, we reached out to someone that could do the screen, and then we bought the paper, and we bought the ink, and we made *fun* out of getting ready to let the fucking city know that you're allowing people to

suffer, whether they're on the street or in the shelter, by having these buildings. And that's when I was finding out that a lot of these buildings had been vacant—the apartments anyway, for years and years and years and years, and the stores are open. So that made me angry.

So now, we've got to go out. We can't put this shit up in the daytime, so how are we going to do this and make this fun, make this exciting, you know? And so, that was the whole sense of, you know—when the sun goes down, homeless people are going to get out and... It kind of reminded me of shit you would see in a cartoon, whereas people go to sleep, and everything is fine, and then when they wake up shits like, "Where the fuck did that come from?!"

I remember us planning this. What are we going to do? These are the people who are going to have the papers... These are the people who are going to have the glue, the paste, or whatever, and this is what we're going to do and we're just going to hit all these buildings and we're going to call attention. I think there was more than one group, and people



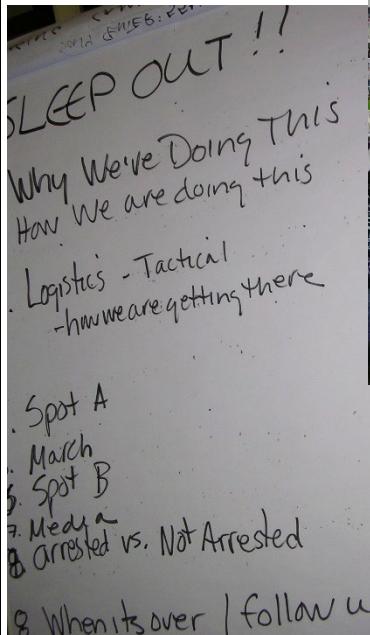
Nikita Price, PTH Housing campaign wheatpasting.
February 2006

had to go scout because we did have to look out for the police and because we were in small packs.

We've always been a small group of folks who finally got it, "If we don't say something or do something, that shit's going to continue." And we'd have to go back to our environments and see people that were suffering, and that had resigned to, "Well my fate is whatever my fate's going to be." Whereas the folks at Picture the Homeless said, "My fate is going to be whatever the fuck I want it to be, and so I'm going to do whatever I have to do, to make that. And if I have to step out of my comfort zone, and let it be known and tell you that, then I'm going to do that."



2006: BODIES ON THE LINE SLEEP-OUTS and VACANT BUILDINGS



PTH plans its first of many sleep-outs in front of vacant buildings, held on March 31, 2006

Tyletha Samuels: I didn't enjoy sleeping in the rain. I can't get on the ground, so I had a chair, but I can't sleep sitting in a chair. So, for me it was very uncomfortable to be out there all night. And for me to go through that? It put *me* in the place where the homeless person is, who has to do it *every night*, and who don't have a choice. So yeah, it was real powerful for me. I had a choice. I could go home. I could have left two o'clock in the morning. I could have left three o'clock in the morning. But the homeless person who have to stay there *could not leave*.

William Burnett: You know, in the military, they say that you're strongest friends are the ones that you're in the foxhole with. And I think that happened at Picture the Homeless too.

And when we're out in these actions, and we're spending the night, especially in the rain and we're interacting with each other, and we're not just protesting, but we're talking to each other. Sometimes there's the camp out part where we sit down, and we pull out the canteen of cocoa and we're talking to each other and we're getting to know each other, so there was some personal bonding going on. There's always that human interaction that I like to bring out. That experience was important because that bonding makes us stronger.



*Scenes from PTH's first sleep-out,
midtown Manhattan, March 31, 2006*



*PTH Housing
Campaign sleepout,
125th and Malcolm
X Blvd. May 15,
2006*

DeBoRah Dickerson: I came out of the meeting one day, and I walked around to 116th, off of Lexington, and I was just canvassing the neighborhood. And I'm saying, *"Oh my God. Look at all these places."* So, we had another meeting, and I came back, and they were talking about, "We got to make a plan."

I got up—I just couldn't sit there any longer. I said, "Well, I'm new, and I don't know how to do this. But I thought you was *lying*, you know, because people say stuff." And I told them how many buildings I counted, the blocks where I walked, and I said I was really shocked. I said, "What can we do? Is there any way that we can do something about this?"



Next thing you know, we had a meeting, and we collected our information, we got a plan, and next thing we went out and we started counting Manhattan!



Tyletha
Samuels,
DeBoRah
Dickerson, PTH
Housing
campaign
Vacant
Property Count
Leadership
Orientation
July 12, 2006



2006 HOMELESS PEOPLE COUNT!

Nikita Price: Picture the Homeless had been looking at all this *desolate property* around the city, and all these people in the shelter system. And we were actively trying to get some government agency to tell us who owned it, and how much of it was... And nobody had an answer.



Rogers: That fight up and down Third Avenue, identifying buildings, trying to get the city council members to see what is all so obvious, that we have vacant spaces enough, sufficient to house every person who's in the shelter.

There are times when common sense seems to be shrouded by political subterfuge, political motives. Common sense says that if we have, on the one hand, a hundred thousand vacant units,

and on the other hand, eighty thousand homeless people, there should be some way to put those two things together. That's common sense.

Political diatribe and malfeasance and ignorance and self-serving legislation gets in the way of common sense that says, "Put together the homeless—those who need a place to live—with the homes that are vacant. There are things that politicians subscribe to that allows them to posture themselves with their thumbs in their lapels saying, "We are doing good." While they stand between people who need a place to live and places to live.

It is on us! It is our obligation to speak to people, to speak to power. It is our obligation to let them know that we see things that they don't see. The rules that get in the way of putting together people who need a place to live and vacant places to live, a child could tell you, "Duh! Those two things belong. They can serve each other."



Rogers, PTH Housing campaign vacant property tour, East Harlem.

DeBoRah Dickerson: When we did the count, that made it so important, the actuality of us going out and counting, it made it so real. And I didn't mind doing that. We were counting vacant buildings and properties. I remember there was one block, it was nothing but commercial buildings on the bottom and apartment buildings on the top. And I said, "Oh my God. Those could be homes for people! They don't have to stay in the freaking shelter." And that was just the beginning of a little seed *that has blossomed* and I'm like, *wow...* And we went out—they said, "We couldn't do it." But you know, I'm going to get to some of *my faith*. If Jesus took two fishes and a loaf of bread and fed a multitude, well we took some vacant buildings and we counted all these vacant buildings in all five boroughs, *and they said we couldn't do it.*



Rachel Brumfield, Roosevelt Orphee, DeBoRah Dickerson, with Scott Stringer. Manhattan Vacant Property Count. July 22, 2006



Tenant Inquilino

Housing for people, not profit

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Metropolitan Council on Housing
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New York, NY 10012

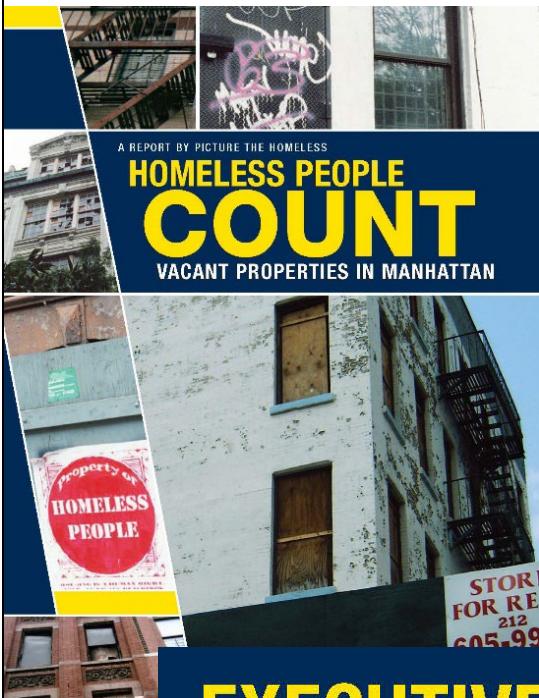
PERIODICAL

GCU

Abandoned Buildings Could House All the Homeless, Group Says

By Steven Wishnia

PTH continued the tradition of self-publishing participatory action research projects to back up organizing campaign goals.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

■ VACANT PROPERTY CAN COMPLETELY ERADICATE HOMELESSNESS IN NYC

The total volume of empty housing units in abandoned buildings exceeds the number of homeless households in shelter and on the street! 24,000 potential apartments can be developed out of all those properties going to waste. As of April 17, 2007, families and 7,170 single adults. NYC's HOPE 2006 count of the "unsheltered homeless" indicated a citywide street population of 3,843. While we believe that this number is dramatically lower than the actual street population, even if the City's count was off by 98.7%—meaning the street homeless population is twice as high as officially acknowledged—there are still enough potential apartments in Manhattan to house every homeless person in the shelters and on our streets.

Kazembe Balagun: I think that one of the things I really appreciate about Picture the Homeless was the intellectual rigor, and the fact that you all would publish reports and did a lot of that work. It seemed to work so seamlessly and endlessly and so effortlessly with the broader left, intellectual community and it really not just held its own, but actually created that space for intellectual work to be happening in the city.

You know, I feel like right now, just a lot of popularization around Right to the City, like cooperativism, inviting different schema, and PTH's intellectual interventions in a lot of ways pushed those doors open. And it was done in a way that was in co-leadership with folks like [David] Harvey, and some other of the think tanks or whatever around the city. And so, that was something I recognized as really important.

PTH's ability *to win* at the vacancy count also opened up the space for people to talk about community land trusts because then people were like, "You know what? There's a lot of land in New York City."



2007: COALITION BUILDING

PTH co-founded the East Harlem Anti-Displacement Task Force to focus on neighborhood based organizing. At the time, East Harlem had one of the highest rates of losing families to the NYC shelter system and a lot of vacant buildings and lots. Research, public forums, media work and sleep-outs were on-going.

**Tired of: GENTRIFICATION? DISPLACEMENT?
OVERCROWING? HOMELESSNESS?
POVERTY? VACANT BUILDINGS?
SHELTERS? INSTEAD OF HOUSING?
EAST HARLEM/EL BARRIO IS
FIGHTING BACK!**



**The East
Harlem
Anti-Displacement Task
Force is an alliance of
community-based
organizations, concerned
neighborhood residents,
elected officials, and
others who are fighting to
save our barrio from all
these problems
and more.**

Since 2007, we've:

- Mobilized hundreds of community residents to march for justice!
- Brought City Council Speaker Christine Quinn to the neighborhood twice to hear from us what problems we're facing, and what we need
- Organized a "Shadow Convention during the 2008 presidential race, where we developed demands that were later included in the official platform of the Democratic Party!
- Been covered in the Daily News and lots of other news outlets!

**NEXT MEETING OF THE EAST HARLEM ANTI-
DISPLACEMENT TASK FORCE
WEDNESDAY, JULY 14th, at 5PM**

Office of Councilwoman Melissa Mark-Viverito
105 East 116th Street (Between Lexington & Park Avenues) For
more information, call Joey at 212-828-9800.

2007/2008 SLEEP-OUTS and CHANGING LAWS

In addition to continuing to publicize the harm caused by warehousing vacant property in NYC, PTH was successful at uncovering and ending a tax incentive to keep properties vacant above 110th Street in Manhattan.



2008: ANTI-WAREHOUSING LEGISLATION



Lawmaker Floats Plan To Target Housing Crunch

By Peter Kiefer, January 16, 2008

City Council Member Tony Avella is proposing legislation that would allow the city to target, through levied fines, property owners who intentionally keep buildings and apartments vacant. Mr. Avella said the legislation, an "anti-warehousing" effort designed as a remedy for the city's housing crunch, would be announced at a press conference Saturday.

"There is a homeless crisis in the city of New York, and we need to do everything we can to help make more apartments available," Mr. Avella said. "We need to encourage property owners to

repair and make these apartments inhabitable. This is a proposal to discourage these owners from keeping these apartments off the market." According to a report compiled by the nonprofit organization Picture Homeless, which is helping to craft the new legislation, about 24,000 apartments could be created by renovating the city's abandoned buildings and living spaces. Mr. Avella said the legislation would target only those property owners who were intentionally keeping space unoccupied. He said the fines would be "open to discussion." A fund would then be set up to rehab distressed vacant units. A real estate attorney, Adam Leitman Bailey, said he was concerned about the proposed legislation. "I don't like any statute that allows the government to place restrictions on what hard-working property owners can do with their land," he said.



Rob Robinson, Councilmember Avella, PTH Housing campaign press conference in support of Anti-Warehousing legislation, January 19, 2008

2008 COALTION TO SAVE HARLEM and REZONING BATTLES



Rogers and Nikita Price, PTH Housing campaign with Coalition to Save Harlem, protesting 125th rezoning. Hands Across Harlem rally. April 12, 2008

Kay Samuels: The Coalition to Save Harlem was a very good coalition, that really should still be functioning because it brought so many groups together, which I thought was great. People who were not afraid to get out into the street, or to holler at a politician, which was really needed.

But when it was at its height, it was very effective and I do believe the politicians were extremely worried, particularly the way people showed up at City Hall the day they had the hearing about the rezoning. People got a chance to go and speak—but the minds were already made up. It was really sad to see our own politicians getting ready to really just stab us... And for people who won't even let you ask them questions in

the meeting, to give these *big* speeches at City Council, regarding “their people” and so-and-so. You just want to scream because you have to sit there and be calm because they’re the first ones to tell the police to pull you out, you know? You have to sit there calmly but it’s something that just tears at your heart, to hear how these people talk and know that they are the reason why so much of this is happening.



2008 SLEEP-OUTS, PUBLIC FORUMS

Homelessness continues to increase, and a wave of foreclosures sweeps across the country. PTH launches the Housing Not Warehousing Coalition, continues working with CM Avella on anti-warehousing legislation, holding sleepouts and other public events.

Picture the Homeless

Housing Not Warehousing! Forum

Thursday May 8th
CUNY Graduate Center
365 5th Ave. at 34th St.
New York NY 10016
C204-C205 (lower level)

“I’ll get arrested for sleeping in the street, but this landlord can keep his building empty for decades and nothing happens to him.” —Picture the Homeless Member



2009 PUBLIC FORUMS, HUMAN RIGHTS, TRAINING ALLIES AND TAKEOVERS

PTH begins 2009 with a public forum with the East Harlem Anti-Displacement Coalition and training Right to the City NYC and Reclaim NYC to conduct a count of vacant luxury condos resulting from the 2008 financial crisis.



Brandon King, Linda, Steve Wavra, PTH, Right to the City NYC, Protesting Vacant Condos, 2010

PTH increasingly embraced a human rights framework and helped organize a national visit to the U.S. by the U.N. Special Rapporteur for Housing on her first official mission to the United States, serving as the NYC Anchor for her visit.

PTH also continued to lift up a racial justice analysis of homelessness, and coordinated the chapter on Homelessness, in the U.S. report presented to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, in Geneva.

Celebrating 100 Years 1909-2009

NEW YORK
Amsterdam News

The new Black view
www.amsterdamnews.com

Vol. 100 No. 44 October 29-November 4, 2009
\$1.00 New York City

2 October 29-November 4, 2009

U.N. Special Rapporteur on housing comes to Harlem

THE HUFFINGTON POST

THE INTERNET NEWSPAPER: NEWS BLOGS VIDEO COMMUNITY

Michelle Chen June 7, 2010

New York Sits on Empty Housing While the Poor Face Displacement

2009: VACANT BUILDING TAKEOVER



PTH's first takeover was of a building on 116th and Madison Avenue. We mobilized hundreds of members and allies to dramatize the extent of vacant property warehousing and spent the night outside of the building. March 2009

Lynn Lewis: Early on with Picture the Homeless, it was members in all these meetings talking about vacant buildings. And people saying, “Oh, no. That’s not an issue anymore because the city didn’t own them all anymore.” And homeless folks saying, “Well, it’s an issue if you don’t got no place and there’s an empty building.” But the housing movement was fighting to *hold on* to housing, whether it’s NYCHA, rent stabilization, Section Eight—all of these battles, code enforcement... Everybody’s geared towards keeping gains that *other people* fought for. And the only group that was talking about, “We need new units of housing.” Were people that didn’t have housing.

And so the tactics that you would use to *hold on to* housing would be to maintain relationships with institutions and elected officials that you need to put the money for whatever you need in the budget, or to meet with you about repairs in NYCHA, to meet with you about Department of Buildings issuing vacate orders...

All of those kinds of things—you need relationships with the system. Or you feel like you do. “Oh, we’re going to get a meeting with this person in three months. So we can’t have an action, because we’ll piss them off.” And we feel like that because we believe in democracy.

And then you have a group of people that have *no* relationships with any of these institutions, because all the institutions said, “Fuck y’all.” And so, I think that that’s what gave Picture the Homeless an edge, to say, “Yeah. Let’s take over some buildings.” Because *these people* aren’t doing nothing! And we don’t have much to lose.



Kazembe Balagun: The sense of daring that PTH had was unusual. My critique of the movement sometimes is that there's a sense of like, "Well, if you're undocumented or you're a woman of color or you're a Black person you should not be taking risks in terms of getting arrested, or challenging, or doing a direct action, or being in the front part of rallies. You should be more in the background and be more scared and stuff like that. And I feel like that type of philosophy has actually disempowered people from taking leadership, and moving forward and taking risks and doing stuff.



Rob Robinson: It was an interesting way of saying to the members, "You don't have to be afraid. You can step up. I have an open case, but I want to do this. You're not going to make any change without taking a risk, right?" And I think the organization had provided us with enough legal support that I wasn't worried about it and the lawyers were very clear as to what could or couldn't happen, and I said, "The reward versus the risk is overpowering, right? If we take this and set a precedent, it's going to change who the organization is, change how people look at vacant spaces. So we just got to do it, and turns out, we were pretty successful in that day.

I think it was a lot of the ally support that we had garnered that day, because that was also empowering. Knowing that you have this role as the police negotiator and somebody says, "The police are coming." Right? And then I said, "Okay." Then I turn my head to the right and here come three-hundred people marching—so okay, now I'm empowered. "Come on Mr. Policeman, let's talk."

2009: VACANT LOT TAKEOVER

On July 23, PTH occupied a vacant lot owned by JP Morgan Chase on 115th between 5th and Madison Ave., featuring a community cookout and fashion show, ten people were arrested.



Shaun Lin: I was always reaching out Picture the Homeless organizers in terms of how to plan actions that kind of got to the root of the problem a little bit more. And I always respected the principles from which Picture the Homeless organized. It was very courageous, willing to take risks, *but not just foolhardy risks*. It was risks to raise consciousness. It was risks to force conversation.



Maria Walles: We took it on because it was just sitting there and not being utilized! It's our land. It was before Community Land Trusts. You know, it was sitting there, they wasn't

building no school. It wasn't going to be no restaurant. It was just sitting there. It could've been a community garden.

In the beginning, you try to be nice about it, "All right." You know, you do the phone call. "Okay." We set the meeting. "All right." It's still the same. Nothing's getting done.

And I feel like, "We had the meetings with you. We talked to you in person. We talked over the phone. We listened to what you had to say. All right? We gave you enough time." But after a while, it was getting kind of boring. "All right, you're not going to do nothing? All right. This is what's going to happen.



Anika Paris: I was really sold on the organization after that. It was like, yeah! There is all this vacant property and New York has really gone in a direction that's not necessarily surprising, but it was nowhere near as bad as it is now in terms of gentrification and just neighborhoods being totally whitewashed, and storefronts being left vacant and then when they finally get occupants, it's like a Citibank or something.

PTH just really seemed like it was the vanguard. Housing is one thing, but also just the tactics that were being used. I was like, "All right, these are the people who I need to be getting with." And I started volunteering at PTH after that and then I ended up working at Picture Homeless as the office manager for, I think, four years.

Knowing about squatters on the Lower East Side it seemed like that was a bygone era, and there were like, a couple of spaces that were still hanging on. Like, there was C-Squat and

I remember people from Books Through Bars and other folks who were around No Rio talking about other squatted spaces. But yeah, it seemed to me there were these places that had been secured around the time that I was born or, when I was very, very young. But I was like in my early twenties and there was a land takeover happening—like right now, and that was really exciting. Yeah.



Shaun Lin: It was actually at that time that I first went to a Picture the Homeless organized action, the vacant lot takeover. That was like the wildest and craziest thing I had participated in, I think. I remember meeting up at Union Square because it was very like, shadowy—like where this action was, what was actually happening.

I remember meeting up at Union Square and folks had already identified, “Those people are following us. They’re definitely cops.” And then, getting to the action. I think I went because I knew that there was going to be some important organizing work happening. I didn’t know necessarily what to expect. I knew that there was going to be a direct action, and that it was going to be a civil disobedience, and that laws would be broken, quote, unquote. What I didn’t expect was, to really be challenged on the relationship between real estate and land and speculation and homelessness.

I think it must have been either Rob or Jean at that action saying something about... What role does land play? Should land serve a social good in terms of housing people or should it serve the role of real estate, and be treated as a commodity? What is our relationship with land and what is its value? Is its value making money for somebody, or is its value in providing

shelter, space, homes for somebody? That I think really like fundamentally kind of made me think about capitalism in a different way.

I think from that moment on, I always looked at Picture the Homeless as an organization that was willing to kind of push the envelope in terms of what type of organizing was happening, willing to break the law if it felt it was necessary to do so, and also pushing consciousness, you know? Like forcing us to think about the political issues of homelessness, not just like we need shelters for homeless folks, but like we need to think about, how we think *about land* in the city. And that was really powerful to me.



Frank Morales: But our point really was to perform this act of civil obedience to take the arrest and make the point—that the breaking this law was to highlight the fact that the *bigger crime* was to keep lots vacant, and keep buildings vacant, while people were *without* homes, particularly women and children that were leading the demographic of the homeless population at the time.

That kind of action really is meant to appeal to the heart of those who *see it* being done and hopefully get them to take action, to support your cause. And I think in that respect, I think we got our message out, and we made it clear to people that we were willing to take these kinds of actions. And that's what I believe. I believe that squatting these vacant buildings is an act of civil disobedience.



Rob Robinson: I think overall, it said to me, one, you can elevate the respect of this organization by doing this type of work. You can do it in a way that you look good in the end, even though the police arrested you, right? We had two Episcopal priests in collars, *which was huge*.

It was a dynamic that we put together on the street that day—between both those actions, that garnered us a lot of respect in this city. I think at places you wouldn't *expect* a grassroots organization to be respected—particularly a homeless organization? We got some pretty high respect from both those actions, right? And I think members got empowered by that and started to think a little bit differently about a lot of things and so, for me in particular—obviously, I thought a lot about it more, and I said, "This is a way."

2010: CALENDAR INTRO 48!

In February of 2010, Intro 48 was introduced by Melissa Mark-Viverito. The bill would empower NYC to conduct an annual count of vacant buildings and lots throughout the five boroughs. In less than a month, this common-sense legislation had a majority of the City Council members as co-sponsors.

The bill was referred to the Housing Committee of the City Council, which should have scheduled a hearing for the bill and then send it to the full council for a vote. After two months without a hearing, PTH learned that the Administration was concerned about the cost of the bill.

PTH provided a cost analyses from Boston (who conducts their own annual count), and one from Tom Angotti, PhD, Hunter College Professor of Urban Planning. These estimates ranged from \$50,000 to \$75,000, compared to the \$48,000 to keep one family in a homeless shelter for a year.

David Pristin, the Director of the City Council's Policy Division, informed PTH that "this legislation is not something we're interested in moving forward, and we're setting it to the side."

PTH organized a direct action, asking Christine Quinn to intervene and override her staff's obstructionism. The day before the action, David Pristin called back to say that he "said some wrong things," and that "Speaker Quinn wants you to know that this issue is important to her."

Christine Quinn continued to block the committee from "calendering" Intro 48, so PTH began targeting her district, which had a high number of vacant buildings, by the way.

Buildings Sit Vacant for up to 30 Years, Homeless Advocates Push for Habitation

August 25, 2010, 12:18pm by Tara Kyle

Advocacy group Picture the Homeless toured vacant properties Tuesday night to call attention to the plight of the homeless.

MIDTOWN — In the heart of Midtown, across from Madison Square Garden, the James Farley Post Office, and Brother Jimmy's BBQ, the first floor of 411-413 Eighth Avenue hosts a pizza place. But the three upper levels are all empty.

They've been that way since 1979, according to Picture the Homeless, an advocacy group that staged a tour of vacant properties in Chelsea and Midtown West

Tuesday night, in an effort to send a message to City Council Speaker Christine Quinn.



PTH Housing campaign march and sleepout in Christine Quinn's district. August 2010

Arvernetta Henry: When this particular party said “There isn't any vacant property available for the homeless population. That's why you have to be in the shelter system.” Well, she was talking to the wrong group of members!

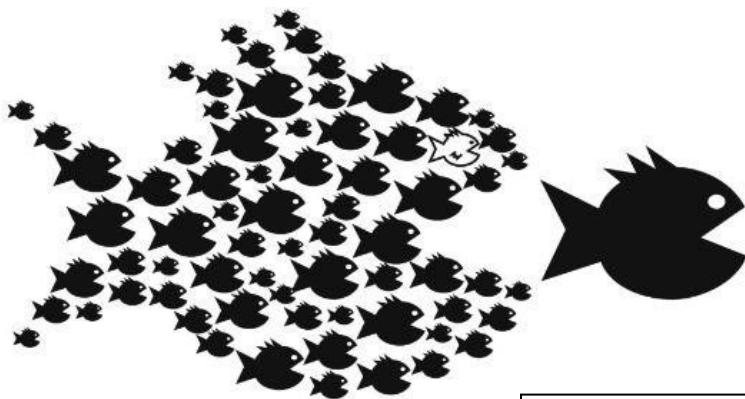
I never thought I would be sleeping out in the rain, on the ground, on an air mattress, camping out, because this person owned this building and it had been vacant for many, many, many, many years, in a very popular district. And we called the media, we called other organizations that supported us.

I said, “I wanted to do something new” and this was something exciting and new to me. I said, “I always liked camping!” But this was different. This was at night in the city street! I had so much fun, and people came and asked us why we were doing this. We gained respect from the people that was in the community, because they were educated. They found out who owned that building and they was surprised. They opened up their store to us, and they brought us food! Oh my! We had so much food! They allowed us to use their establishment, to go in and wash up, and go to the bathroom.

When they understood why we were out there and realized that, “Well all these people, they are not bad people! They're just asking for housing!” And when we would go to the streets and stay overnight... It brought attention to the main populations to say, “We have to get involved. We may not have to stay overnight, but we're going to support you.”



2010 CHASING CHASE



**LET'S
CHASE
CHASE!**

We have a message for Chase Morgan Bank—which received a \$25 billion dollar “TARP” bail-out of our money, which owns numerous vacant lots in NYC, which has foreclosed on hundreds of thousands of working people throughout the country, whose CEO Jamie Dimon picked up a cool \$20 million dollars last year.

Frank Morales: We had a march to Jamie Dimon, the CEO or whatever of Chase Bank. It was on Park Avenue, I think, and 90th something street. We marched from 125th, down Lex maybe—and down to Park Avenue and 90th Street. And it was

a bit of a march, because I think we had a few disabled folk who were with us, or other abled, you know.

It was a slow march, but it was a really powerful march. Of course, we had great banners. Seth [Tobocman] and others would help us with the banners, and we had good banners. I remember that as we were crossing, we were starting to feel a little fatigued. We were about halfway there, and then there were a couple of hills that we had to traverse, and all that, so it was a bit difficult.

But then, we were met by the Rude Mechanical Orchestra. We were coming around the corner, and they started playing. It was so great, I mean, it was such a spirit lifter. And then they joined us, and we made our way to Jamie Dimon's house. It was impressive. In other words, it was a strong witness, that these people who are sitting on so much wealth, and hoarding it, and facilitating the *violence* that's done against people. So, that was a good action.



Ms. Betty, Tammy, Frank Morales, and Salaam Ellis, PTH Housing Campaign march on Chase Bank CEO Jamie Dimon's house. 2010.



PTH carried out three banner drops in the early morning of May 19, 2010. One in Brooklyn, another in East Harlem and the third in the S. Bronx.

PTH Housing Campaign, speak out and march to Chase Bank banner drop. South Bronx, May 19, 2010



**Homes without People,
People without Homes!**

PTH Housing Campaign, East Harlem banner drop above, Brooklyn banner drop, below. May 19, 2010



2010 CALENDAR INTRO 48! City Council Disruptions



Darlene Bryant, William Burnett, PTH Housing Campaign and allies, press Conference and disruption of City Council "stated meeting". September 29, 2010



PTH Housing campaign disruptions included forcing Council Speaker Christine Quinn (left) and all council members to walk through the Intro 48 gauntlet. Some, including Council Member Letitia James, were supportive. September 29, 2010

Anika Paris: There was going to be this action to interrupt the City Council meeting to push the council to at least put Intro 48 on the calendar. It's like totally reasonable, you know? If elected representatives representing the will of the people are like, "This is actually a horrible idea." They can totally vote it down. But they weren't even bringing it that far.

We decided to do a rolling protest where we were going to get up in pairs and start chanting, "Calendar Intro 48! Calendar Intro 48!" I don't think that we went first, but my friend Joe and I were partnered in this action. And at that moment, we got up and started chanting, "Calendar Intro 48! Calendar Intro 48!"

I remember Jumaane Williams and Ydanis Rodriguez started chanting with us, and we were escorted out. I think we locked arms and I do remember a picture of me right outside of the chambers. I mean, it's exciting. I think I was a little bit relieved that I didn't get arrested. But there was the possibility that we would get arrested.



Andres Perez: My favorite was a housing campaign one. We had teams of three or four members to try to shut down the meeting. The first phase went inside the room and started screaming, "Intro 48!" Then they were escorted out. They didn't realize there were a couple more phases there. The city council personnel or whatever, she was angry. At the time, her name was Christine Quinn. She didn't realize how many of us were there doing this. Second person went in, same thing. We had ourselves chained together. She got so mad, she shut down the meeting and everything.



Security Team Blocks Homeless Activists from New York City Council Meeting

Andres Perez: We went back, I think the next day or a couple days later. We had a meeting in 250 Broadway. As we walked there, they had all our pictures up on this wall. I happened to look up. I said, “Oh, that looks like me. What the hell is with my picture up there?” And everybody’s looking at it, and says, “Oh, shit, that’s my picture.” It was hilarious.



Lynn Lewis: We had to get Norman Siegel, the civil rights, civil liberties attorney, to call Christine Quinn and say, “You can’t do that.” We felt pretty full of ourselves.



Marcus Moore: This white guy named Frank Morales—he was like *a pastor dude*, and he used to talk about this housing stuff, and things that's going on with meetings concerning housing with our local officials. That was the first time I'm really hearing how these people, in this particular organization, actually talked to politicians! And I'm like, “Man! These guys are talking to politicians. I don't see nobody in here with a suit

on. It don't look like to me that these people in here can even afford a suit!

But as time went on, I was going to these places and having meetings and people was just accepting me. It wasn't so much what I had on, but what was coming out my mouth, where politicians were like, "Where did these people come from?" So, I felt very comfortable on Thursdays talking about housing issues, and why the unbalance, and why so much vacancies is going on. It was just really like night school to me. I found something that I can be part of and be learning at the same time.



Marcus Moore, Anthony Williams, Kendall Jackman, Arvernetta Henry, Rogers, PTH Housing campaign presenting existing vacant property in each district of members of the Black Latino and Asian caucus of the NY City Council. December 12, 2010



2010: RESEARCHING VACANT PROPERTY, CO-CONVENING CONFERENCES

PTH co-convened *No More "Affordable" SCAMS* to learn and to teach about alternative housing models and community land trusts, sent Freedom of Information requests to multiple city agencies for data on vacant property, and continued to hold the city accountable to create pathways out of shelter, including Section 8.

"IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING"



Vacant NYC: Mapping the Homeless

By Curt Hopkins / September 10, 2010

The most exhilarating thing about social media to me is that it allows us to extend and amplify our dreams and concerns. One of the most bracing things that can be done with innovations in the social web is to take that innovation and turn it to uses the creators never thought of. An example of both these aspects of the web is Vacant NYC.

In a DIY response to a combination of homelessness, vacant properties that could be leveraged to ease that homelessness, and what they feel is a municipal disinterest in both, New York-based group Picture the Homeless, inspired by crisis-mapping outfit Ushahidi, are using crowdsource mapping to identify vacant property and lots in that city.

50¢ - NYDailyNews.com

Windy & rain, 76/63, Thursday, September 30, 2010

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

Building census to aid homeless wrong tack, Quinn says

BY FRANK LOMBARDI
and MIKE JACCARINO
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITERS

HOMELESS ADVOCATES lobbying for a bill to establish an annual census of vacant buildings and lots across the city got crushing news yesterday from City Council Speaker Christine Quinn.

"This is a bill that would be very costly and, I believe, divert resources for exactly the goal of the bill's proponents," said Quinn, as backers of the bill protested outside.

She said such a census would cost "millions of dollars" at a time when the city is wrestling with a huge budget deficit. Quinn said that the money would be better spent to directly help the homeless and build more housing.

The census would identify the vacant buildings and lots to target some for housing for the homeless and needy.

Members of the west Bronx group Picture the Homeless, rallying at City Hall for the bill, carried handmade signs with such messages as: "They Say Gentrify. We Say Occupy" and "Help the Homeless - We Need Housing, Not Lots."

"We plan to have the homeless fix up the empty houses," said group member Alease Lowe. "This would provide jobs for the homeless and help build homes for the homeless."

But Quinn said that rather than a costly census at this time money "might be better spent assisting homeless people and working

with not-for-profits that build quality housing for homeless people."

Without Quinn's blessing, legislation rarely gets to a vote at the Council level.

Arnold Cohen, president of Partnership for the Homeless, argued that finding empty lots where affordable housing can be constructed is an effective way to address homelessness.

"Housing is so out of reach for so many people in this city that it's important to find places where affordable housing can be constructed," said Cohen.

"That's why we're seeing the numbers of families in shelters continue to skyrocket."

The city Department of Homeless Services said 35,566 people were living in city shelters as of Sept. 23. mjaccarino@nydailynews.com

2011: PTH AND HUNTER COLLEGE CITY WIDE VACANT PROPERTY COUNT

In December of 2010 PTH met with Peter Marcuse, sharing with him the results of our vacant property FOIR, and RTTC survey data showing thousands of units of vacant buildings and lots. He recommended we speak again with Tom Angotti at Hunter College and that month finalized an agreement to partner on a city wide vacant property count. With a public launch in February 2011, PTH recruited hundreds of volunteers, held borough wide trainings and borough based press events.



Darlene Bryant at Press Conference Announcing Vacant Property Count, February 2011

Council member Letitia James, GKM, PTH Housing Campaign, Brooklyn Vacant Property Count Press Conference. April 26, 2011



Arverneta Henry with a volunteer, counting vacant buildings and lots. June 11, 2011

PTH led the historic first-ever city-wide Vacant Property Count, mobilizing over 275 volunteers, and partnering with dozens of community organizations, civic institutions, and community spaces from all five boroughs.



Arvernetta Henry: I knew that the mistreatment in the shelter system was devastating to children as well as adults. And so, we learned how to fight back. How to write chants, how to stand up to the government and say, “We’re human beings. We’re *not* a piece of meat that you can shuffle from place to place. We’re not your commodity!

We don’t believe that you have the right to keep us out of these vacant houses that I know for a fact is vacant.” And we learned how to go around and search for vacant property, how to log and research property and find out who was the landlords. Who owns this property? Why this property has been vacant so long?



Rob Robinson: And I think sometimes we’re a little bit guilty of fantasizing about, “Okay, now they’re going to open up all these vacant buildings around the city and let us in.” No, it’s not. But it’s putting the issue front and center, and people are starting to talk about it.

2011 PTH AND OCCUPY WALL STREET

Picture the Homeless joined OWS and other community groups on December 6, 2011, for the National Day of Action Around Housing. Actions took place in more than 25 cities across the country.

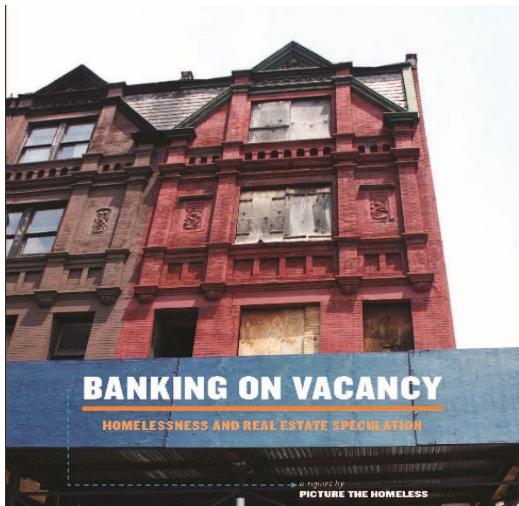
PTH members along with OWS marched through East New York highlighting vacant buildings that are being kept empty while there are so many people sleeping in expensive, horrible shelters, and on the street. The march ended with a house warming for a family that moved into a vacant foreclosed building.

PTH Board Member Andres Perez stated, “The December 6th action is just one example of what should be done across the city. All of these vacant buildings need to be turned into housing. The crime should be keeping vacant buildings empty, not trying to live in them!”



*Marcus Moore, Ryan Gibbs, GKM, Andres Perez, PTH Housing campaign.
December 6, 2011.*

2012: BANKING ON VACANCY REPORT RELEASE



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TOTAL FINDINGS



The following report exposes the extent to which vacant buildings and lots permeate our landscape, concentrated in the very communities hardest hit by gentrification and homelessness. We believe vacant property can create housing, parks, urban farms, commercial and cultural space, and jobs—and this report will prove just what a transformative impact this property could have.

Private Property—So What! The majority of vacant buildings and lots in NYC are privately owned, and the trend toward privatization continues. While we envision different strategies for the transformation of publicly owned vacant buildings and lots vis à vis privately-owned vacant property, both types beg the same question: who benefits from vacancy, and does that benefit outweigh the social and economic costs of the housing emergency?

If Picture the Homeless Can Do It, The City Can Do It!

Picture the Homeless gathered nearly 12,000 addresses of vacant buildings in NYC in 2011. This document is the first step in the process of turning those buildings into homes.

SOLUTIONS

Housing Creation is Jobs Creation A jobs creation program that partners with construction trade unions to provide apprenticeships to unemployed people would help convert vacant properties in the communities hit hardest by the recession and housing emergency. Every dollar of investment in housing development generates an additional two dollars in economic activity.² In the 1970s the CETA program funded job training for public assistance recipients through employment in the rehabilitation of vacant buildings.³ These “sweat equity” models allowed people to receive training to renovate and purchase properties through their labor during the 1980s, but were phased out in the 1990s. We need to bring back past models with proven track records.

End Vacancy Decontrol and Liberate Thousands of Vacant Rent Stabilized Units Ending vacancy decontrol for rent stabilized apartments, renovating them and renting them

Kazembe Balagun: The Vacancy Count felt like such a vanguard issue. It was like, pointing at the vacant houses that exist in the city, is the most intrinsic critique of capitalism that you can do without even telling people that, “This shit’s about capitalism.”

And that shit is so slick and so smart that people don't understand they're talking about capitalism. It's like, “Yeah! Look at all of us homeless people and look at all those empty houses. You make that connection.” And folks are like, “Damn!” And I think that was like the pedagogical example of people's actual practical lived experience being dignified and not theorized. That's where I thought that that movement pedagogy felt like it was real. I also felt it was real in terms of the symbolism. I felt having the powder blue shirts and the crow bar as a symbol was this kind of level of visibility around the issue that was just like, yeah!



Jenny Akchin: People would talk about *Banking on Vacancy* and how amazing it was. Like, just that people went and just counted, right? And just did it, because people talk all the time about data, right? “Oh, we need to get this data. Oh, we need to get that data.” And you all just did that! And I think that was really attractive to me at the time, because it was seeing groups that actually do and show up in that way was like really, really cool.

2012 PTH DELIVERS VACANT PROPERTY COUNT INVOICE

Invoice

To: Councilman Erik Martin Dilan From: Picture the Homeless

Service Rendered:

- ▲ Doing His Job
- ▲ Finding Solutions to the Housing Crisis
- ▲ Counting Vacant Buildings & Lots

Total Amount to be Paid:

“Millions of Dollars.”

(The City Council's cost estimate—even though we did it for \$150,000!)

In lieu of Payment, Picture the Homeless will accept:

- ▲ Following the legislative process
- ▲ Calendaring Intro 48
- ▲ Instituting an annual citywide count of vacant property!

For more information, call Picture the Homeless: 646-314-6423

PICTURE THE HOMELESS

Organizing For Justice and Respect:

Don't Talk About Us: Talk With Us!

2427 Morris Ave, Bronx NY, 10468



- Blog: www.picturethehomeless.org/blog
YouTube: www.youtube.com/picturethehomeless
Facebook: <http://tiny.cc/ptfonfacebook>
Flickr: <http://tiny.cc/ptfonflickr>
Twitter: <http://twitter.com/ptny>



PTH visited Erik Dilan's house on February 11, 2012, delivering an invoice PTH's city-wide count of vacant buildings and lots, for the amount that Speaker Quinn said it would cost.

Intro 48, a bill that would empower the City to annually count vacant properties and is currently

supported by 29 City Council representatives, had been sitting on Erik Dilan's desk for two years. Picture the Homeless members held a press conference in front of Erik Dilan's house at 1281 Decatur Street in Brooklyn.

DeBoRah Dickerson: You got to let them know, we're not going to sit there and take it. We're going to be sitting out here and I guess I'm one of those real militant type of people. "Let's sit out here, and when you come by, you got to walk over top of us." When you start trying to embarrass them, they have to look at that.



PTH Housing campaign, taking Banking on Vacancy to Erik Dilan's Committee on Housing and Buildings hearing, February 28, 2012

2012: DISRUPTING DILAN'S FUNDRAISER WITH THE TRUTH



13, Adrian Antonio Paling, PTH Housing Campaign disrupting Dilan's fundraiser with copies of Banking on Vacancy, educating Dilan's donors that he isn't doing his job and to "Calender Intro 48! February 21, 2012

2012 PTH SET UP BY CHRISTINE QUINN AND THE NY POST



City-funded activist group teaches homeless how to invade Apartments

By MICHAEL GARTLAND

March 25, 2012

It's breaking and entering for dummies. Picture the Homeless, a Bronx nonprofit that has received at least \$240,000 in taxpayer money in the last five years, is giving a crash course on squatting — and city-owned buildings are a prime target.



gothamist™

Homeless Advocates Protest Outside NY Post HQ After Tabloid's Critical Article

March 29, 2012

Picture the Homeless Board Member Ryan Gibbs blasted the tabloid for its "history of racist reactionary news coverage." The Post article focused on the fact that upwards of \$240,000 of taxpayer dollars in the last five years has funded Picture the Homeless, and that money is going towards classes that "preach squatting." But homeless advocates say this number is small change when compared with the \$3 billion NYC has spent in the last four years on a shelter system that "warehouses" occupants rather than focusing on housing.

Gibbs explained how the Post article never mentioned the community outreach programs Picture the Homeless is involved in, the organization's goal of educating the public about homelessness, nor the "ridiculous rents" that prevent New Yorkers from affordable housing. He went on to claim that the system is maintained in this manner "so that landlords and politicians can get rich" and "the NY Post is their lackey." But Picture the Homeless isn't bitter about the bad press. Executive Director Lynn Lewis told us, "We don't feel defensive. This is an opportunity to talk about the achievements of Picture the Homeless. We do not advocate criminal activity, but laws change when people organize."



Andres Perez: I was framed by the *New York Post* for being somewhere I wasn't. They also put out a message that I didn't mention. So, we had to clear that up, and finally we got out of that mess.



Ryan Hickey: There was a lot of accusations of PTH teaching people how to squat and take over buildings and like ten *Post* articles, *Daily News* articles, obviously hit jobs, kind of smearing. I was like, "Okay, this is crazy but also, "I agree with that, though." If there are vacant buildings you have to use them and if people are sleeping on the street, they deserve a home. I was looking on the website and stuff and reading all the articles. I was like the *Post* is painting this as like a bad thing, but I view this as a good thing.

2012 COUNTING VACANT PROPERTY DEMOCRATIZING LAND USE PLANNING

PTH's Community Land Trust (CLT) work takes off. PTH co-designed a class and participatory research project on housing policy and community land trusts at City College of New York. The first meeting of what would evolve into the New York City Community Land Initiative was co-convened by PTH and met in October 2012.



2012: CLT STUDY GROUP

Ryan Hickey: They fucking put us on a really concrete roadmap that just transforming New York City housing, and everybody's talking about CLTs now and it would not be the case if homeless people did not do that.

We developed a curricula based on brainstorming sessions, and we had weekly study groups where we were talking about community land trusts, *really* getting into the nuts and bolts, looking at case studies, we were reading reports and we educated ourselves based on the knowledge that we already had but we also looked at other resources, as well.

We tapped into those resources, and we started forming this common language around land trusts and mutual housing associations and home ownership and equity and all this really complicated terminology that was used to other homeless people in these conversations, in these policy questions.

And I think people just made a conscious decision. We're just like, "No, that's not going to happen anymore. You know, we're going to be part of these conversations. We're going to be *leading* these conversations." That's when NYCCLI was really taking root and that's when the study group morphed into the Education and Outreach Workgroup, where the coalition was looking to Picture the Homeless to like ingest the material and digest it and see what comes out—in terms of like how do we talk to people about this really complicated stuff.

"The importance of this is to demonstrate that homeless people are capable of doing what most of society says they can't do."

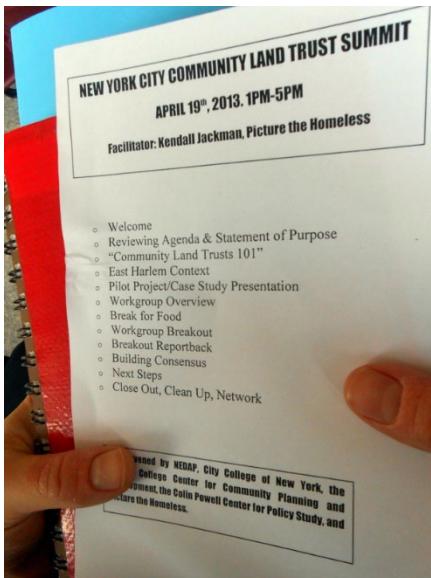
—Dwayne Austin, PTH MEMBER

2013: MAKE IT COUNT!

PTH published a field guide to counting vacant property, a companion to *Banking on Vacancy: Homelessness and Real Estate Speculation*. From the introduction:

"Picture the Homeless counted enough vacant buildings and land to house just under 200,000 people in 2012 in just a third of NYC. Our vacant property count proved that the housing crisis is not about a shortage of space, it is about who controls those buildings and that land. Homelessness is a

manufactured crisis that lots of folks are making money off of. An inventory of vacant property can be a *first* step to reverse this process. What follows is a step by step manual of our process, your process may have variations based on your local circumstances."



PTH builds out CLT work, there is enough vacant buildings and land to house every homeless New Yorker and then some and there's money wasted on the shelter system rather than creating housing for poor people.



Marcus Moore, PTH Housing campaign, addressing what becomes NYCLLI. July 29, 2013

2013: STRATEGIC PLANNING AND EVALUATION



PTH Housing campaign strategic planning retreat. November 2013

2014: PROTESTING CUOMO CUTS

Although PTH identified issues with poorly designed voucher and supportive housing programs, the housing campaign continued to push for the city and state to provide housing assistance to poor and homeless New Yorkers, while at the same time identifying the systemic change needed to solve the housing crisis.



Ryan Hickey: All the LINC stuff happened during that time I think and where members and homeless folks were coming to us saying, "I have a LINC but nobody's accepting me." There's LINC I, II, III, IV and eventually a fifth one was added. And all of them targeted a certain population of homeless folks. So, there's a seniors, there was single adults. There were the adults with children. Families without children, so just couples and stuff like that. I mean they kind of like, sectioned it off.



Danielle Statuto, PTH Housing campaign, protesting Gov. Cuomo cuts to housing subsidies. February 14, 2014

Jenny Akchin: One thing that I do really credit Picture the Homeless with—that I wouldn't have gotten *anywhere else*, is a very healthy critique of vouchers and a very healthy critique of supportive housing. I definitely feel like I wouldn't have the tools to even begin to have that thought and thought process without having been at PTH.

Marcus Moore: I'll never forget when fellows was trying to get me to take this pill, so I can get my housing faster. I came into the shelter system as healthy dude and I left as a healthy individual, in my right state of mind. So, I realized that people was endangering their health to able to get some form of housing. And they didn't care what they did to their bodies to get it to be diagnosed of whatever type of degree of health that you would have to have your own housing immediately, as opposed to waiting for the system to house you because you're able bodied, so you could just get out there get a job or something and do your own housing.

I've learned that a lot of men at the time—because I was in a men's shelter, they just got to the point where they just endangered their health, they didn't care no more. They're gonna, take these pills, and get checked out by the doctor where they have to address them to some kind of housing package immediately.



Arvernetta Henry: I said, "Oh wow! I got money; I'm just running short." And nobody was telling me about any resources that I can go to get extra help. And so, I just started working more closely with the organization.

And I learned that there were ways to get housing, but you had to have certain criteria and because I had a background in teaching and education... I just did not fit in, and I felt it was so unfair. I wasn't a senior citizen, and I wasn't mentally ill, and I didn't have a handicap. My handicap was lack of housing. And so, many times, I found myself crying, and just saying, "God, please help me. What do you want me to do. What am I doing wrong?"

Ryan Hickey: Donna may not have come to every housing meeting, but when it came time to talk to the press about the failures of LINC or the failures of temporary subsidies, which was a huge thing for the press for a year and they needed a story about the failures of these problems, if I didn't do that work with Donna, they wouldn't have come to us.

So even if it didn't serve a targeted campaign about temporary subsidies, that still served the mission and still served the work because Donna was talking. I remember Donna was on camera, but she didn't want to show her face because she was afraid of retaliation. So they lit behind her and kept her face shadowed.

And at the end of the day, she was telling a very good, real story about the failures of LINC and that helped push our other campaign work up because then we could say, "Look at our member who did such a great job on this. This isn't the solution. *This is the solution.*" And then that's when we did a lot of the social media stuff and that got a lot of traction because we effectively managed the narrative around the failures of the system versus the policy solutions that we were talking about and were working towards.



2014: CLUSTER SITE ORGANIZING

Ryan Hickey: Cluster Sites are shelters from the Giuliani era—usually rent stabilized apartments that were converted into shelters. They quickly became a profiteering scheme for



Example of cluster site apartment conditions. November 16, 2015

slumlords. Because slumlords realized they could get two, three times the amount of legal rent. So, if the rent stabilized apartment would only get eight-hundred dollars, usually the payment was three grand. That's what the city paid for each unit. Because they were shelter units. And they were families with children, exclusively.

They were scattered all throughout the city and there was about three thousand families in the cluster site

system at its peak, I think. And it was the Andrew Rice piece on the Podolskys, the title was like, "How a landlord made millions off of profiting off of the poor."

This hits a lot of points of what we've been talking about. Like, the shelter system is eating into the affordable housing stock. Homeless people are being profited off of. Slumlords are making millions and they're living in really, really shitty conditions that are going to endanger their lives. It's like quintessential what's fucked up with the system.

Cluster sites weren't really on the map for anybody. We were the only people going into these cluster sites, knocking on doors, sneaking past security. We kept knocking on doors and we tried to have some meetings with cluster site residents, and it was so difficult because oftentimes they were single parents with multiple kids. I don't think I've ever seen one person with just one kid. It was like multiple kids.

2014: HOUSING NOT SHELTERS

**SPEAK OUT IN SUPPORT OF
PERMANENT HOUSING!!**

**August 20th, 2014,
11am, Pan Am Hotel**

Rally and Speak-out with Pan Am Residents
79-00 Queens Boulevard
M, R to Grand Avenue-Newtown

New York City
spends \$1
BILLION on the
shelter system,
but homeless
people need
permanent



Housing - NOT SHELTERS!

While private companies get huge contracts to provide services, the reality is that homeless people rarely benefit from these services and are offered little help to find Permanent housing.

*PTH Housing campaign
protesting the city
selling vacant
property.
October 28, 2015*



2015 HOLDING NOT FOR PROFIT INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX ACCOUNTABLE

Ryan Hickey: We had a march to Aguila's headquarters, which was also in the Bronx. We got shelter residents who lived in Aguila buildings, we blew up photos of dead rats and stuff like that. I'm organizing in tenant buildings now that are falling apart. Honestly, that's nothing compared to the cluster site stuff. The cluster site apartments were the worst I have ever seen in my life.

Aguila was contracted by the city. The landlords had nothing to do with the city. It was the "service providers" who had the contracts, and they had a responsibility to maintain habitability throughout these buildings and they were failing. That's their job.

We went after them because that's where the accountability was, legally. And so, we went after Aguila, and we had a march from shelter to shelter, and then we ended at Aguila and then we took over their office. We forced our way inside and I remember the security guard was so freaked out and pissed, and he was shouting.

We took over their office because we were just like, "Fix up your buildings! Like you are getting millions every month. Millions every month and you're putting it into your salaries, or you're putting it to something else besides maintaining these apartments. You're not even giving people metro cards. You're not providing any services." They're not even onsite, because sometimes there was supposed to be onsite services. I think that's when Aguila, like at 941 [Intervale Avenue], they started having onsite services in the commercial space right next to there.



Above ^ PTH Housing campaign Aguila action in front of cluster site apartment building. June 10, 2015. Below, occupation of Aguila offices. June 10, 2015.



Ryan Hickey: At 941 Intervale there was Antoinette. I think that was her name. She was blind, she was an undocumented immigrant and she had multiple children and she was like the leader of the building. Everybody knew she was fearless; everybody knew she got the worst of retaliation and stuff. But she was just like, “No, fuck these people. I’m living in a unit that I could almost afford if it were not a shelter unit, but the ceiling is falling down, the plumbing is shitty. There’s mold everywhere. I have four kids and there’s a one-bedroom and I’m sleeping on the floor.” Like, I have nothing else to lose, right?”

We held an action out there, which I remember being really, really powerful. Then we soon realized that it was DHS, but also the service provider, which was Aguila at that time, who was retaliating against the people who were inclined to speak out, or whose faces were in the media and stuff. So, Antoinette was retaliated against with not even thirty-day notices, like emergency shelter transfers. Because if it’s an emergency, they don’t have to give thirty-day.



Lynn Lewis: I have a memory of going into a staff meeting and you getting a text from Antoinette and had a picture of a twenty-four-hour notice. Maria and Arvernetta were in the office, and we were like, “Ryan, you have to go!” So, you went with Arvernetta and Maria, and organized.



Ryan Hickey: Arvernetta and Maria were so powerful in those conversations. Most of the people were out of their apartments, in the hallway, shouting, “What’s happening?” People were packing up their shit in trash bags, DHS did not give them anything. They gave them twenty-four fucking hours! They had their life possessions in trash bags.

Some people were just like, “I’m going. I’m tired of fighting.” Or, “I don’t want to fight.” But the people who *were* fighting we quickly identified. Some people we didn’t even know yet. I think it was Arvernetta, “Yeah, we’ll do a blockade, nobody’s leaving here.”

I remember calling Sam and you, and we’re just like, “People want to do a blockade. Would you be down with that?” And you’re like, “Yep, let’s do it tomorrow. Cool.” We did it at six a.m., seven a.m., because it was twenty-four hours, and we didn’t actually know when the timeframe, if it was strict or whatever. But I remember Andres was there, Stanley was there. We had a bunch of people there, really fucking early in the Bronx, where a lot of people didn’t live, including myself. I remember we got lawyers there; we got press there. I think Banana Kelly came. That’s when we started formulating the narrative, “No, these are tenants.” Because nobody else was calling them tenants.

Some people did get permanent housing out of that. Antoinette was one of them and through that fight we got permanent tenancy for a bunch of people who didn’t have it! And I think it was like eighteen people in that apartment building, and I think eight or nine got permanent tenancy—because of us, because of them.



Maria Walles: We had to go to the building, and we did an action! "Because, you didn't give these women no notification. You only gave them twenty-four hours..." And we was able to stop the transfer, we was able to get a meeting with the city council in that district. We was able to get a meeting and we was able to talk to them and stuff like that, and they put it on a note saying that men and women are not getting a transfer.

One sister almost lost her job. I remember one young lady said she was about to do a job interview and she thought she wasn't able to do it. It put a lot of stress and strain on her. You know, some of them was able to stay. Some of them was able to get vouchers. They was able to get the vouchers and they was able to move out. Some of them did eventually was able to move, and get their apartments and stuff like that.



2015 CLUSTER SITE SLEEP-OUT

Ryan Hickey: We were shifting course a little bit but also looking at the landlords, specifically the Podolskys. Because all the buildings we were organizing in were Podolsky buildings and we had some really good media hits, we were doing actions, we were trying to drum up media support for ending the cluster site program.

We started doing a little bit more research. I remember I was doing scouting missions on where they were working, where their offices were, where their houses were. I don't even know how we did this. We just found out where one of the brothers

lived and then we had that sleep out, which was so fun and so crazy.

Our members knew how to do this stuff and they were teaching me how to do this stuff. I remember Maria was always just like, "Let's have a sleep-out!" But they just knew... I remember like going through a lot of those checklists in those housing meetings. Members are like, "Okay, so do we have this? Do we have this? Do we have this? Do we have this?" Like, holy shit—I barely need to be here. I'm facilitating the discussion, but you guys know what to do.

That was on 59th Street in Midtown. He lived in this high-rise luxury tower. Landlords are parasites, for the record. But *this guy*, he doesn't do anything for a living. What he does is profit off of homeless people, and he was living in a luxury tower with a pool, sauna, all this shit.

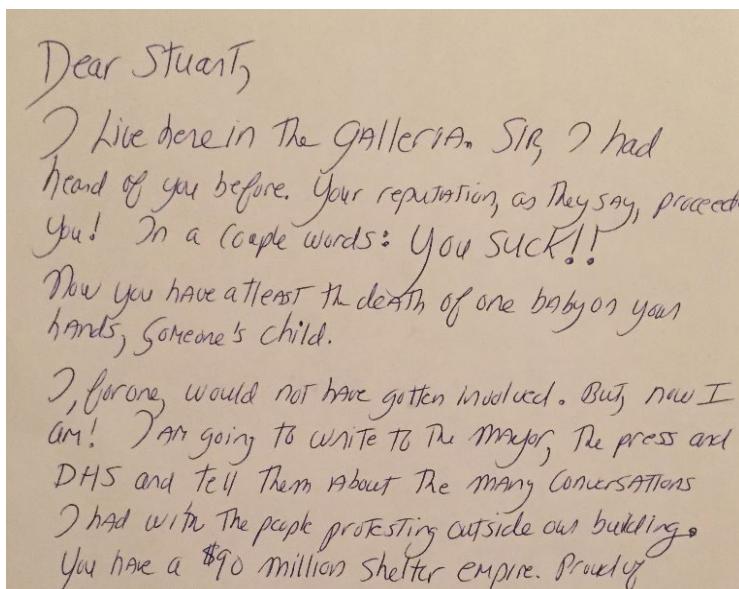
So, we start organizing for the sleep-out, and we have the sleep-out. We get some tenants who lived in his buildings. I remember this other new member; her name was Flora. She was really cool, and we were slowly pushing her into leadership roles where she did some public speaking that day



Salaam Ellis, Turhan White, Darlene Bryant, PTH Housing campaign sleep-out in front of Podolsky luxury building. August 20, 2015.

and she was amazing. She was so good. I think one or two other tenants came.

We had music going and we were doing flyering outside to tell his neighbors who he is. And some people were just like, "Wow, I had no idea. I know this dude. I see him a lot. I didn't know he made his money this way." Then early in the night one of the neighbors comes down with food for us, and she's like, "Why don't I take you upstairs?"



Legal Aid was there. I think UHAB was there. Banana Kelly was there, Crown Heights Tenants Union. I think that was the majority of the groups. But like Coalition for the Homeless wasn't there and just goes to show the organizing that was happening was from Picture the Homeless and no other group... And we were the only ones calling for these demands, in very explicit terms.

Charmel Lucas: I spoke. I was prepped to speak to the media. Al and I were still new to everybody. I had an interview with Jay Dow about the Podolski's building and how *a studio* apartment is cheaper than you'll spending six thousand dollars a month for us to be in a room.



Charmel Lucas, PTH Housing campaign, Podolsky sleep-out. June 10, 2015.

Unfortunately, Al and I didn't sleep out, because we didn't want to lose our hot room. So we didn't sleep all night. But I really enjoyed it! And they need to do more of it. And I really was appreciative that they took Ryan upstairs and Podolski's daughter's friends wanted to shame her at school, "Oh, that's

so-and-so's dad! I didn't know he was such a creep!" That was the highlight! Take that back to school! Share that!

Kay Samuels: It maybe might be in a funky way, but it's effective. Sleeping outside that guy's building was pretty funky—and for them to realize they couldn't move anybody. I don't think a lot of people know that you can sleep on the street in New York. I don't think people really know that.



Kay Samuels, Ryan Hickey, Podolsky sleep-out.

HOMELESS POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Jenny Akchin: I mean, we would go to rallies and our members were super on fire about—what are we talking about when we talk about affordable, and like affordable to whom? And are they including *us* in the tenant spaces? Are they including *us* in these legislative campaigns?

So, you really quickly just come to understand the importance of representation and of accountability in those spaces. I know a lot of organizations that don't value that in the same way, and I think it's really to Picture the Homeless' credit that that's so much a part of the motto and the doctrine of the organization and people really know that, and I think they gravitate towards it.



2015: REZONING BATTLES

Kay Samuels: I was extremely impressed with how Picture the Homeless stayed with their opinion on MIH, and ZQE. Because the other groups sold out. Whatever the mayor gave them, they took that. I don't know what they got, but whatever they got, they decided to *just drop* out of the coalition—which weakened the coalition. I think they were winning! I really think that they were making a stance that City Hall could not walk around or run around. What did they do? They just sold out, and that killed it.

So, now we have MIH and AZQ—now everybody's complaining about it. But we knew it was bad! You knew it was bad. But you sold out everybody, and now we have a situation that's *really bad* in terms of the housing and percentage that's given for this and given for that.



Cops Accused Of Using Greater Force On Black Protesters Who Interrupted City Council Vote

by Emma Whitford in News on Mar 23, 2016

The City Council was in the midst of approving two major pillars of Mayor de Blasio's \$41 billion affordable housing plan on Tuesday afternoon, when a small group of protesters in the Council gallery cut through the proceedings with shouts of "City Council vote no, MIH has got to go!"



2016: GAINING GROUND: FROM PROBLEMS TO SOLUTIONS

Ryan Hickey: *Gaining Ground* came out of a lot of formal and impromptu conversations with housing leaders where we were organizing in cluster sites and seeing just the really shitty conditions that people were living in.

The three main things, were permanent subsidies, we have to do something about these cluster sites, and all that is going towards a solution which is land trusts—where people own and control the land and then somehow manage the

properties on top of it. We'd been having these conversations for a long time, and I guess I was struggling to figure out what to do with them because we were doing all these things kind of separately rather than as part of just one cohesive framework.

I started writing *Gaining Ground* as just bullet points on paper. I remember having these meetings with Valerio Orselli from Cooper Square, Ken Wray from CATCH [Community Assisted Tenant Controlled Housing], and Harry from Banana Kelly, who are all developers and had gotten properties from the government, who *knew* the motions of how to do this, and also had a lot of experience with dealing and tracking down subsidies and most importantly, *housing poor people*.

At the same time we were obviously talking back and forth with members, and members were in all these meetings and were adamant in that these cluster site buildings, these privately owned buildings owned by slumlords, they had to be owned by somebody else and the government can subsidize it through LINC or Section 8 or whatever.



PTH Housing Campaign, Gaining Ground Press Conference, January 27, 2016

Ryan Hickey: The finished product was *Gaining Ground*. We specifically looked at five, six, seven cluster site buildings and we did value assessments on them, and we said the government should take this over through eminent domain. And a lot of people who we asked to sign on to *Gaining Ground* did not like that. They specifically said, ‘no they weren’t going to sign on to it because it said eminent domain.’

Some of the smaller, more radical groups signed on to it because they had no problems with eminent domain, and they knew and understood the political ramifications of asking for eminent domain for this stuff.



Charmel Lucas: I mean, to me, it was just normal, normal conversation, “What is going on here? What do you need? How do you need it?” That’s really all it takes! What do you need? How can I get you there? And I enjoyed it.

No, I did not enjoy walking up all them damn steps. Ryan and I paired off, we’re like absorbing all this shit... People are telling us, showing us... Roaches—I mean the roach stuff—boom, boom, boom, boom.

The issue was the landlord was playing the shelter issue people against the paying tenants. *That was a big thing.* Don't tell me that you're not gonna pick up my trash because we got shelter people here! You got shelter people. Okay. Don't tell me you're not going to fix my door because you got shelter people here for six and five thousand dollars and you know—the ones with the kids, ain't no telling. They had to make close to ten thousand. It still has to be close to ten thousand a

month! Ten thousand dollars a damn month—so, that was the most impactful. Just because *you* money hungry. Oh. So that was the last door knocking of the clusters.

That's when the mayor said, "If you get eighty percent of the clients to say they will stay here in this apartment if it will be rehabbed." And they said, "Yes." So, I got eighty percent. I just broke it down to them, "Look, if you're willing to stay here, they're going to rehab it. Is this a *suitable size*? And most of them, people with children, "And is the school good enough for your child?" And a lot of them said they was comfortable. They was comfortable with their area, they was comfortable with their stores.



Ryan Hickey: Then fast forward whatever, a year and a half, two years later after *Gaining Ground*. That's when Mayor [Bill] de Blasio announced that actually they were going to implement eminent domain on the Podolsky portfolio. I remember that day being like, "What the fuck is this?" You know, nobody else was pushing this except us. We were the only ones knocking on doors in cluster sites.

Charmel [Lucas] was really the one member who was knocking on doors, I mean consistently, and building relationships with people. I just said to the mayor, "You wouldn't be here if it weren't for these two people, Lisa [Milhouse], and Charmel. You wouldn't be here if it weren't for us but we're the ones who put this plan in motion. We're the ones who gave you the statistics. We're the ones who gave you the facts. We're the ones who gave you the framework to work with and then you're just ignoring homeless peoples' work." And then, turns out eminent domain wasn't such a bad idea after all, and the city really liked it and that was because of us. For the record that was because of us.

2016: HOUSING NOT WAREHOUSING

Intro 48 evolved from one bill, to three. The Housing Not Warehousing Act was comprised of three bills, with three different sponsors. This time, one of them was the chair on the Committee on Housing and Buildings of the New York City Council, Jumaane Williams and the bills moved forward.

DeBoRah Dickerson: We went to meet with HPD. I remember we had our statistical information, another organizer, she was there talking, and me saying, "Well, this is what we have found." And we gave them the information that we were talking about, and this was one time we were talking about really lobbying for Housing Not Warehousing.

I think about how they came in with their entourage, they came out with fifteen people. They had Sanitation, they had the Fire Department, they had these people come up. But nobody knew what the next one was doing! Because no department was talking to the next department and they were city agencies, and I used to work for the city. Y'all don't communicate? So, I got issues with that. Show me something that's really working, that's beneficial. If it's working so well, then why come is this happening?"





*Al Williams, PTH
Housing Campaign,
Housing Not
Warehousing Press
conference. September
15, 2016*

*Jermaine, Al Williams,
William Burnett,
PTH Housing campaign
testifying for the Housing
Not Warehousing Act.
September 15, 2016*



*PTH Housing Campaign
members and allies in City
Council Chambers, during
Housing Not Warehousing
hearing*

2017: VACANT LOT VISIONING SESSION

Ryan Hickey: So, the summer of 2017 we had an action every few weeks, I think. So, there's was one time where my friend Ingrid, she was working out of the Laundromat Project. We developed this day of action where we started out in Marcus Garvey [Park]. We had this event where people were making the banner, themselves, there were different stalls around about activism and art and East Harlem and stuff like that.



2017: CLUSTER SITE WIN

Jenny Akchin: *Gaining Ground* was my first assignment when I was hired. *Gaining Ground* was us giving the city all of its best ideas, right? It was homeless people looking at these buildings that were rent-stabilized, where landlords—slum lords like the Podolskys, had kicked people out and replaced them with shelter units.

This is a huge waste of housing for everybody because it's just a displacement machine where people are displaced into homelessness, and then homeless people are put into the same homes that those people used to live in and then the slum lords collect twice as much rent, and it's just a shitty system. And so, we did a cost analysis on just the cost of that based on some statistics, I think from the DOI report. Department of Investigations did an audit of what was being spent.

Then we proposed alternatives, and we were told that some of them were very reasonable. Then we took this report, and I remember going with Donna and you and Ryan and I think Sam was there for that one too. And did anyone else go to Steve Banks?

And then, it goes into a vacuum, and then we get a call scheduling a meeting with the deputy mayor, Alicia Glen, who we all have feelings about, but who actually really I think, read this report. And I remember her staff was like, "This is interesting, right? This is a good report." And you know, then it goes into a vacuum again and a couple of months later they announce their amazing plan to take these buildings through eminent domain! I know our big victory that year was the Housing Not Warehousing Act and that was twelve years of work, and it was amazing. But, that was a victory. *That's huge.*

That little policy report went in three years, from a bunch of notes on a Google spreadsheet to you know, a portfolio of buildings being transferred and they're going to be developed next year.



2017: PASSAGE OF HOUSING NOT WAREHOUSING ACT

Nikita Price: What Picture the Homeless has done is always shown that it's a myth about homeless people. We've gotten legislation—on that fucking board in there—Housing Not Warehousing, that homeless people put together. We're part of a coalition where there's two pieces of legislation that should have been passed with some other legislation back in 2013—

the Right to Know Act. Homeless people are doing this shit. We're not doing it by ourselves, but we've injected ourselves into the conversation—on housing, on policing, your civil rights, your basic rights, your basic needs.



Rogers: More and more and more we have to continue pushing so that the vacant spaces are not only identified, but that they become occupied by the sixty, seventy, eighty thousand people in New York City who are homeless. It's not rocket science. But still, there are those who are too obtuse to understand that simplicity.

As more and more members of the City Council become alert to the incredible bureaucracy that's costing the city of New York one billion or more each year, then maybe more of them will begin to realize what these people are saying is not so crazy and we should push harder to have some of this converted into housing for the homeless. It's doable. It's affordable. It makes sense. We just have to get some people to understand that we're not the lunatic fringe. Then maybe they'll understand—not just that we can identify the spaces, but we can convert those spaces and then occupy those spaces.

Convincing city council people, convincing some real estate owners, convincing some developers, this is what we have to continue to do. But it is completely doable that we can be the greatest city in the world, and we can provide housing for everybody who needs a decent place to live. It's completely doable. The faith that I have tells me it is not just doable, but is mandated, not just something that we could do, but my faith tells me it's something that we must do.

DeBoRah Dickerson: I talked about how historical it was that homeless people had a bill, and the importance of having this bill—that it took us a long time, but we finally got it. And I wanted to thank Mayor DeBlasio for giving us the opportunity and the chance. Because people think that homeless people are nobodies, that we don't have no minds, we don't have vision, we are not educated. And that's the farthest thing out, you know?

And just standing there was just a wonderful day. It does make me feel really great. And I could feel my ancestors on my shoulder, and I'm saying, "Well, we didn't stop." Because I think about Harriet Tubman. She told her people, "Keep moving." *And that's what Picture the Homeless has done.*



2018 Business of Homelessness

Jenny Akchin: I think one of the things that was really hard about this particular research was it was extremely demoralizing. People would read the budgets. That was a huge part of our report—reading city budgets and seeing how much was being spent on every line item. People were devastated thinking about how much money was being spent, while they were living in the system. So, a lot of it was really, really hard—emotionally hard.

The other half of the research project was thinking about affordable housing. In my mind I was like, this is going to be the hopeful part of the project, this is going to be the part

where we see the potentials and the vision and what we can really get done.

In fact, affordable housing is also extremely expensive and so, there was a really difficult reality that we had to confront there, too. It's not as expensive as the alternative and it's much better for people to have homes than not to have homes, than to live in a system, obviously. But it wasn't like there was an easy answer. There was no easy solution at the end, and it wasn't neat, and it wasn't simple. And that was really difficult.

What I appreciated so much about our members was just everyone's extremely just intellectually curious and engaged and invested in this. It just reminded me how important research was to our members.



Ryan Hickey: When Picture the Homeless was founded people told you, "It can't be done..." But you proved that it can be done very successfully. Our members prove that homeless people aren't anything like what we've been fed our entire lives, we meaning the American people. When people talk about bottom-up organizing in terms of socioeconomic status and marginalization, homeless people are quite damn near the bottom.

There are intersections between LGBTQ runaway youth who are homeless, and trans folks who are homeless and there are all these intersections of oppression, but a lot of the times what they have in common is that they're homeless. I guess also I've learned sectioning off homeless people into groups and categories it's divisive. When you craft policies based on

that way of thinking then homeless folks who aren't getting the benefits of that policy are like, "Well, you—person who's getting this policy I don't like you anymore, and now I'm going to fight *for me*. And the state has done that pretty successfully I would say, which is a shame.

Picture the Homeless has tried to counter that narrative of "Yeah, if we divide society into neat little sections then our policy will be really neat and then finally, we'll end homelessness." We see that's not true and in fact it's done a lot of damage to movement thinking and movement organizers where we think that we can house homeless people with AIDS, and then we'll be fine. Or, we'll house veterans and we'll be fine. Or, single mothers and then we'll be fine.

The problem isn't divided into these neat little sections. It's very messy, and we have to embrace those differences but not craft policies *around* those differences, per se. And PTH I think, counters that narrative pretty well.



PTH HOUSING CAMPAIGN WRAP-UP

2000 PTH and NYC AIDS Housing Network co-chaired the “consumer committee” of the Continuum of Care, training hundreds of homeless New Yorkers on HUD homeless funding

2004 Surveyed 109 vacant buildings in East Harlem.

2006 Completed count of vacant property in Manhattan, proving there is enough vacant property in Manhattan to house every homeless household in NYC

2007 Published *Homeless People Count*, documenting the Manhattan vacant property count and identified alternative housing models.

2007 Created the Housing Not Warehousing Coalition

2008 Moved the State Legislature to end the tax credit encouraging vacant property above 110th St. in Manhattan.

2008 Drafted City Council legislation to empower NYC to conduct an annual count of vacant buildings and lots.

2009 Trained Right to the City and Reclaim NYC to conduct vacant building counts

2009 Anchored the first national visit to the U.S. by the U.N. Special Rapporteur for Housing

2009 Coordinated the chapter on Homelessness in a national report presented to the CERD convention in Geneva.

2009 Drafted City Council legislation that would empower the city to conduct an annual count of vacant buildings and lots: more than a majority of the Council co-sponsored.

2010 Launched an interactive site - vacantnyc.crowdmap.com, using open source software to map 2,000 addresses obtained from FOIL returns and invited everyone in NYC to participate.

2010 Co-convened the No More “Affordable” Housing Scams! conference on CLTs and community-based planning, Hunter College

2011 Led historic first-ever city-wide Vacant Property Count in partnership with Hunter College's Department of Community Planning and Development, mobilizing over 275 volunteers, and partnering with dozens of community organizations.

2011 Co-designed a class and participatory research project on housing policy and CLT's at City College of New York.

2011 Developed online CLT resource page on the PTH website.

2012 Published *Banking on Vacancy*, documenting the finds from our city-wide vacant property count.

2012 Created a CLT study group for PTH members to investigate real solutions to the housing crisis, including coops and mutual housing associations

2013 Catalyzed the founding of the NYC Community Land Initiative

2014 Founding board members of the East Harlem/El Barrio CLT

2013 Published grass roots vacant property count manual

2014 Led the organizing to end the cluster site program over the next three years

2014 Supported homeless families in shelter targeted by communities, calling for Housing Not Shelters

2016 Housing Not Warehousing Act divided into three separate bills, testifying at multiple city council hearings over two years.

2016 Published *Gaining Ground*, a blueprint to end the cluster site program and create housing for homeless New Yorkers

2017: Cluster site win – eminent domain used to take cluster site buildings from slumlords

2017: Passage of the Housing Not Warehousing Act

2018 Published the *Business of Homelessness*



Anika Paris: Picture the Homeless consistently put forth a really radically different idea of what the city could be. I mean like with Intro 48, that there are like *clear problems* that anybody can see. PTH had a lot of allies across the spectrum. There are definitely city planners and academics who have contributed in one way or another to PTH campaigns and efforts and actions.

But the issue of vacancy, the issue of inadequate housing, the issue of police harassment and overreach and like the necessity of *sleep* and the necessity of healthcare... If you looked at the policy proposals that PTH was putting out and what was being voted on in City Council, it was almost like two separate cities, you know? And very different understandings of how they should operate.

And those ideas were like created, crafted, discussed over coffee and mad creamer among homeless folks, you know? Like, a lot of folks who didn't have formal education, people who had been street homeless, people who had been kicked out of their homes, people who had health issues, people who—in a lot of formulations, should just be the recipient of services. But it was like radical city planning, sort of... Yeah. Yeah. I think that's how I would put it.



Organizing Lessons Learned:

- Listen and document what folks are saying on the streets and in the shelters
- Link problems to solutions
- Fight for solutions that address root causes, not what is considered winnable
- Diversity of tactics is essential
- Organizing can shift what people consider winnable
- Frame homelessness as a housing issue
- Creative actions create space for media coverage and narrative shifting
- Don't be afraid of civil disobedience
- Convert spaces of oppression to spaces of liberation
- Political education about the root causes and current conditions
- Conduct research and write your own reports
- Confront policy makers
- Create your own media
- Support homeless folks to visibly represent the group
- Whether you're filing a lawsuit or proposing legislation, direct action is needed to keep up momentum and pressure
- Have fun

Narrators:

Andres Perez	Anika Paris	Anthony Williams
Arvernetta Henry	Charmel Lucas	Dave Powell
DeBoRah Dickerson	Frank Morales	Jean Rice
Jenny Akchin	Kazembe Balagun	Kay Samuels
Lynn Lewis	Marcus Moore	Maria Walles
Nikita Price	Rob Robinson	Rogers
Ryan Hickey	Sam J. Miller	Shaun Lin
Sue Lob	Tyletha Samuels	William Burnett

About this Project

Zines created by the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project are based on oral history interviews with homeless social justice leaders, staff, and board members of Picture the Homeless (PTH) as well as political allies and incorporate archival materials and public records. This is part of a series of campaign zines, covering highlights of each organizing campaign.

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project covers the first 17 years of Picture the Homeless (PTH). We began with homeless leaders who have been with PTH for a minimum of 10 years because we want to understand why homeless folks came to PTH – and why they stayed and how PTH built a powerful, homeless led organization.

Our intention is to support homeless and poor folks organizing by listening and understanding what PTH meant to the people who carried out the work. Standing up and fighting for your rights isn't easy, coming together to collectively identify issues and solutions is real work. The sacrifices of these leaders were many, often in the face of extreme hardship. Picture the Homeless has changed many lives and made a difference in New York City, around the U.S. and internationally. The PTH Oral History project is a work in progress. Email us if you would like to stay in touch or have something to contribute!

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project
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