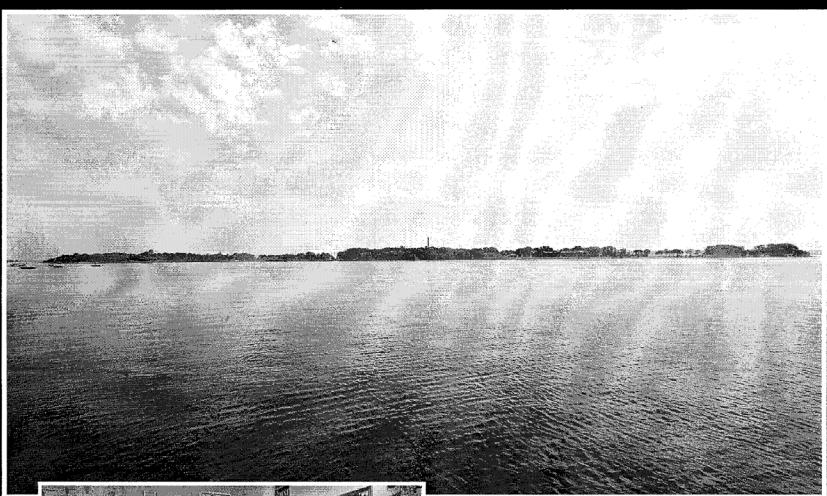


The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project

Don't Talk About Us: Talk With Us!

The Potter's Field Campaign



After a friend's anonymous burial in potter's field on Hart Island, a group of homeless men and women began working with clergy in hopes of

Giving numbers a **name**

Potter's Field is the cemetery for the poor in New York City. It is located on Hart Island, across the Long Island Sound from the Bronx.

Charley Heck, a Picture the Homeless (PTH) leader called it the Prison of the Dead; on a little known island where New Yorkers were buried in mass graves dug by Riker's inmates.

In August of 2004, we learned that our co-founder Lewis Haggins had been buried in Potter's Field as a John Doe. PTH successfully launched the campaign to open Potter's Field so that our homeless and poor brothers and sisters would have a dignified and spiritual sending off. Between 2004 and 2005, the Potter's Field campaign won several victories and built deep relationships with faith leaders and with one another.

These relationships led to further justice work around housing, police brutality and shelter conditions that wouldn't have been possible without the relationship building which resulted from our Potter's Field campaign.

This is the story of that work, based on oral history interviews with Picture the Homeless Potter's Field campaign leaders, former staff, faith allies, archival materials, and public records. We were and remain, especially grateful to the Haggins family for taking this journey with us.



William Burnett: I think it's important not to underestimate the value of spirituality in people's lives, and how that spirituality informs their motivations, and even their consolations. One thing about being involved in social justice work is, obviously there's injustice and it's very taxing, both emotionally and spiritually.

For people who have a strong spiritual background or have any kind of spiritual background, that's part of who they are; that's what they bring to the table.

I would caution against underestimating that part of people, and what value that part of people brings to their leadership within an organization.



Lynn Lewis: On the day of the Still We Rise protest of the Republican National Convention, in August of 2004, we learned that our co-founder Lewis Haggins was buried in Potter's Field.



Lewis Haggins, John Jones in the background. March on Mayor Bloomberg's home to deliver the People's Report Card. March 7, 2003

He died in December of 2003. For nine months he was a John Doe. His family called wanting to know if we'd seen him, but we didn't know what had happened to him. He fell ill on the subway. His friend that was with him told the emergency service personnel and police, gave them his name and everything.

By the time he got to the hospital the paperwork was lost, or maybe they didn't bother to fill it out, so the hospital didn't know his identity. He died in the hospital.

They didn't run his fingerprints in the morgue, so he was buried as a John Doe. Then when they [NYPD's missing persons unit] ran his prints later, they found that he had been arrested for trespassing while homeless. You're also fingerprinted when you get public assistance. They had his fingerprints on file, ironically, for being poor and homeless.

They called his family on the day of the RNC, and his brother Brock called me. I asked Jean, who was speaking that day for us on the stage.



Anthony Williams, Picture the Homeless co-founder, at the Still We Rise march and rally. August 30, 2004

I asked him not to say anything until we could tell Anthony Williams, PTH's other co-founder. I told Anthony and gave Jean the sign, and he mentioned Lewis in his speech.



Jean Rice, Picture the Homeless, speaking at the Still We Rise Rally, protesting the RNC. August 30, 2004

Charlie Heck, a new member, was street homeless. In meetings, he always sat off to the side with a lot of bags.

He got up and said to us, "Well, our co-founder is in Potter's Field. We have to get his body! He needs a proper Christian burial!" People were just kind of stunned, you know—how are we going to get his body? Charlie chastised us and said, "What kind of people are you? What kind of organization is this? We have to. He's our co-founder." And everybody said, "Okay, what do we do?"

Charlie laid it out, like a road map.

Charley Heck: Well, I had earlier experiences working with Joe Gilmore. Working with Joe, we interred people. In fact, a close friend of mine Bill Phillips, a person that I had slept beside in the hallways and doorways and banks, he died, and we held a funeral service for him. He is now buried in Calvary Cemetery in Queens. That was just one person. We'd buried several other people that we knew on the street through the Midnight Run.

Lynn Lewis: You showed a tremendous amount of leadership. So then here you are, less than a month later writing letters. What did that time mean to you?

September 22, 2004

Dear Friends and Allies,

Picture the Homeless was started at the end of 1999 by two men, Anthony Williams and Lewis Haggins. Both men were homeless and stayed inside the Bellevue Men's Shelter in mid town New York City.

At that time, as a result of the poorly managed and inept bureaucracy the two homeless men in the shelter, believed that their rights as American citizens were increasingly and more intensely deprived. Living in the most Spartan and most austere conditions did not weaken or less diminish. Their resolve to express their human right to bed treated fairly. Thus, Picture the Homeless was born.

Now, five years later, Lewis Haggins, one of the two original founding members died anonymously, sleeping on the subway at night. Today, his body is among the 800,000 dead in Potter's Field, Harts Island, Bronx.

We, the remaining members feel that because of this great achievement in helping to develop citizenship and other humanitarian efforts makes him worthy of something better than the City Cemetery.

Because of his death, Picture the Homeless is convening a forum to discuss the issues surrounding Potter's Field, Harts Island. The issues relevant are public access, a dignified burial, common restive worship areas, and a continuous discussion about how we can improve these problems.

We would like to invite you to a meeting at our office on October 13, at 9:30am. Please share this invitation with any of your colleagues that may be interested. Please call myself, or Lynn Lewis, at 212 427-2499 to let us know if you will be able to attend.

Thank you,

Charlie Heck
Leader, Civil Rights Committee

Charley Heck: I was not doing just simply nothing like waiting for the world to come to me, like the world owed me something that I was now doing myself. I was doing something.



William Burnett: I came from a very conservative background. I grew up in Franciscan community, so there was always that identifying with the poor element, but I came from a conservative part of the country, from a red state, born and raised.

Pope John Paul II—which remember on many issues he was conservative, but in the sense of justice he wasn't very conservative when it came to social doctrine. Those kinds of questions did lead to an internal dialogue about what it means to be an authentic Catholic because is it the prayer life alone, and your relationship with God alone, that makes you an authentic Catholic or is your relationship with God and your prayer life supposed to influence your relationship with other people? I decided it was the latter. Remember the Apostle Paul said, “How can you say you love God, whom you do not see, when you do not love your neighbor, who you do see.”

Some of the strong leaders at that time, Leroy [Parker], Jean [Rice], Rogers, and Charlie [Charles Heck], once Picture the Homeless learned that Lewis died, members wanted to go to Hart Island to mourn his loss, and discovered they couldn't, because Potter's Field, on Hart Island, was and still is under the jurisdiction of the NYC Department of Correction, and there's history behind that, too.

I think the biggest lesson for me is one, about being authentic about what you're calling leader, because we talk about, "we're developing leaders," and every organization that organizes say they're developing leaders. I see some organizations that organize, calling people leaders who are nothing more than mouths, or people with strong opinions, or people who can speak, but they're effectively bodies that just communicate. They're not actually part of the process of figuring out what the problem is and how we're going to solve it.

Lynn Lewis: You have leaders, and you have staff, and staff have keys. Sometimes leaders get keys for different things. We arrived at a moment that in order to seriously take that on, staff had to change how we were doing things, because the Potter's Field Campaign needed to have its own meetings, needed to have access to the phone, needed to have access to the computer to do research. Those were adjustments that staff had to make based on how important it was to leaders. There was that dialogue, between leadership and staff that was to a certain extent, about control over resources in terms of the office space itself.



William Burnett: This is a lesson and example where the organizers didn't even decide to take on a campaign. The people that organizers are calling leaders made that decision, and brought other leaders in, and compelled the staff. So that's a little more authentic leadership. So we're going to call people leaders? Let it come from the leaders. I think that's an important lesson, because I do see social justice groups out there with people calling themselves organizers, when all they are is people's strong personalities that bring in bodies, with

complaints, so the people who are being called leaders aren't really authentically leading.

Those leaders couldn't get onto the island, and it was really painful for them. So I was getting very emotional conversations with them, all three of those people—all four—were pretty religious people. Different faiths. I think Rogers's Catholic; Charlie's a Baptist; Leroy was a Muslim. So they're different faiths, but they were very religious, and very spiritually conscious. They knew I was a Catholic, and so they were bringing to me the emotional arguments to get involved, and they were bringing to me the religious arguments.

They all centered around human dignity.

I think Rogers was actually the most moving to me because he wasn't only talking about the dignity of the deceased person, Lewis. He was talking about the dignity of the people who'd lost somebody. Rogers is the one who framed it to me as, "Don't forget the dignity of the people who lost somebody." I guess Rogers was the more philosophical of the bunch. So, they got me involved, and once I got involved, I got really involved.

Sam was involved. You were involved a little bit, but you were wanting members to lead it, because you were busy with Civil Rights. I became the Potter's Field organizer, but we intentionally transferred my title, because organizer would imply that I'm organizing members, and I really wasn't doing that. Members were organizing themselves. I was busy organizing faith allies. As far as I recall, pretty much all the staff members were involved, and all the leaders were.



Rogers: Through the late '60's, things had bubbled up to the point where laypeople were finally recognized as the center of the Catholic Church. Not the clergy, but the laypeople and laypeople being empowered to do what's necessary to take the Church forward was part of what I was learning. That was certainly significant in my own growth and development and challenged me in many ways as to what I should be doing with my time and with my life.

That evolution, that growth throughout the '80s and '90s is part of what would have pushed me eventually to attend neighborhood meetings—one of which I'm sure would have been Picture the Homeless—even before I became homeless because my political conscience was awakened. It is important to me to understand that if I work to serve God, and others work with me to serve God, that we're on the same side. That's part of what I'm commanded to do. Not be a bystander, but to participate in the fight, ultimately, for justice.

At the same time, ultimately, a whole lot of other circumstances led to me being homeless. The group that I felt was fighting for justice, speaking for—on behalf of the homeless, and doing the things that I saw or heard as God's commands, that was the Picture the Homeless people. It's like, okay, if these people are doing the same thing that I'm doing, then maybe I should be doing it with them, as opposed to being a lone wolf someplace.



William Burnett: When somebody close to you dies, you're missing them. In terms of the homeless community, we've got to remember that it is a community. People know each other. They keep talking about clusters of homeless people on the street. These are people who know and interact with each other. In many cases, they are the only people they're interacting with.

As human persons, we want to interact with somebody. We're social creatures. When somebody you have a relationship with, any kind of relationship with, passes away, you're going to feel a loss. Just like if I had a spouse and my spouse passed away, I would feel a loss. Now that I think about it, it's one of the things that people who've never experienced homelessness don't get. Homeless people are just as human as people who are not homeless and have relationships just like people who are not homeless. So the idea that when Lewis passed away, the people that Lewis was battling in the trenches with, developed a relationship with, could not go to the island to have closure. They had a loss, and they deserved the right to have closure.

Lynn Lewis: Mohammed [Singha] and Joey [Kemp], didn't know Lewis, but they would talk about the fact that they were in a shelter, and when somebody in a bed next to them would die, someone that they had built a friendship with, and there would be no information. They would disappear. Their belongings would be put into a plastic bag, and thrown away. That was dehumanizing for them to witness. When they would ask questions, they wouldn't get any answers.



William Burnett: Early on, during my involvement in the Potter's Field Campaign, Rogers and I spoke at this gathering of faith leaders from around the world. It was an inter-faith gathering. Rogers pointed out that homeless people are pushed out of society while they're living and then when they're dead, they're put on an island that nobody can see, and so they're pushed out of society when they're dead too. That's a pretty touching point.



Rogers: I have spent a great deal of time working within Holy Mother Church in one aspect or another, from teaching Sunday school to different parish programs. I had the experience through many years to see how church, when it's done right—whatever that means—how it can uplift and save a great many people. It is a blessing, it is a gift from God that I have been able to meet some magnificent people, present company included, who are doing the things that the Bible says that we should be doing.

Recognizing that it is important for us to understand that God's children are our brothers and sisters once they're alive. They don't stop being our brothers and sisters once they die. They're still kin to us. They're still part of our lives. They're still in our hearts. They're still part of us, even after they die.

As I learned about the horrors that happened on Hart Island and the million souls that are buried there, it became important to me to understand that this severing of the people who are buried there from the rest of the church community is ungodly.

That people who want to mourn their loved ones, people who want to commend their brothers and sisters to God, who gave us life, should not be prohibited from doing that by any municipal authority. When I came to realize that the city authorities were working to do that very thing by not allowing us to go to visit our dead brothers and sisters at Hart Island, to me, it was a clear case of the commands of God and the commands of the civil authority being in conflict. That was oh so clear to me. I think not enough people know or knew about that, particularly people who claimed to be men and women of faith.



Department of Correction sign barring entrance to the dock for the ferry from City Island to Hart Island. May 25, 2005.



Lynn Lewis: It was amazing to us that every faith leader—there wasn't one faith leader that we spoke with that knew how the bodies were treated.

Rev. Elizabeth Maxwell: Yes, I had no idea. Had you known that before?

Lewis: No, I had no idea. I didn't even know where people were buried who were just poor and had no insurance. I just didn't know. But Charlie knew, and William knew. We had members who were people of faith, and they knew because other homeless people that they knew had died in the shelter or in Charlie's case he had prevented homeless people from being buried there.

Maxwell: How had he done that?

Lewis: If you're Catholic or Muslim, the Catholic cemeteries or Muslim cemeteries will take the body. They have plots that family members have bought, more plots than they ended up using, and they'll take the body if there's some proof that they're of that faith. Charlie knew that. We didn't know. Rogers knew too. We had some members that knew because someone that they had a relationship with while they were homeless died, and they found they couldn't go pay their respects because you had to have a death certificate, and in order to have a death certificate you had to have a legal relationship. You couldn't be a friend. They learned the hard way. We had homeless folks who were lay faith leaders who deeply, deeply cared about this issue that we didn't know about, and the faith leaders that we had relationships with also didn't know.

Maxwell: We didn't know, no. We didn't have any idea. This was a big education because I had never thought about it before really. It was very moving to me how determined and persistent people were, and that convinced me that it was something we really had to do, that it was the right thing to

do and that it wasn't just about Lewis really, that there were lots and lots of people for whom this was an issue.

I learned a bunch of stuff that I'd never known about before. Again, I don't remember all the details, but I remember the feeling that there was a lot of clarity about how to kind of keep moving, even though all the roadblocks and the times when it just didn't seem possible that we were going to be able to get out there. I remember getting the Bishop and the Archdeacon involved, and they saw that it was the right thing to do. I mean, obviously giving somebody a proper burial is a religious function. So the faith leaders got interested in that, and then it became eventually clear that there was a much longer history about people not being able to get to Potter's Field when they had loved ones who were buried there and that was clearly wrong, but it took a while to move, and then the whole relationship with the Department of Correction and the prisoners who were used to dig the graves and that kind of stuff, which was like, what!? I had no idea.

Lewis: Yes. It seemed that once we found something, like how the bodies were handled, something that was a concern that was shared, that was really central to many faith traditions but also very important to our members because it was going to be them when they died or their loved ones. So it was a connection that was very deeply held by faith leaders and homeless folks, a deeply shared value.

Maxwell: I think it also drew on the faith traditions of homeless folk. My experience at Holy Apostles was that many of the people who ate at the soup kitchen were deeply religious and came out of religious backgrounds. They viewed the world in a religious way. I think that this was one of the places where you could really see that human dignity and a sense of what it is to be a human being and what God would want. You know, the homeless folks could talk about that just as clearly as the faith leaders could, in many cases.

Lewis: Lewis's family was very involved.

Maxwell: I remember meeting them, yes. It seemed like they had been so worried about where he was, they were worried about him being homeless, and the idea that there had been this kind of indignity of not knowing and then his body not being treated properly so that they could know that he had died. All that time that he had died, and no one had told them, I mean, I remember their dignity, and I remember that they had suffered indignity.



Lewis Haggins, his mother Gerry, brother Brock, sister Lois and other family and friends attended the memorial for Lewis at Holy Apostles, officiated by Rev. Elizabeth Maxwell. November 29, 2004

[That first service] It was on an evening, right, on a weekday evening. People spoke, and just shared memories, and his family talked about him too.

Lewis: It made a big difference for us that Holy Apostles allowed us to have the service there, even as we were fighting to have one in Potter's Field, and you went to the big one that we had at Potter's Field for him.

Maxwell: Yes.

Lewis: Before we found out he had passed away, one time the Haggins family called and I said, we just don't know where he is. We didn't know he had passed away, and I said, you know, Lewis knew a lot of people. Why don't you take a photo and just walk from Port Authority, walk down 9th Avenue to Holy Apostles and show his photo to everyone and see if they know where he's at?

They were sad, and maybe frustrated that we couldn't give them a better answer. But they called after and they said thank you because everybody knows him, and everybody had something nice to say about him. His life, being homeless, was nothing like their life. It was hard for them that he didn't go back home because he could have gone back home.

Maxwell: I remember that. That they didn't understand why he hadn't come back. But to know that he had had a community, that he hadn't just been kind of out there by himself but that, as you say, people really had good things to say about him, and he had made a difference to a lot of people.



THE POTTER'S FIELD CAMPAIGN GOALS

the detectives told us the hospital gave his hospital records to the missing person department. As to why it took ten months to get his records to the detective's desk is a mystery to us. When Louie hospital records landed in their desk they ran his fingerprints thought their database. Apparently Louie was arrested in 2002 for trespassing. They matched up his fingerprints from their database with the fingerprints from his hospital records. Then they found my mother addressed and phone number and informed us. One of our questions is, if they had his fingerprints in the NYPD database, why didn't run his prints through that database first? They would have identify him much sooner and inform us earlier. Maybe in the future a process can be put into place so no other family will have to go through this again. With us not knowing about his death and burial (at the time it happen) it has made his death harder to take than it should be. With the help of the LORD and family and friends we are getting through this tough time.

So again I would like to send our regrets for not attending these program. We will try to attend future programs. We would like to thank the people at Picture the Homeless and all of Louie's friends for their support and for all that they are doing to give Louie's death meaning. We support everything that the people who are working on the Hart's Island program are doing. If there is anything we can do please feel free to contact us.

Sincerely
Brock Haggins

Excerpt of a letter from the Haggins Family to faith allies. February 15, 2005

Burnett: We had a few goals, actually. The Department of Correction had a thing where if you wanted to go onto Hart Island, to have closure, you had to establish that you were a family member of the person, and you had to establish that the person was actually on the island, and you got that through certain documentation. Obviously, you need the person's birth certificate, and you need your own information to establish a relationship. You had to establish you were a family member and that the person was actually on the island. Then they would let you onto the island, via appointment, to go have closure.

Members of Picture the Homeless couldn't establish anything, yet still needed closure. One of our goals was for us to gain access. First of all, folks wanted to gain access to have closure

for Lewis, but we wanted to expand it. Let folks have access to people who were close to them, but we also wanted to open it up more broadly so that people can have access to the island. Of course, folks wanted the island transferred away from jurisdiction of Department of Correction. Then we want to know who's on the island.



Rev. Liz Theoharis: The first time I ever learned about Potter's Field in New York before the Potter's Field campaign was in the movie *Takeover*. It was about the housing takeovers that the Homeless Union does. We dedicate it to those that have been buried at Potter's Field. It actually opens and closes with scenes of prisoners bearing these caskets in these mass graves.



Rikers Island prisoners burying the poor in Potter's Field, Hart Island, NY. "Hart Island in the Era of COVID-19" by Amy Gopp, Kairos: The Center for Religion, Rights and Social Justice

William Burnett: One of our demands about Hart Island, was to transfer jurisdiction from City Island, or from Department of Correction to somewhere else, maybe the Department of Parks.

Lynn Lewis: One of the other goals was, and it was a journey to get there, was that Charlie and some of the other Picture the Homeless members wanted Lewis's body removed. At first, his family wasn't sure that that's what Lewis would have wanted. They thought that perhaps Lewis would've wanted to stay, to remain in Potter's Field with people that he had, you know, lived in solidarity with, and been a part of, and there was a process where the family decided to take—

Burnett: Remove him. He was disinterred and transferred to a cemetery in New Jersey.

Lewis: Some of us went to the service.

Burnett: Yes we did.



Charley Heck: Well, dealing with the Department of Correction, I mean anything we asked of them, they always, always said no. So because of that rejection, we sought out church groups and faith leaders to help us recover Lewis, his body.



William Burnett: I had said “how we depose of our deceased is a pastoral question. So where the fuck are the pastors?” That kind of was like the lynchpin for my involvement with the Potter’s Field campaign. Let’s find the pastors.

We got on the phone. Actually, there were a few connections that actually facilitated this. I obviously had a connection with the Franciscans, so I started with them. One of my connections with the Franciscans was on the Upper West Side, so I pulled him in. There was a Jesuit priest who was also on the Upper West Side, and the Franciscan that I was able to connect with was connected with the Jesuit. The Jesuit was connected with *Interfaith Assembly on Homelessness and Housing*.

Those were some networks. So some of it was able to come to me, and I don’t think we’ve ever talked about that part. There is the part where I was organizing myself, but there’s the other part where other people were also organizing allies, and they were able to bring things to me.

It honestly wasn’t hard, because we were talking about the human, personal, pastoral aspect of responding to the deceased, and the folks who have lost people. At the time, we were very happy about some of our wins, but it wasn’t like some of our other campaigns. It’s not something we had to battle for, because faith leaders naturally respond to the pastoral questions, and so we used the pastoral questions as our hook to gain the allies. But it did take a lot of phone calls.

Once we had gotten all of our faith leaders lined up to support us, we had set up a meeting with the Commissioner of the Department of Correction. I remember they had arranged for us to meet in a small room, but we had arrived with several members of Picture the Homeless, and several of our faith leader allies, and we had to delay the meeting because they realized there were too many people for that small room. So they transferred our meeting to a big conference room. So

we're all sitting there and we're talking to them, and it wasn't a difficult meeting because as it turned out, the Commissioner of the Department of Correction at the time was a Catholic, and we had a couple Catholic priests with us.

I remember us joking afterwards that no one would be able to say no to Lewis's mother and Charlie and the rest.

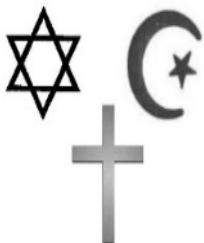


Charley Heck: Well, it was a wonderful experience. We met them on the day that—I think there were eighteen of us, myself, other members of Picture the Homeless, and members of the Interfaith community. We met with the Commissioner of Correction in his office downtown. I spoke with the Commissioner, myself, and him privately, and he divulged to me that that year, it must have been 2005, in that year, there were eight hundred bodies interned in Potter's Field.

William Burnett: Lewis's family was there. We had our faith leaders, one of whom was the Muslim chaplain at Rikers [NYC's jail] cold cases so we had a faith leader who was associated with Department of Correction already, and we talked to them about why homeless people need access to the island. We were negotiating. We wanted monthly access, and they gave us bimonthly access. I think the strongest argument in the meeting from the faith community actually came from Earl Kooperkamp. I can't remember the argument he made, but he was really, really firm.

Lynn Lewis: Yes, and we formed, the faith allies formed Interfaith Friends—

William Burnett: Interfaith Friends of Potter's Field. And we were able to establish a relationship with Union Theological Seminary, their Potter's Field initiative.



Interfaith Friends of Potters Field

170 East 116th Street, Suite 1W, New York, NY 10029

Rev. Paul Chapman
Union Theological Seminary

Rabbi Michael Feinberg

Carl Garrison
Manhattan Church of Christ

Rev. Amy Gopp

Marc L. Greenberg
*Interfaith Assembly
on Homelessness & Housing*

The Rev. Earl Kooperkamp
St. Mary's Episcopal Church

The Rev. Elizabeth Maxwell
Church of the Holy Apostles

The Rev. Karen H. Senecal
Judson Memorial Church

William Burnett
Picture the Homeless

Letterhead of the Interfaith Friends of Potters Field. Not shown here, at the bottom of the page it read "list in formation."

Rev. Liz Theoharis: We did this immersion course in New York City. It was during that that we brought folks to Picture the Homeless and there was a meeting about the Potter's Field campaign. Amy Gopp was there, and she realized that we needed to be in this, taking the lead from Picture the Homeless and the Potter's Field campaign as it's developing. Her focus was on liturgy and ritual. There's this story about the death of Lewis Haggins, the co-founder of Picture the Homeless and what happens to so many poor people, homeless people and folks that don't have family or connections and folks that do and how the kind of dignity that people are denied in life happen in death.

SCRIPT for Worship Leaders¹

"With All Due Respect"

A Memorial Service for Those Buried at Potter's Field

March 23, 2005

James Chapel

Designed by members of Picture the Homeless
with Amy Gopp, The Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary

Chapel/Space Set Up: People will gather in the chapel after having to step over the symbolic body of someone who could have been found and buried at Potter's Field. The "body" made of garbage bags, cardboard boxes, old blankets, and heaps of clothes, all provided by PTH members, will be laid at the entrance of the chapel, blocking the doors so that all entering are confronted by the image and have to step over it, engage with it, or otherwise notice it.

Excerpt from Liturgy developed by Amy Gopp with Potter's Field Campaign members and held at Union Theological Seminary. March 23, 2005

That was one of the moments of the real coming together of Picture the Homeless and the beginning of the Poverty Initiative. I remember holding a Potters Field campaign meeting in the Bonhoeffer room and different religious leaders coming to that and hearing the clarity of leaders from Picture

the Homeless. Hearing Jean Rice and Charlie and others just share about why we have to do this and what injustices are being done by the Correction Department, by Hart Island and by the system of Potter's Field. Again, I had met Jean before that. I had met Tyletha. I was pretty familiar with Picture the Homeless. I would come to the Homeless Memorial Day services.

I remember Jean Rice would be in these meetings. He, like Jean would do, would draw all of these connections, right? How this was a part of a system where his co-founder, Lewis Haggins had been buried in a mass grave and that the Department of Correction is who is doing that burial.

He would just draw these connections both back to the Bible and to these other ideas and to history and then also to our present day and the systems of oppression that were impacting his life, but also showing how they were impacting everybody's lives and that you weren't free of this, and you weren't able to feel bad for a homeless person over here because you're just as implicated and you're just as impacted.



Lynn Lewis: Who were some of the faith leaders that we engaged with?

Rev. Elizabeth Maxwell: I mean, actually, I do remember the archdeacon, Mike Kendall. I remember that the Catholics from St. Francis were there and probably somebody from Xavier [Church] too, although what I really remember is being with the Franciscans.

William Burnett: Amy Gopp, definitely from Union Theological Seminary. Michael Feinberg, Rabbi, Mike [Michael] Tyson [O.F.M.]. That was the Franciscan, not the boxer, of Holy Name, Father Mark Hallinan [S.J.]. He was the Jesuit that got Interfaith Assembly involved. [Father] Clyde [Kuemmerle], Clyde was the volunteer coordinator for Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen. Liz [Maxwell] was an associate pastor there. The Imam from the prison. Umar [Abdul-Jalil], He was a Muslim chaplain at Rikers [Island jail complex, New York].



Rev. Earl Kooperkamp: The first time that I went to the Picture the Homeless office was for the Potter's Field campaign meeting. Picture the Homeless had started Interfaith Friends of Potters Field with Reverend Liz Maxwell and some other faith leaders and were preparing for a meeting with the Commissioner of Correction. In that same first meeting, we were talking about what we were going to be asking for, what our demands were.

I guess I heard about Picture the Homeless early on, I think from William. It was first of all, the slogan, *Don't Talk about Us, Talk With Us!* That makes so much sense because you hear so much about the homeless. It's like, nah, you talk with the homeless!



Lynn Lewis: That was five years into Picture the Homeless. We didn't have a lot of success building relationships with faith leaders and other groups. It was like, homeless!? People didn't know what to do with us as a justice group, or as William would say, in terms of the justice question. But you [Rev. Kooperkamp] came to that first meeting with your hat, and accent and friendliness and red socks and we get to the point in the meeting where we say, well, if we don't get these things, what do we do?

You said, "Well, we just won't leave until we get them! They have to say yes because this is the right thing!" We loved that; you know? That was my first memory of you. There are people that were in that meeting that still mention that. That's not usually what we would get from people, from allies.



Rev. Elizabeth Maxwell: I remember finding my way to East Harlem. By that time, I knew some of the people of Picture the Homeless, and I sort of knew what we were trying to do.

Sometimes it was a bit tedious. It would go on, everybody being heard, which was important but took a long time. But yes, I mean, I just remember that it was part of the process. I think the first time I went, and I went at least one or two other times. I remember going with the Bishop and the Archdeacon because the Bishop, you know, sort of, he was going to do the main service, but we wanted him to have other Episcopalians there, and he was very moved by it. I remember that. I remember going, and I remember that other people went.

You had to go across the water to get there. It was a long way to get there, took the whole day, basically, to do it. You could imagine it being kind of peaceful and beautiful, but a lot of things had just fallen into disrepair. My awareness about the prisoners being used was very stark.

*Charley Heck,
Rachel Brumfield,
Thomas Antenen,
Rev.
Elizabeth Maxwell,
William Burnett,
going to
Potter's Field for
Lewis Haggins'
memorial.
September
30, 2005*



I remember also that one of the times we went, and it may have been the first time or another time, there were also people who were family members who had finally gotten permission to go out to where their deceased family members were buried, and one of them was a woman whose mother had given birth to a baby.

The mother was an immigrant, and the baby had died, and she had no wherewithal to bury the baby, and so they just took the baby. She had gotten out of the hospital and had a life in this country, and this woman had been born later, and her

mother had died fairly recently in her old age, and she had said to the woman I want you to go find the baby, where the baby is buried.



*View of Hart Island from the Department of Correction dock on City Island.
September 30, 2005*

Hearing that story, it was like, wow, there are all kinds of people who are out here, and nobody knows where they are, and the city has sort of made it their business for people to not know. They haven't made it easy. She fell down on the ground when she—they had a place where, with burials like that they had some kind of record about who was where.

She knew more or less where the baby's body had been put and she just fell on the ground weeping. Obviously, that made a big impression on me. I mean, I remember being out there and being a little less clear about where homeless folks were, but it was very powerful that so many people wanted to go and pay their respects, certainly to Lewis but there were many others that folks knew who were there.



Charley Heck and Willie Baptist, waiting for the ferry to Hart Island, on the way to Potter's Field for Lewis Haggins' memorial. September 30, 2005

Willie Baptist: Someone from California heard that they were going to make available to people who their loved ones had been buried in this mass grave and she was on the boat. She was with a minister and we were talking. She was happy that Picture the Homeless had done this.

A long time ago her mother had her sister who died as a baby. Her mother couldn't afford the burial. It just left the mother empty in terms of trying to find where her baby went, because she knew her baby had passed away, but didn't know her grave or nothing like that because she was poor and couldn't keep up with what was going on. So she had lost track of where the baby was actually buried. So the hunch was that the baby had to end up at Potter's Field.

So here comes this lady. She's there in the boat, a boat that was put together, and involved a delegation that was put together by Picture the Homeless in conjunction with this Interfaith group that Poverty Initiative had put together. So I was among the first to go there with her. She agreed to attend our services and we agreed to go with her, and both were moving events. They're events that make an indelible impression on you and I associate that with Picture the Homeless.

She brought with her flowers and a jar of dirt. She didn't have enough flowers for all of us because all of us wanted to participate. She gave petals of this flower to each one of us and the idea was that we would go to the gravesite. Of course, because it was a long time ago, the overseer of the place, of the burial site, could only point in the direction where all of the poor children were buried.

Lynn Lewis: A thousand baby coffins in one mass grave.

Baptist: Yes. You remember. Yes, she took us through a ritual, an impromptu ritual. Even right now I feel it. She took out this dirt that she had got from her mother's grave in California to throw the dirt in the direction. Whoo! You got to be made out of wood or steel not to feel that.

It really underscored to me the powerfulness of that particular campaign and how maybe, you know, you didn't get a house, or you didn't get this, but you moved people to the point where they have to be outraged with the kind of injustices that reflected that.



Memorial Service for Lewis Haggins at Potter's Field on Hart Island
September 30, 2005

Rev. Elizabeth Maxwell: I really just remember that it was such a long time coming. It was kind of exhilarating to finally be able to go and be there and see what it was like, and I remember for the people who knew him, how meaningful it was.



William Burnett: There's this cross that we went to, and there's a story behind the cross, and we'll have to look it up, but there's some big, historical thing. The inmates planted that cross. Hart Island was under the jurisdiction of Department of

Correction. Historically, there was a time when inmates wanted themselves to make a cross, and they made a cross and put it there, and so that's where we had the mass. It was touching, very touching. I do remember Sam left a rock, and he was talking about it being a Jewish tradition that you always put a rock on the grave.

Remember, Hart Island used to be part of the New York City prison system, and so you had buildings on the island that were effectively jails. One building was the warden's house, and you had buildings that were work centers, because that was their rehabilitation, was prisoners had to work. But the buildings were all falling apart.

Beyond those buildings, you've got woods; obviously, the graves are in flat areas; but it's also really peaceful until you feel the presence of the people that are there. It's still peaceful, but you feel the presence of the people who are there.



Anthony Williams, PTH co-founder, Lewis Haggins' Mother Gerry Haggins, photo of Lewis in the background, in PTH office on the day of Lewis' memorial at Potter's Field on Hart Island. September 30, 2005

William Burnett: We have a very powerful film that's still available on YouTube called *Journey Towards Dignity*, and you, Sam, Charlie, Rogers, and I, I think, were all involved in editing that. That event was you guys went to City Island to attempt to get on the ferry to Hart Island.



Mike Williams, Rogers, Bruce Little, speaking with residents of City Island on Ascension Day about our efforts to open Potter's Field on Hart Island. May 25, 2005

The Catholic Church actually has a trip on Ascension Thursday that's sanctioned by the Department of Correction for folks to be on, to have Ascension Mass, in honor of the dead. You attempted to get on the ferry for that, and you didn't make it, but you made a powerful film. That predates my involvement with the Potter's Field Campaign, but I was part of editing the video, so I'm happy to have been in that part.

We had to be trained by Manhattan Neighborhood Network, and because Picture the Homeless was an organization in Manhattan we were able to do that.

We all sat together in front of the computer and watched all the raw footage and had to make decisions about what footage to pull in, how to clip it together, and produce a final product that tells a story, so that it wasn't just raw footage being played out for everybody; it was a footage that told a story.

Charlie, who I'm hoping you're going to talk to, was very forceful about how the story was being told, so, he would let you know: "This footage—no. That footage—no."



*Charley Heck and Jean Rice, on Ascension Day, attempting to get to Potter's Field.
May 25, 2005*

William Burnett: That video had come out well before our meeting with the Deputy Commissioner, and I suspect the Deputy Commissioner saw that video before we even showed up in his office. So I think that was a useful tactic.

Interfaith Assembly was kind of helpful with some of that, because remember, my connection, Mike Tyson, had Mark Hallinan's connection, who had Interfaith Assembly's connection, and Interfaith Assembly invited us to give a speech at their annual convocation. Media was there, and so we did interviews with them, and word kind of came out of that. So part of it was our work and part of it was support from allies.

Burnett: A Columbia University journalism student who interviewed and did an article, and *New York Times* picked it up.

A Chance to Be Mourned - New York Times

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The New York Times
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November 12, 2006

A Chance to Be Mourned

By EMILY BRADY

THE trouble began on the subway.

At first he was just another homeless man taking refuge from the bitter New York winter. Then he collapsed. He was unconscious when paramedics pulled him out of the subway car. He died a few hours later at Brooklyn Hospital Center in Downtown Brooklyn of an inflamed pancreas and a weakened heart. It was two days before Christmas 2003. He was 48.

In life he was a stocky man with gentle eyes, a short beard and a wide smile. His name was Lewis Haggins Jr., though everyone called him Lou. As it turned out, he had a large circle of friends in the homeless community, along with family in New Jersey. But like many who teeter on the city's edge, this man carried no ID. For weeks, his body lay unclaimed in the city morgue.

Lynn Lewis: One of the themes that I'm hearing in this story of the Potter's Field Campaign are how you and other Picture the Homeless members and staff utilized our own networks, and connections that we already had, and found alignment between this issue and what we wanted, and alignment with their values.

William Burnett: When you're talking about values, you're also talking about empathy, and how people understand and relate to each other, which is why some of our justice questions are challenging. I mean, we have a lot of relationships with people in the social justice movement. I don't know how convincing we are to some people who are not involved in the social justice movement. That raises some interesting challenges about, do you confront, or do you try to draw out empathy, or a little mixture of both?

Lewis: You built a really powerful relationship with Thomas

McCarthy, the historian. The Department of Correction historian, yes.

Interfaith Friends of Potter's Field Memorial Service for Lewis Haggins Jr.

The image shows a memorial page for Lewis Haggins Jr. The page features three staves of sheet music for "Amazing Grace" on either side of a central photograph. The photograph depicts a memorial service on Hart Island, showing people gathered around a cross. The text on the page reads:

Interfaith Friends of Potter's Field
Memorial Service on Hart Island
September 30, 2005 for
LEWIS HAGGINS JR.,
Picture The Homeless
co-founder

Christ Jesus . . . humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him . . .

Excerpt from Philippians 2:5-11.

Opening Words:
The Rev. Karen H. Senecal, Judson Memorial Church

Burnett: He's a colorful character. He created an entire memorial page about Lewis Haggins on that site.

NYC Department of Correction website

Willie Baptist: I'm thinking about my work with Chris Sprowal who was the lead organizer of the Committee for Dignity and Fairness for the Homeless, and also was the lead organizer for the national organizing drive of the Homeless Union. I lived with them during the whole period, with my family. He was the lead organizer.

There was no doubt who was the leadership of that process. When I came to that meeting with Picture the Homeless, I saw the same qualities. The same potential.

I was very excited about what they were talking about and what they were planning to do, and also their history.



Anika Paris: Well, because of that early advocacy and activism, there were monthly trips to Potters Field. I think that may have been the only way to get to Potters Field.

There would be people within the organization but also people who didn't have any sort of relationship to Picture the Homeless as I remember it who would get on this list to go to Potters Field. Because it's the Department of Correction they really tried to control people's—everything. You couldn't bring a cell phone.

I remember repeating these words to people who had signed up for the trip and getting pushback from this woman who was, like, I—because I think part of the spiel that I would give people was you can't write about this, you can't record it in

any way. This was kind of hazy in my memory, definitely not verbatim or, like these are not the exact rules but I would basically tell people that they couldn't share any information about it. This woman was asking totally reasonable questions "How can you—how is it reasonable to tell me that I can't write about this? Like, this is going to be part of my personal experience."

People would go because they knew people who were buried there. You know? I do remember talking to a *Vice* reporter and I'm sure there were other people who did not have any sort of personal connection or were maybe adventuring. But, yes, I mean for the most part, people were going to say final goodbyes or look into whether their loved ones were buried there.



Willie Baptist: I remember being among the first at the victory after we had formed—the Poverty Initiative helped form the Interfaith group. Reverend Amy Gopp played a lead role in that. I remember a certain victory that was made, that for a time there, people couldn't go to the island, Hart Island. But the agreement was that now people can come visit. I remember the first visit I was on it. I'll never forget that. We were on the boat going to Potter's Field. I mean, it was moving in terms of Picture the Homeless and what it had done, and agitation, and education that they carried out to bring that about.





Jean Rice, Amy Gopp and William Burnett on the way to Lewis Haggins Memorial at Potter's Field on Hart Island. September 30, 2005

Tyletha Samuels: I loved the Potter's Field campaign. I liked to take the members over to Hart Island. I can't remember the lady's name that was the point person over there; she was so hospitable. I would take the members over. She would have coffee and breakfast for us before we caught the ferry. Then when we caught the ferry, we would go over to the ferry and we would—they had built a little, like, porch that they would let us do a service.

We would take turns doing a service, and just bless and pray for the people that was over there and talk about if any family member came that was buried over there in Potter's Field, they would say a few words.

We would just look out at the dirt, and we would still wonder where they were. Because all you would see was dirt and this land. It was sad because you didn't know whether you were going to be there or not. I mean, like is somebody you know going to be there or not. You never know. That campaign meant a lot.

People were moved, every time we went. Everybody was moved. It was an experience. People know, you came out there with some reflections, Who could be—who's over there? Who's over there? Who are those eight hundred thousand people?

This could be my family member. Yes.



William Burnett: I think because of the emotional nature of the campaign, some of the softer emotions and sense of connection from people that were otherwise hardened by very difficult lives, kind of came out, and people were able to really meld together in a tight way. It's the biggest thing I see coming out, and besides our wins.



HOMELESS ORGANIZING AND MOVEMENT BUILDING

William Burnett: It's easy to get faith allies, or faith leaders to ally with you when you're talking about pastoral, obviously pastoral questions. It's not as easy when you're talking about the justice questions, and it's disappointing to me, as a Catholic, that it's so hard to get faith leaders to be involved in the justice questions.

But, getting involved in the obviously pastoral questions was certainly a foot in the door to begin a conversation around justice questions.

The reason I'm finding it challenging is because faith leaders, when you're talking about the poor, you're talking about the homeless, they keep wanting to push towards the mercy or the charity question, and they're forgetting the justice question part.

I can't speak for all the faith communities; I'm going to quote the Jesuit, Father Mark Hallinan, who said—and I have him on video saying it, if anybody challenges me. He said, "In Catholic social doctrine, justice and charity are two sides of the same coin," quote, unquote, Mark Hallinan, SJ, and that's true.

So I think, even within the Catholic community, I find that disturbing that it's a challenge to pull faith leaders into looking at the justice side a little more firmly and the same is true with interacting with other leaders of the faith community. But being able to establish relationships through the obviously pastoral question is an opening.



Lynn Lewis: One of the other things that we did with Holy Apostles, is that you all allowed us to have a table there. Could you share why it was important that Picture the Homeless have one?

Rev. Elizabeth Maxwell: Other groups that offered important services often had tables. We tried to have some sense that we were aligned, in terms of our values and commitments.

I thought that Picture the Homeless was doing really important work organizing people and offering a kind of dignity and that not everybody would want to be involved but that for some people they might want to really be involved in the kind of justice work that you all were doing. So I was very happy for there to be a table.

Sometimes we had a voter registration table. There were some addiction recovery groups that had tables. We tried, you know, to make sure that they were genuine programs or people who really could help. We had harm reduction stuff around HIV. I'm sure there were more. Those are the ones that come to me now.

I felt like it was important for people to know what you were doing, and that was the only way I knew to make it available. You could tell your own story. I didn't need to tell it, nor could I have told it.

I always just really enjoyed the straightforwardness and the quirkiness, in a way, of Picture the Homeless. That people were who they were, and the name, you know, Picture the Homeless, it was sort of like this is not a program. This is people, and there are a lot of injustices to be addressed, and the people who are the most effected are speaking about what's important to them.

I was always impressed by how many different skills and experiences and backgrounds and articulate, intelligent perspectives there were. So I just felt like it was a group that wasn't always easy to get anything done or to work with, but it felt like it was a group that really was organizing around basic dignity and rights and the issues that effected people.

It wasn't always what an agency might think was the most important thing. It was also very lean, you know. There was not a kind of an overhead structure. It was just the people. Sometimes it was challenging because people had so much that they needed. Sometimes it was challenging because people would kind of go off on their own story, and it would be hard to follow. Sometimes there were things that I felt like I couldn't do, or we couldn't do in exactly the way that people wanted them to be done.

But yes, I mean, sometimes I thought we're a church, and we're a soup kitchen, and we're trying to be supportive, but we are going to keep doing the thing we do, and we're going to work with you, but we can't devote all our energy, you know, over here. There was so much to do. There was so much need and so much to do.



Rev. Elizabeth Maxwell: I think that many faith communities are glad to partner with particularly groups outside of the congregation, particularly groups that know more than we do or can help us see.

Sometimes I think we're kind of focused on our own particular religious life or our own particular programming or whatever it is.

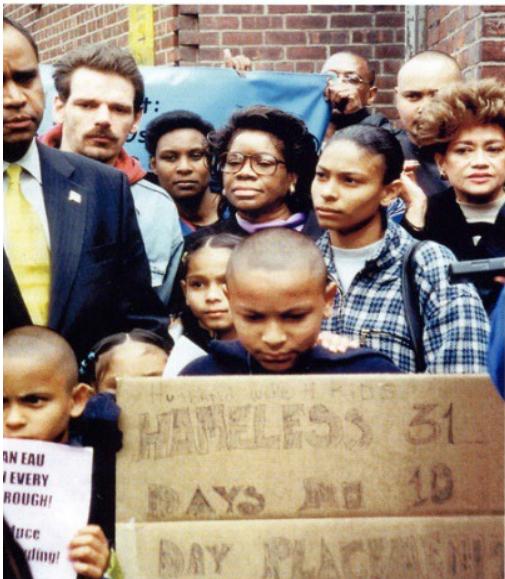
But I think, there are some religious communities that are probably not going to be as open, but some are. Some are open, and I think if there are sometimes in communities—larger sub-communities in the city, I think faith communities are glad to organize with others and make common cause.



PTH Housing Campaign kickoff to march through Speaker Christine Quinn's city council district highlighting vacant buildings and lots at Holy Apostles Church.

August 24, 2010

SOLIDARITY WITH THE POOR



Above, members of Picture the Homeless, a grassroots organization of New York City residents who are or have been homeless, protest at an emergency-assistance center because care was inefficient and ignored the dignity of those coming to the center. It has

The Response, February 2007.



by JESSICA CHADWICK
and CHARON HRIBAR

Lili Watson, an Aboriginal woman, inspires the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, a coalition of poor people's organizations fighting for economic justice. Ms. Watson said:

Jessica Chadwick and Charon Hribar, students at Union Theological Seminary

Rev. Liz Theoharis It was a moment really early on in the development of what becomes the Poverty Initiative that then becomes the Kairos Center, which then becomes, this significant Poor People's campaign that's happening all across the country now.

I think, for one, the relationships that people like Amy and other students developed in developing that liturgy, in getting to go to Potters Field once you all had won access and were doing memorial services. I mean, the number of Union students that got to go and help lead, but mostly participate, in those. I know they played a huge role in this kind of next generation of faith leaders to be not just more aware about these issues but having experience, not just ritualistic, but experience with an interfaith group of people in remembering and honoring.

I remember sitting around in the Poverty Initiative office when we were in this little kitchen area and talking. Picture the Homeless members were there and faculty and scholars of Union and some of the students and we were hearing more and more of the story of Potter's Field. I remember a Bible professor saying, "I now understand communion. You know, I've studied for years that the early Christian groups, the churches, were these kind of burial associations. They were basically groups of poor people who vowed to take care of each other when they died because they were living in this kind of empire that was both killing poor people and degrading their deaths. That when Jesus says we do this remembrance of me, that's actually about a tradition of poor people memorializing each other."

He was just like, "I've studied this for decades. I'm the expert on this. I go to churches all across the country and world and teach people that what they're doing is a ritual that isn't just about Jesus but is about poor people organizing but I never really understood it. I now understand. How that just blows open for Christians who Jesus was and what it is that we do in remembrance of him." I just remember the huge ideological impact of this relationship with Picture the Homeless as an organization and with these individual leaders.

Lynn Lewis: I know that we learned this through that Potter's Field process, that different faith communities have different decision making structures. So finding out what they are, it may be the senior minister, but it may be a social action group within the church.

Rev. Elizabeth Maxwell: Right, or a board. Sometimes there's the larger judicatory, like for us it's the diocese, you know, the bishop, or the Presbytery of New York or the Board of Rabbis or whatever they are. You know, they have individuals, and individual congregations have particular ministries and work that they're involved with, but sometimes there's something that the larger group has committed to so that you can't always find out exactly who's going to do that work, but at least you can find a kind of a justification on the larger level that will make people comfortable with doing something.

Lewis: What was always so important for us as Picture the Homeless to engage with faith communities is that there is so much charitable work - shelter beds in many faith communities, of all religious traditions, soup kitchens - so if not specifically around homelessness it's around extreme poverty.

Maxwell: Emergency food is almost entirely delivered by faith communities, not entirely but almost entirely, both soup kitchens and pantries.

Lewis: It was a journey, the Potter's Field work, and we built really powerful relationships with faith communities, but sustaining them and in some cases it transferred into our— spilled over into our housing campaign work, much less in our anti-police brutality work. But I'm just wondering, from your perspective, what are some important ways, what are some things that Picture the Homeless did that allowed that engagement to happen in your point of view?

Maxwell: Well, I think for me it was that there were people who would listen, who had a really compelling story to tell but also could be involved in a give and take about how to try to engage the issues. Of course the Potter's Field thing, you know, we worked on it for a long enough time that we knew and trusted each other, at least just to a large extent, I think. I think a lot of it was just attention to trying to build relationships.

You know, I'm really glad to have been involved during those times with Picture the Homeless. I have a lot of respect for the people that I met, affection for the people that I met, even though it's been a long time and I haven't seen them. And I feel as if having the clarity about the dignity of people who happen to be homeless sort of in my face was a very important thing. I think we need that kind of organizing, and we need those relationships too.



*Delegation of faith leaders, PTH Potter's Field Campaign leaders and the Haggins family, on the way to Potter's Field on Hart Island for Lewis Haggins memorial.
September 30, 2005*



POTTER'S FIELD CAMPAIGN WRAP-UP

2004 – Inspired an interfaith coalition of faith leaders to form Interfaith Friends of Potter's Field to support our work to open Potters Field to interfaith services.

2005 – Won for the first time, the right for homeless people to travel to Potters Field to mourn a friend. Several members of Picture the Homeless, Lewis Haggins family and four faith leaders went to Potter's Field on Hart Island to celebrate a memorial for Lewis Haggins, our co-founder.

2005 Moved the NYC Department of Correction to allow Interfaith services on Potters Field six times per year, coordinated by Picture the Homeless.

2005 – Co-wrote a liturgy with Union Theological Seminary Student Rev Amy Gopp, “With All Due Respect” to honor the lives of all those buried in Potter's Field. Union Theological Seminary hosted this memorial on March 3, 2005, and have now adopted as part of their curricula.

2005 – Won the addition of a staffer person at the City Morgue to conduct additional identity verification for deceased Jane and John Does.

2005 – Created a documentary film about the Potter's Field Campaign, Journey to Dignity.



Charley Heck: Well, for people that have never been forced to live on the street—the uninitiated, they really don't have a conception of the life of a homeless person. For them to devise all these programs and charities is helpful to a degree, but it doesn't satisfy the sense of accomplishment. It doesn't really give a person a sense of accomplishment of doing something, and that's what I feel is vastly insufficient in helping people on the street.





Willie Baptist: I remember taking that story and that whole campaign around the country and how people responded. I don't care if they're homeless or not. They just responded.

I think today it's something that we need to have people know about because there's Potter's Fields all over the country. Every city, they're a situation where people who can't afford to die, which is a contradiction—the richest country in the world and you can't afford to die, let alone afford to live, that they have these Potter's Fields that are set up.

And I think it's something that needs to be talked about because I think it's an exposure and an indictment on a society that has so much, and yet people die with nothing.



ORGANIZING LESSONS LEARNED:

The Potter's Field campaign teaches that affirming human dignity is at the heart of organizing homeless folks.

The Potter's Field Campaign was the only campaign at Picture the Homeless that did not use protest as a tactic. We built power based on values shared by homeless leaders and faith leaders and we believed were also shared by most New Yorkers.

We exposed the way that the City of New York disrespected the poor who passed away as well as those left behind who sought to mourn their loss.

People aren't defined by homelessness, as human beings we are defined by our values and our actions. Identifying what values move us to action allows us to connect with others who share those values. Collectively we can determine what action to take, together.

In the case of the Potter's Field campaign homeless leaders and faith leaders deeply connected with the family of Lewis Haggins, enriching all of our lives, and created opportunities to build political power to win policy change.

We saw in action the principle that people with shared values who may not already be in community can be moved to fight for justice. These same values become the basis to imagine and to fight for a better world.

Narrators:

William Burnett
Charley Heck
Rev. Elizabeth Maxwell
Rev. Earl Kooperkamp
Anika Paris

Lynn Lewis
Rogers
Rev. Liz Theoharis
Willie Baptist
Tyletha Samuels

The Potter's Field Zine is dedicated to:

Lewis (Lou) Haggins, Jr.

and

Anthony Williams

Co-founders of Picture the Homeless

Our zines 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. Each zine highlights a theme of this project, or multiple themes embedded in the stories and archival materials from our organizing campaigns and approach.

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. We have more interviews, and much more analysis to do. Email us if you would like to stay in touch or have something to contribute!

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project
pth.oral.history@gmail.com