



## CopWatch

### Interview by Hanna Clapsadle

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Verbena is a full time defender of the earth and her peoples, and I've long admired her work. Memorable moments include watching her select her own jury in the Spring of 2006 after she had a SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) suit imposed on her by Pacific Lumber for her ongoing forest defense work, and holding down the PEOPLE PROJECT Encampment in the Spring of 2007, an inspiring space where folks organized autonomously and peacefully to demonstrate that poor and houseless people are criminalized for pursuing the basic need of sleep.

I met Verbena for this interview at the new office of People's Action for Rights and Community (PARC); the old spot was lost when Consolidated Management raised the rent to oust PARC "because we didn't fit in." There were half-unpacked boxes here and there, but a cozy couch to sit on. Several other folks were working or chilling in the new spot: Shaila, a local artist and organizer of last December's Anarchist Bookfair, was cooking in the kitchen. Dee, a friend of and volunteer at P.A.R.C. sat opposite, chiming in on the conversation. Courtney, who organizes (among other things) to end rape culture with Creative Unity for Nonviolent Transformation, helped transcribe and edit the interview.

Hanna Clapsadle: What is Redwood Curtain Cop Watch?

Verbena: Redwood Curtain CopWatch (RWC) is

one of many CopWatch groups in this country and globally. CopWatch has existed in various forms (i.e. KlanWatch, Black Panther Party, COG) as long as cops have existed. The majority of groups that call themselves CopWatch are in the U.S. All of us document police activity; try to keep track of what the police are doing; go out on the streets with notepads, cameras, eyes, ears, and try to be present when people are in encounters with police.

RWC understands that we're part of a larger struggle against capitalism, sexism, racism—oppression. Most of us who do CopWatch organizing are also involved in other types of work for community empowerment; we're engaged in many struggles. RWC supports victims, or survivors, of police brutality and other forms of state repression, whether it's from the mental health system, the welfare system, whatever. What the state calls 'solutions' or 'answers' are deceiving and (often) further oppress people already vulnerable to the system. In order to support people, we do a lot of listening. We strategize with people going through the "injustice" system. (Almost every time a person is hurt by police, the cops and District Attorney try to distract and cover it up by charging the victim with crimes.) Sometimes we seek attorneys for civil rights cases and work with them, or gather information they need. We document people's experiences after they happen, whether they happened to them (for instance someone is beat up by a police officer) or they witnessed that happening. Our phone line is available 24 hours a day and we encourage people to call us if they're watching a police encounter, or if they've experienced police abuse. We also defend and advocate -- sometimes we write letters on people's behalf, to

local police departments or state agencies; not to team up with these agencies, but to scold them, warn them, make sure they don't retaliate against someone who's speaking out. We remind them that people are paying attention. Everything RWC does is informed by the observing, the listening, the documenting.

We also try to engage more folks to explore ways of surviving, living with dignity and organizing ourselves as communities –without the state. That is, without involving police, without going to Semper Virens mental hospital, without involving those kinds of institutions. Creating our own way, not only of dealing with problems--'cause I wouldn't say that's what the state does—but taking responsibility for each others needs and protecting one another from oppressive forces.

HC: How did CopWatch get started here in Humboldt?

V: Well, in the past, there was CopWatch in Arcata. Like Berkeley CopWatch, they attributed their formation to the way that houseless people and people living outside were being treated by police. Berkeley CopWatch folks say that they realized that while people living outside, or

16 year old Christopher Burgess was shot in the heart by Eureka officer Terry Liles, (who then killed another teenager, Zachary Cooke, two and a half months later) we, who'd already been talking, protesting, and strategizing here in Eureka, got serious about being observers on the street and talking with people about their experiences. So, that's when RWC began. I think it's important to mention that the DA and the whole system excused every killing by the police. Not one officer spoke out against the violence.

HC: Can you talk about which communities are most affected by the police and why?

V: Sure and I'll back up, too, and say that the effort of RWC is to organize as and with people who are most affected, and with anyone who considers themselves an ally or wants to join in the struggle, taking direction from people who are oppressed. I say that because many people are used to a church group or some 'vanguard' group that says "we're gonna save you all, we're gonna advocate for all of you, protect you." Instead, we want a culture of CopWatch, a culture of listening, of observing and being present, so we're all doing that for each other all the time, and so voices that are normally silenced

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who've found themselves without shelter, need food and clothes, protection from the police is of primary importance. You may have a donated tent and new sleeping gear, but when the police come and run you out or slash everything or beat you up and put you in jail and take all your stuff, then donations don't cut it. In Arcata, several folks living on the street (or in ways other than renting or owning a house) started doing CopWatch, primarily on the plaza. They also printed up zines (people-made, free publications) exposing things they had witnessed. The 'Plazoid' was one example. This was back in 2003-4, I believe. Now regarding the current CopWatch in this area, around 2005 people in Eureka and some students at HSU were experiencing, witnessing, and talking about abuse by police. Some were connecting with CopWatch Los Angeles. So things were building when, beginning in fall of 2005, locally we experienced a killing spree by Eureka police—sometimes with the Humboldt County Sheriff's Deputies and other cops. After

are heard.

Regarding communities that have her/historically been most abused by the police—they are also people who'd never be able to access the police in the way that, for example, business owners do. People speak of "using the master's tool" and use phrases like that; I think that the police can be a tool for a business owner because the police have always been around in order to protect capital, property, money. Slave catching patrols were the first "police" in the South. In the northern U.S., the system created laws against poor people, and police existed to abuse, arrest and jail them. Black communities and poor people (anyone who is poor) continue to be under attack by the police and the system. Indigenous communities, of course, have been and continue to be brutally targeted. A native woman who's living on (or off) a reservation cannot count on police like a business person does. If somebody is bothering or assaulting her, calling the police is not really an option- the police would likely

cause way more trouble for her, her family, her neighbors, her land, et cetera. So business owners or persons who “own” property are typically the people who can use the police the most—because of what this country is based on and the reason police were created— to keep people enslaved and to deny access to land and resources for most people who might want to use it, sit on it, eat from it, or simply exist on it. A business owner can call, and the police do whatever the business owner wants. Not something that poor people, Native people, or youth can rely on. Most of the time, they’re targeted and criminalized by the police, as are most people of color. Immigrant communities cannot call the police, nor can queer communities. They can call, of course, I mean, anyone can dial that number, but the result is usually not helpful or transformative, but painful. The police are not a tool that these communities can use. Essentially, one can see the violence that comes from police reflected in society. So when there’s direct or indirect violence against, say, trans folks, (and there is), then the police are probably going to act similarly violent toward them. For a queer person who’s being hurt or brutalized by another member of the public, calling the police would probably just get more dangerous.

The state also targets people who are engaged in political dissent activity, as well as environmental or libratory action against corporate domination of everything, of life. (Government and corporations are interwoven.) Here, there’s an

intense her/history both of people resisting and opposing corporate industrial logging and of heavy brutality against them (and before that against striking loggers). I wanted to mention in particular, not “the environmental community,” because that includes people who are never targeted by police- but the radical environmental community- and people who don’t identify as Earth First! but do direct action to prevent their watersheds from imperial forces, such as indigenous communities who’ve been struggling that way for centuries.

HC: Does CopWatch make a judgment of all police (because of the historical formation of police in this country?)

V: To some extent with that question, I could only answer for myself. But I can say that I think RWC understands that there’s a rotten system, and police are heavy tools of that system. We are all living beings and we need to co-exist in a good way --we wanna work towards that. We know that we all get lied to, but police get really sucked into the system. When I say “police” I wanna make sure y’all know I’m not only talking about street police, but also marshals, ICE agents, any government agents—we know they’re all part of a system that has built into it certain ‘values’ that prioritize property over life—a system that wars against certain communities. I heard Ramona Africa of the MOVE organization say that “the police are the system’s first line of offense... not defense, but offense.” In training and culture throughout government agencies, from the podunk town police to Homeland Security, there’s a thread where the same people are oppressed and the skewed values amount to violence and a kind of fear; lots of “everybody else is bad” and “we’re catching the bad ones.” You can see it on TV and all over- lies spread that the police and these other government organizations exist to keep us safe. We don’t share that opinion because we can feel and see what’s really going on—and its roots.

Shaila: There’s a Foucauldian analysis that links the Prison Industrial Complex, the public education system as we know it, what they call the healing centers or hospitals, and the militarization of all of these institutions that are supposed to act in the name of the people of the land—that effectively reduce us to numbers and beings without any kind of subjective personal history in people; instead we’re subjects to be shuffled around systems of incarceration and



oppression.

HC: Given that problem, is CopWatch trying to change the overall culture in this community and in what way, and how does this tie into the idea that the people who are doing CopWatch are not separate from the people that are affected by police brutality?

V: We're definitely trying to transform, affect and be part of a change in our cultures here. We want the fear to lessen—the fear of each other. We also want less fear of the police. Maintain distrust of the police, but lose the fear. Ridding ourselves of fear of each other means people engaging and encountering each other more, getting to know one another as we come from different ways and places. Then we can get to where we understand, or at least communicate, and rely on one another rather than looking to a rotten system in order to survive. We're hoping for more caring communities, more connectedness inter-generationally, inter-racially, inter-all-those-things.

A primary thing that RWC does, as do other CopWatch groups, are Know-Your-Rights workshops—I like to say Assert Your Rights because it's one thing to read in books what they say your rights are in lofty language; it's another thing to know how to use your rights when you're encountered by some type of government agent. If we know how to assert our rights, how to not get sucked up into a lot of manipulative situations where we end up in prisons and the court system, then our fear level can also change - our fear of the system itself - can change.

Courtney: When talking about asserting our rights, I think of folks who systematically have their rights refused or obliterated—their lives on the line daily. There is a crucial solidarity in all of us asserting our rights and sharing, articulating them with each other. Whether it's my life or someone else's on the line (it is always that), we must be active with people struggling and fighting against this system.

V: RWC realizes the importance of being present and active. This system has been imposing fear on a lotta people for a long time. We want people to become more comfortable being present when someone else is being pulled over, messed with, invaded in their home—whatever it is—so

overall we're more present in each other's lives and so that whoever's doing the pulling over, harassing, invading—and we're talking about the state—knows there's eyes on them, that people care. The culture we're moving toward is cooperative, more CARING (care- that's a huge, big bold letters thing). This sometimes means that people take on risks that they wouldn't normally have to take on, except that now they're paying attention to what's happening to their neighbor or to a person walking down the street—because it matters.

HC: What other groups does CopWatch network with, and maybe here you can talk a little about People's Action for Rights and Community (PARC)?

V: RWC is often present at protests and demonstrations. We kinda offer ourselves or gather people together to copwatch at those events. We have a specific way that we observe police, we have particular strategies to do that.

RWC also organizes protests, inviting and collaborating with people from many groups. Naturally, RWC has a lot of crossover with PEOPLE PROJECT, which focuses on the rights of houseless and poor people through direct action, dialogue, and building dignified spaces. We also connect with the Icarus Project which is a radical mental health organization. RWC is essentially connected with any group in this area that's talking about dignity—restoring it, allowing for it, creating space of it. Dignity. PEOPLE PROJECT is one of those, as well as Accion Zapatista de Humboldt (AZ). AZ hosted a gathering in 2007, shortly after Chris Burgess was killed, that allowed people to meet and talk about their experiences with the police. It was a diverse room full of people: students, some of Chris's family, people who had never met before and came together. The politics of encounter and listening are critical in our struggles.

Peoples' Action for Rights and Community (PARC) is a physical space, a meeting and an office space that groups can use for work or gathering and to share literature. PARC is also open to anyone who needs a place to sit down, rest, use the bathroom, shower, make something to eat. The daily work of PARC, in addition to trying to create space that's dignified and actualizing cooperation and care, is to assist people who have had their rights violated by the police, the

## **CopWatch tries to expose the truth of what's happening.**

mental health system, etc.... So PARC is akin to RWC in that way.

HC: Without endangering anybody, could you talk about a situation that RWC was involved in or documented?

V: Yes, here's an example of how we're working to make the police, the state and all its institutions obsolete. RWC got a call from a man whose roommate was in a manic state, and it was scaring the man who called us. He'd called his roommate's family for support, trying to figure out what to do and get help for his roommate. The family said if their son would not voluntarily go to the mental hospital, call the police. Calls to the mental health crisis hotline are reported directly to the police. People either suggested calling the cops (which he did not want to do) or other ideas which we knew would lead to police interaction. Also, police were driving by while the roommate in the manic state was outside. So, even if no one called the cops, we were concerned that they'd come anyway. We had lots of phone discussions. Then, we quickly networked friends who have experience with manic episodes or who simply thought their presence would be calming. We went to the house and stayed present, 3 or 4 of us at a time. The man who called us felt supported. The person experiencing the manic episode seemed to know that we were there because we cared- not to punish anyone, or vilify or judge. Within a few days, his manic state subsided. Beautiful—no one was criminalized or killed- no police involvement.



CopWatch has shown up at Sun Valley Floral Farms (SVFF) where Immigration Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) is consistently raiding. ICE terrorizes people all over the U.S., going into work places and homes, kidnapping people, separating families, locking them up ('detention') for indeterminate amounts of time and without "criminal reason." We call it xenophobia.

SVFF is a transnational corporation locally-headquartered in Arcata with operations on this coast and in Johannesburg, South Africa. SVFF sets up extremely toxic situations—fumigants, herbicides, pesticides, all kinds of chemicals—to grow cut flowers right next to waterways, near rivers—the Smith River, the Trinity River, on the Mad River bottoms. Wherever they go they're poisoning the land, the water, the people working there and people who buy their flowers. It's a big operation here, known for exploiting workers, who are mostly Latinos. SVFF hires big time before Mother's Day, Christmas, then fires people. I believe Sun Valley collaborates with ICE so the raids—intended to target, intimidate, disappear, and incarcerate people who don't carry documents for immigration—are convenient for the company. Then SVFF bosses tell raided employees, "come back when this trouble is over and we'll start you at the beginning" (at minimum wage, working your ass off).

CopWatch tries to expose the truth of what's happening. We're always careful, checking in with people about confidentiality and sense of safety, so that no one becomes more vulnerable by our efforts. Unfortunately, folks not directly affected generally don't know what happens. This is true on an everyday basis with people being arrested or harassed: once someone is locked up, once they're in a cop car or jail, they're isolated and silenced so others don't know what happens. Thus, being present is protection. Listening is critical. We create literature and do protests that expose what's happening. We're usually exposing the government to the people, not exposing anything to the system—it knows what it's doing.

The system is set up to, and has been targeting the same people forever. It trains itself to do that and then tells us that police violence is an anomaly. Some people talk about abuse by police like it's unusual, it's one "bad apple" cop, things like that, but instances where a black man is shot, or a houseless person is beat up; these things happen all the time.

We're in contact with people all over who are active against police brutality. Almost identical situations and patterns of police violence



occur everywhere, especially against youth of color, native youth, and people in emotional breakdowns. In April of 2006 in Eureka, the police criminalized and killed a woman, Cheri Lyn Moore, who was in a rough emotional state. Many people witnessed the police scene. Months prior to that, Eureka cops killed a man in his house who spoke only Spanish; the police and media hardly talked about that (also a pattern) but when they did, they criminalized the man. His name was Gabriel Muldenado and his death marks the beginning of what I know as the murderous spree of the Eureka Police Department (EPD). After Gabriel and Cheri, the EPD shot Chris Burgess, an indigenous youth. Many folks witnessed the fatal beating of Martin "Fred" Cotton II, 26, who was living on the street when he was killed. It's common for houseless people to be beaten and threatened regularly by the police, as well as killed. Most of these incidences happen in isolation.

Courtney: In cases of rape, domestic abuse and sexualized violence in general, we find that the courts are a site of further trauma for survivors where they are forced into a room or empty hallway with the person who has abused them. In some cases locally, CopWatch folks have accompanied survivors to support them through the bureaucracy and ongoing trauma they face. We're concerned with not only dismantling oppressive forces, but helping our communities to heal from the violence that is perpetrated by so-called law enforcement and the criminal injustice system as a whole. It's not uncommon for a woman who is abused to be arrested herself after calling 911, or her children taken away because she supposedly endangered them by being abused. I think folks are more receptive to our intentions and actions than a system proven manipulative, sexist, racist and homophobic. This may be one reason our presence is appreciated at local Take Back the Night marches and rallies: we also walk these streets as survivors.

HC: How can people get involved whether or not they come to a training, and what they should carry with them to be prepared?

V: One woman from RWC says that when she's alone and sees police approaching someone, she asks people nearby to stand with her and watch. A watchful presence at a police encounter can keep things from escalating. We want everyone to be copwatching.



**Peoples' Action for Rights and Community  
focused on justice and care**

Eureka (just north of the library), in the alley on Q St. between 2nd and 3rd  
Look for PARC signs on carport and door which face the alley.

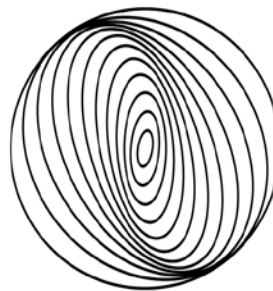
- PARC is an office and meeting space
- PARC volunteers assist people who have had their rights violated
- PARC volunteers also work on connecting with people and communities to imagine and create healthy & supportive alternatives to oppressive structures.

Curious? Need Support? Want to volunteer?

COME BY, CALL (707) 442-7465, or E-mail [peoplesarc@gmail.com](mailto:peoplesarc@gmail.com)

Website: [parc.2truth.com](http://parc.2truth.com)

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**Jana Anna**

**812-334-2479**

[janaanna@insightbb.com](mailto:janaanna@insightbb.com)

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When out on CopWatch patrols, we wear “copwatch” patches and typically have at least one camera, writing pads, and fliers. We talk with folks and hand out fliers which include protect-your-rights information, our contact information, and an invitation to go out and observe with us. Copwatching can be practiced by anyone at anytime.

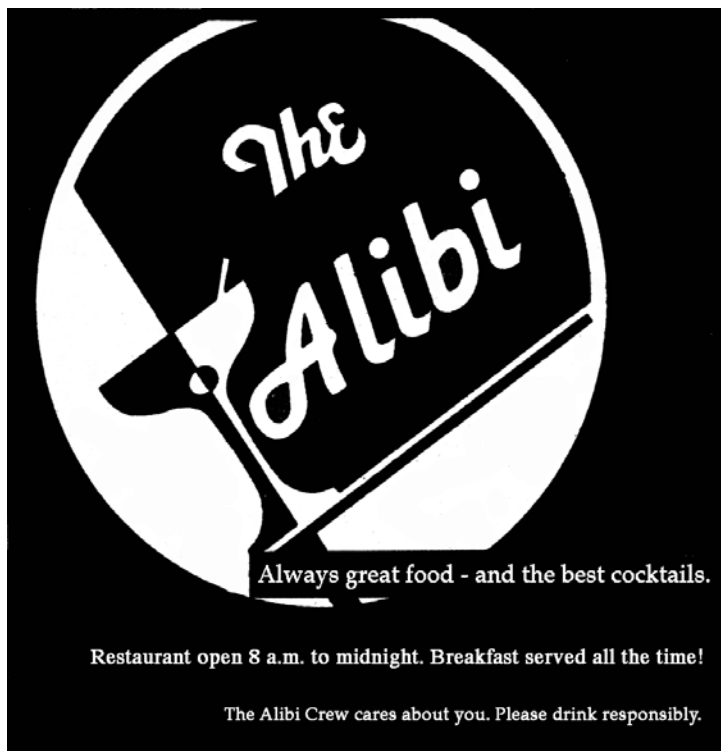
Having a paper and pen for note-taking shows the police that you’re serious. If you have a cell phone with a camera on it, or small personal cameras, use ‘em. Most important are your eyes and your awareness. Find out which police officers are there. Notice who else is around to connect with after the incident. Remember, you can always say, “We only want to observe. We’re not interfering.” You don’t have to be a part of CopWatch to watch, become aware, and learn legal rights like: you have the right to never answer an officer or agent’s questions. If we all assert our rights, cops will learn that we’re harder to manipulate, to trick, to lead into incarceration. This country is imprisoning more of ‘its’ people than have been imprisoned throughout human history—more people than any other country.

Dee: I think it’s important that we give some information on the specifics of how people can do CopWatch themselves, such as how close they can be to a police encounter and that sort of thing. All of what you’ve been talking about

is essential, but people should be able to read this interview and be empowered to just go out and do it.

V: That’s a good point. When you’re observing police, notice names and car numbers, focus on what the police are doing, without getting caught up in what other people are doing. Stay calm in movement and demeanor. The law establishes that all of us are entitled to observe what the cops do in public. Cops have no right to or ‘expectation of privacy’ if they’re in public. We get to film them, we get to watch, we get to take pictures. Sometimes cops try to prevent us from watching through misuse of the law that says that “for their safety” police can order members of the public (who are allowed to watch) to back up.

We invite people to join the organizing that RWC is doing, so we can share resources and strategies, and connect. But more important than becoming “part” of CopWatch, we want people to watch police/public interactions- whether you’d usually be uninterested, or accustomed to walking away because it’s “not your problem,” or you’re scared. If possible, stand and stay until the police leave. And every day, work on creative ways of meeting each other’s needs, being involved in each other’s lives - without and in spite of the state. ■



**The Alibi - 744 9th st. Arcata - On The Plaza!**