

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project

Don't Talk About Us: Talk With Us!

The Canners Campaign



Eugene Gadsen and Jean Rice, PTH Cannery Campaign Action targeting Associated supermarket for violating the Bottle Bill. April 13, 2005

PTH's civil rights committee launched several campaigns over the years, including the Canners Campaign. Economic Justice issues converged with civil rights issues for subsistence workers, many of whom were homeless, such as canners, day laborers and panhandlers. Civil Rights committee members created an economic justice sub-committee so these workers could identify issues and explore how they wanted to organize.

Canners were routinely subjected to harassment by the NYPD, yet supermarkets were violating the Bottle Bill and breaking the law by not allowing canners to cash in their bottles and cans. City and State law guaranteed the rights of canners to cash in a maximum of 240 units, or \$12 per day in stores that sold beverages in recyclable containers, such as beer and soda. It was the supermarkets and other stores breaking the law, not the canners.

The Canners Campaign was formed in 2004 and used direct action, media coverage, documenting supermarkets violations of the bottle bill through surveys, collective analysis, gathering affidavits signed by canners once PTH ignited the interest of the New York State Attorney General, and organizing within the Better Bottle Bill coalitions to expand the types of containers that could be redeemed. Some members of the Canners Campaign formed an informal cooperative that began on a mid-town sidewalk, and which evolved into Sure We Can, which remains NYC's only non-profit recycling center.

This zine contains some of the highlights of this work and the thinking behind it, based on oral history interviews with Picture the Homeless Canners campaign leaders, former staff, allies, archival materials, and public documents.



Jean Rice: All I did was pick up cans, all that night. I wanted to be the first one in, the next morning, to get my cans redeemed. So, across the street from the Associated, I got on top of my mail cart and went to sleep. And when daylight came, I later found out that I was sleeping right near a school bus stop and some of the parents had got concerned that a homeless person—who might be a pedophile, was sleeping so close to where their kids boarded the bus.

They called the police, and the next thing I knew, I was sitting at 100 Center Street in Central Booking, wondering what the hell I did to be treated like a criminal!

I came out the next day. But! I lost my financial records from the Board, my knapsack with all that in it, my ID. All that was in my cart on the bottom, with a partition to keep it from getting the liquid from the cans and the cans were on top! Well, the cops just took my cart! And when they put me in the van, they put my cart right in front of Associated and said, “Well, you made somebody a good day.” I didn't even have no choice about who to give it to!



CANNERS HELPED LAY THE FOUNDATION

Warren Prince and Jean Rice were both long time canners—ecological engineers as Jean prefers, when they joined PTH in the spring of 2002. Jean's knowledge of the US Constitution meant that he was "immediately drafted" into the newly formed civil rights committee. Warren Prince became PTH's founding Board Chair, and Jean became PTH's founding board secretary. Their impact on the analysis, the campaigns and organizational culture of PTH was tremendous. Their cousin Eugene Gadsen joined PTH later, in 2004.

Anthony Williams: I go outside to smoke a cigarette, and I see a guy [Warren Prince] reaching in the trash can, grabbing cans. I say, "Hey, man! I see you're a canner. What do you think about the Bloomberg administration taking your cans away, your nickel away?" He goes, "Well, he can't do that!" And I said, "Well, I just heard him on the radio talk about doing that." He goes, "Well, that's a state thing."

He goes, "And who are you anyway?" I said, "Well, my name is Anthony, I'm with this organization called Picture the Homeless. We meet here every Wednesday. And I just thought you may want to know about it, or do something about it. You can come down if you want now, and have a cup of coffee."

He came down, and we started talking. He said, "I've got a cousin [Jean Rice] that lives for stuff like this." "And again—consistency. He kept pandering Jean, "You've got to go meet these people. You've got to go meet these people." And finally, they both came on a Wednesday night.



Jean Rice: Under Giuliani we had criminalization of homeless New Yorkers, through these Quality-of-Life *offenses*. Where if you appeared to be undomiciled, you were imperiled. If you, on a hot day like today, if you stop halfway through your tour and opened up a beer bottle, *you were criminalized*.

And if you went to Yankee Stadium and retrieved multiple cans, sodas, beer, all kind of recyclable containers, and in the course of that, when the people that you met, in the parking lot during the tailgate party that they usually did before going into the game... So usually, at the tailgate party when they got ready to go into the stadium, they would say, "Hey you guys look like you work hard. Take this beer." So, Warren Prince and I would drink multiple beers.

And then between transit, carrying the recyclable containers from the stadium to Harlem, 141st Street, where we would store them overnight, pay some superintendent to put them in the basement, and then we'd go to Brooklyn. But in the course of that, we would drink multiple beers. And almost always, we would have to urinate somewhere along Seventh Avenue between Yankee Stadium and 142nd Street... And to our dismay, almost *all the time*, either Warren Prince, or myself, or both of us, would get caught urinating in public.

Giuliani had made that a criminal offense. Picture the Homeless was fighting against quality-of-life offenses that criminalized normal behavior that domiciled New Yorkers could do, like urinating in their house, like drinking a beer. Through the criminalization of the homeless community and implementation of these quality-of-life offenses, these acts were deemed antisocial and criminalized! So, that was one point.

And then after Giuliani left and Bloomberg came in—business acumen, he called all the city department heads and said, "I want to know which departments are in the red, and which

ones are in the blue.” So, the Sanitation Department was in the red at the time. And they contributed the blame to the cost of the recycle better bottle bill industry. So, Bloomberg said, “Get rid of it!” I mean, “It’s red, get rid of it!” Never mind causes—why... Never mind reform. Nobody wanted to look into... That it was ecologically sound, that you’re taking a recyclable fossil material and putting it back instead of having to *dig for more and rape the Earth*. “No—get rid of it!”

In addition to the criminalization of homelessness and redeemers/canners, who are disproportionately people of color and disproportionately homeless, we had the *economic exploitation* under Bloomberg, Wherein, Bloomberg—pure business, profit motive driven—called all the Department heads in when he was elected Mayor, and he wanted to know what departments were in the red—meaning deficits, and what departments were in the blue, meaning surplus.

The Department of Sanitation was one of the ones in the red—deficit. And one of the primary causes of that was the cost of getting rid of glass, plastic, and paper bulk. So, Bloomberg’s solution was, if we take away the incentive, the nickel that these people get when redeeming, we’ll rescind the Better Bottle Bill. That will save Sanitation money. That was his solution.



Jean Rice: At that time, my first cousin Warren Prince used to go around the NYU complex. One of the evenings, as he went around the Southernmost part of Washington Square Park and that part of the NYU complex, he passed by Judson Memorial Church.

Coincidentally, the co-founder of Picture the Homeless, Mr. Anthony Williams, was standing outside taking a smoke break, outside Judson Memorial Church. So, he saw my cousin Warren Prince coming down the street, with the six bags of cans over his shoulder and Anthony goes, "Hey can man! Let me ask you a question. What do you think about the Mayor's proposal to rescind the Bottle Bill, and you guys not getting the nickel no more?"

That caught my cousin's interest. He put his six bags down, and he said, "I think it's a bad policy." And they talked for about a half hour, and then Anthony Williams told my cousin that if he would come back next Wednesday, to a meeting, whatever cans that he had, he would let him store the cans for an hour or two, while he attended this meeting.

At that time, I was room-mate with Warren Prince. I had lost my apartment in Manhattan, and we had moved to Halsey Street, in with Prince's uncle by marriage. We shared living space in Brooklyn, at Halsey Street, right off of the subway station, Kingston, and Throop.

So, my cousin Warren Prince came home that evening and told me about this *exciting group* that he met, that was fighting for us to keep our nickels in our pocket and that during his conversation with our co-founder Mr. Anthony Williams, he happened to mention that his cousin Jean Rice, yours truly, had taken some college courses in the area of public administration and criminal justice administration and he thought that this new organization, Picture the Homeless, could use some of that expertise in their campaign for social, economic and criminal justice. Warren impressed Anthony, and he said, "Well you gotta get your cousin to one of our meetings."

Jean Rice: For three weeks in a row, my first Cousin Warren Prince came home and bugged me about this organization called Picture the Homeless. Finally, to shut him up, I agreed to go to one of these meetings. Because again, *in addition* to Picture the Homeless being opposed to the Quality-of-Life laws that criminalized homelessness, they also was opposed to Bloomberg getting rid of the Better Bottle Bill. And that got my attention because that was my pocket. That was my money!



Anthony Williams: So, to get a homeless person, I mean in my opinion—if you get them *doing something* that they could *see* that's making a difference for them, then they will stay! Because they see things changing. They see them having an opportunity to say what they need to say, without any type of repression or told they cannot speak that way or talk that way, once they're given a space to *really talk about who they are* and how they got there and what put them there.



Jean Rice: I was introduced as Warren Prince's cousin, because Prince had come to a preceding meeting. They knew him but didn't know me. And immediately I struck up a relationship with three members, at that time. I mean there were about eight people at the meeting, but three of them I bonded with

instantly, and one was Emily Givens, Gina Hunt, and my sister Lynn Lewis.

And it was a mutual bonding, because during the course of the meeting, a discussion about the Fourteenth Amendment arose and the three people I just mentioned were impressed about my knowledge about constitutional law, and the three of them instantly drafted me to the civil rights committee, which is the first committee my beloved Picture the Homeless ever established.

Although I don't see Emily as much as I see Gina and Lynn, I'm sure wherever she is, she carries some of my spirit, as I carry some of hers.



Warren Prince, Emily Givens, Jean Rice. December 16, 2005

So, that's how I got introduced to Picture the Homeless, through the attempt to abolish the Better Bottle Bill by then Mayor Bloomberg. Had he never ventured into that negative policy making venture, I might not have never met Picture the Homeless.



Anthony Williams: I know what it's like, having a shopping cart, picking up cans, storing your private property. Their lives are in that shopping cart. If you turn over a shopping cart, you're turning over somebody's life. That is how heartfelt it is, you know? When you see people take their property, turn it upside down, and dump it on the ground, and take the shopping cart. They just see you as a bum, or some person that's no good! The people are so stereotyped that they don't even see the strength in just walking around with a shopping cart.

Like last night, I'm on Eighth Avenue, walking down and this guy comes around Thirty-Fifth Street and Eighth Avenue, had like three or four sticks in the shopping cart with bags wrapped all around them. His shopping cart was full to capacity. And when you see a shopping cart that full, *you already know* this guy has over one-hundred dollars in cans. Because I was taught by the best, right? Jean Rice and other folks! So, we know when we see *that*. We know what we're looking at.

He must have been working *all day*, walking, collecting cans, going in trash cans, going in dumpsters, going behind businesses, going in front of businesses. I mean this is work! This is a person that can make that kind of money in a day—

but is still harassed... Treated as if they can't return the cans to a store, you know... Or put a limit on the cans. So, that's how important it is.

The simple things that a homeless person goes through in life on a daily basis, because they have a shopping cart, because they're trying to make a living, or trying to make some ends meet, make some cash, take off the edge? You know, you're criminalized for it.

So, when I see a person coming towards the building and like parking their shopping cart and coming in, it's an honor! It's an honor and a privilege to have those folks come to your meeting, to talk about solutions, and *how can this stop*.

It takes a lot of strength for a person to just want to stop canning for five minutes or half an hour, and park their shopping cart, to talk about what's going on with the homeless. "I heard you were talking about us." It's just so important, it just means so much.



Redemption Center, 127th St. and 2nd Avenue. East Harlem

ECOLOGICAL ENGINEERS

Jean Rice: Well, first of all, the description of the people that pick up recyclable containers, the word *canner*, doesn't do that work justice, in my humble perspective. To me the word *canner* does not justify how labor intensive that is and how it fits into the current socio-economic climate, on a *global scale*.

So, I took it upon myself to refer to all the of people I know, and myself, who retrieve recyclable containers as *ecological engineers*, *not canners*. Because to me, those two words, ecological engineer, describes the work and *the impact* that the work has on the society at large, more accurately than a word *canner*. To me, the word *canner*, as perceived by the population at large, usually has a *negative* connotation, like the word *homeless*.

But if you describe yourself while you're picking up recyclable containers as an *ecological engineer*, people are more inclined to be more sensitive and more impartial to what that entails. Now, often when people say, "Hey, can man!" I go, "Excuse me, sir, or ma'am, please don't call me that. I prefer that you call what I'm doing ecological engineering." And they go, "How so?"

And then I explain to them that as populations increase globally, as our technology makes us more dependent on fossil fuel—that's running out rapidly... When the search for these fossil fuels to fuel our industry makes us do processes like mountaintop removal to get coal, like disturbing the sea for off sea drilling for oil, how the pollutants really impact *everyone*, and how people, when they pick up recyclable containers, are putting this fossil fuel that has been extracted back into use again, to diminish the need or necessity to keep raping Mother Earth.

So, in that sense, these people are more than *canners*, these people are ecological engineers, and what they're doing when you see them picking up these cans is more than just putting a nickel in their pocket. They're helping Mother Earth survive and diminishing the need for these companies to keep polluting our atmosphere and killing workers! I mean, look at the rate of coal miners that die of black lung. This is all in the pursuit of fossil fuel! Look, all the times that the oil rigs explode, and the oil spills and the damage that they cause to the ecology, all in the pursuit of fossil fuel.

THE WORK OF CANNERS

Lynn Lewis: You've been doing that kind of work for how many years?

Jean Rice: Oh, over a decade. That's what I call survival. A lot of my fellow New Yorkers call that part of the *underground economy*, and part of that is ecological engineering, which is picking up recyclable containers and public solicitation. A lot of so called homeless/undomiciled New Yorkers, help to distribute AM New York newspapers, et cetera.

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



Jean Rice: A lot of people when they first start, on the road to becoming an ecological engineer they are a canner, because they just pick up everything that looks like a can or a bottle.

But it's more intricate than that. For instance, supermarkets are looking for an excuse not to accept your receptacles. So, if you mix a Budweiser product with a Coors product with a Heineken product, with an El Corona product, they'll go, "Oh! You've got to sort this out. I'm not taking this, like this."

When the retailer submits the recyclables that they took in and paid the redeemer for, the distributor dispatches trucks to pick up these recyclable containers. Then the retailer is reimbursed, at a little *over* the five cents that the canner, or ecological engineer got, for handling costs. But! These drivers are instructed not to pick up—and don't pay for, what they call a mixed bag.

So, after picking up these recyclable containers, that part of the labor, now you have to know how *to sort* them, before you submit them for redemption, to get your money. So, you have to sort by two criteria, by brand and size. Which means, I have to sort Budweiser beer cans from Coors beer cans. I have to sort Pepsi soda cans from Coca-Cola.



Jean Rice: When adverse weather conditions came, and me and my two cousins were still part of the recyclable container canning community, we firsthand saw... Dead wintertime, feet frozen below thirty-two degrees... Hands, below thirty-two degrees...

We stand outside a retail establishment, such as Associated or Food Emporium, and the management of these retail establishments saw the weather as an ally. “Make them stand out there long enough, they’ll get cold enough, they’ll go away!”

From our perspective, we said, “We put this much into it, we may as well endure it.” Often times they would just leave it to the delivery boy that they hired, to count our recyclable containers. And the delivery boy would write a receipt or go to the cashier and tell them how much we had—but unbearable sometimes, especially in the wintertime. Still there was this effort by Bloomberg to rescind the Better Bottle Bill.

Sometimes we would get impatient standing outside, and we would stop a cop, and we would go, “Hey! If we were disruptive and abusive, the manager would call the police to make us leave.” So, now the managers refusing to uphold the Better Bottle Bill. We would show the cop a copy, and the cop would tell us—much to our dismay that, “The NYPD could not enforce the Better Bottle Bill.”

So, my cousins and I talked after work. “Well, who is responsible for enforcing this?! If the City Council made it a law, *somebody* must have the authority to enforce the law!”



Jean Rice: Retailers were always a problem on the redemption end of this work. I mean if John Doe and Jane Doe public could imagine that most of the time the recycling happens late night, early morning. For instance, what time do restaurants close? Always in the evening, late evening. What time do

concerts occur? Most of the time, after work, late evening! Well, sporting events and concerts, those are where *the bulk* of recyclable containers occur.

So, if you can imagine, a homeless person having the discipline and the wherewithal to start at say, eight o'clock in the evening, and go around Madison Square Garden and catch the people coming into the hockey game, drinking beer, disposing of the beer cans, afterwards, waiting for the people that clean up Madison Square Garden to put those recyclables out, and beating Sanitation to them. You're talking most of these concerts and sporting events happen like between eight, nine o'clock at night. These people are up *all night*.

Now, after procuring—or acquiring, this whole load of recyclable containers, they have to guard them diligently. I used to sleep on top of mine, in a mail cart. And if somebody took the fruits of my labor, they had to move me first.

If I wanted to take a break, I could go to one of these SRO's, pay ten dollars, wash up, lay down in a cubicle. The homeless element of ecological engineers, they depend on that.

And it is *so frustrating* and so unjust. After that, eight o'clock in the morning comes, and now you take your load that you picked up the night before, and you push that to the nearest supermarket—Associated, Pathmark, Food Emporium, one of them. You get there, and the store manager comes out and says, “Oh! Move that *junk* from in front of my store. You're blocking my paying customers.” Number one, so you comply, and you move it to the side.

Then you go back to the same guy, “But sir, when, when can I redeem these recyclables?” He goes, “You have to wait until my delivery boy delivers groceries to all of paying customers, before we have time to deal with you and your garbage. I'm

going to send a guy out to count it for you, because I don't want you in my store, smelling like that."

That's the reward—you're demeaned, humiliated, after you put in that hard nights labor. Now mind you, our brothers, or sisters that work for the Sanitation department, they go through the same garbage. They smell the same way! But Sanitation workers are not humiliated, dehumanized the way that ecological engineers, i.e., canners are, although they smell the same and do the same labor!

However! Here's the big difference! The recyclable containers that the Sanitation department gets, either goes into a city incinerator, or a barge—to be transported to a neighboring States landfill for which New York City taxpayers paying for the transportation to use the other States landfill. And guess what?! When erosion due to climate occurs? The emissions from that landfill goes into the air—toxic waste.

Isn't it much more in the common good of the global population for those same recyclable containers to be put back into the process and made into more recyclable containers—again, renewable energy? That's why I think that the term ecological engineer is more accurate than canning.



TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Jean Rice: You don't see many people now with the mail carts. So, right near Grand Central Station about two blocks north, I would say 44th Street somewhere, there's a post office. A lot of the postal workers come to work through that corridor, 42nd Street, Grand Central. They get the train, and the Post Office is

like two, three blocks away. So, I got to know a few of them, and they would see me with a lot of bags at first and they said, "Look, come by my place at eight-thirty, I'm going to give you a cart that'll make your work easier. But you got to promise that when you're not using it, put it back where I give it to you at."

So, when my cart was *empty*, I would just go to the nearest post office and put it outside by the mailbox. When it's *full*, and I'm waiting to redeem the next day, I would sleep on top of it.

I would go where there was security, like in front of Grand Central Station, where there's always a police presence. I wouldn't go hide in some obscure alley or nothing. No, I would go right in front of Grand Central Station. I would take me two unused pieces of cardboard and put them on top of my recycle load. I usually tried to get there before my friend Henry the shoeshine guy would get off. My bedding would be stored with him. Then after I put the cardboard on top of the cans, I would go take my blankets, and I'd get on top of the cardboard and pull the blankets up over me.

And when security came in the morning, because Grand Central closes from two to five... So, when security come in the morning to open the door again at five, they would shake the cart. And then I would get up, go get my coffee and stuff, before I'd push my cart to fifty-second to 42nd, ten blocks, ten blocks up and about five blocks west, to this place formerly known as We Can.



THE 1982 BETTER BOTTLE BILL

Jean Rice: The attempt by this Mayor [Michael Bloomberg] to abandon the portion of the Better Bottle Bill that required that every retailer redeem—at minimum, 240 units—that comes out to twelve dollars. Minimum requirement! And then if you had a big load, like a convention or something happening, you just gave whatever supermarket you sought to redeem at two days' notice, and then the amount that they take is unlimited. The law! Picture the Homeless didn't make the law. The ecological engineering community/canners didn't make the law.

The City Council of New York City passed the Better Bottle Bill. *However*, it had a state component. Much like the Fourteenth Amendment has in the City Charter, a City provision, and the State Constitution has the same Fourteenth Amendment assurance—due process, equal protection of the law. So, the Better Bottle Bill was two tiered also. I don't know why our former Mayor didn't know that you cannot repeal a State law, by City ordinance. State law supersedes City.



ABA Redemption Center, Midtown Manhattan, just blocks from Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen. 2004

Giuliani and Bloomberg never gave the ecological engineering community space, like Dinkins did. So, We Can went out of business. So now, the ecological engineering community had to depend on the retailers to redeem their recyclable containers. In the flux, independent operators like A.B. whatever that was, they popped up. But it was sporadic, it wasn't institutionalized. So, they went out of business.

2004: THE CANNERS CAMPAIGN

PTH's Canners' Campaign launched just after the Republican National Convention in 2004. PTH civil rights leaders raised the issues of police harassment that interfered with their ability to work.

These issue areas included subsistence work such as canning, day labor and panhandling. The civil rights campaign voted to create a new Economic Justice sub-committee to conduct outreach and research. Markus Frensch, an intern, was instrumental in supporting the organizing and participatory research work of the Canners Campaign.

The Canners committee had its first meeting in October of 2004. PTH members joined the canners campaign and Jean recruited his cousin Eugene Gadsen to campaign meeting. Markus recruited his friend Ana Martinez DeLuco.



Brainstorming/Issue Identification Notes from First PTH Canners Campaign Meeting, October 2004

Brainstorming Issues of Canners

- mail problem - not getting checks on time (carfare check - HRA)
- lack of space (to store cans etc.)
- can't get bank account
 - > hard to save money
 - > puts people at risk (money in pocket)
- no redemption center
- places that don't accept cans on Sunday
- transportation
- places that accept only 20 or so cans.
- welfare: food stamps not for hot food
- health care (immigration rights/Medicaid/workers compensation)
- public urination as work condition
- panhandling
- immigration status
- police harassment (post 9/11: - black bag - no access
 - no garbage scavenging
 - not getting into transportation
 - obstructing sidewalk)
- lack of housing
- lack of respect as a worker
- no place to wash cans
- health risks (occupational hazards, unknown contact with black bags/
subject to weather condition)



PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

In order to really know what was happening with canners on a bigger scale, and to engage, listen to and meet canners and invite them to join the canners' campaign, PTH conducted its third participatory action research project.

Picture the Homeless

Canners' Survey: Summary of Preliminary Results

April 13, 2005

Methodology

The Canners' survey was conducted predominantly in Manhattan during the months of February, March, and April of 2005. Fifty-three canners were interviewed at random, primarily on the street while picking up or while cashing in their recyclables at supermarkets, or redemption centers.

The survey instrument was developed by members of the Canners' Committee at Picture the Homeless to document the prevalence of violations by supermarkets and drug stores of the New York State Bottle Bill. Canners committee members conducted the surveys in the form of a guided interview, with the majority of interviews conducted by one surveyor.

Definitions

For the purposes of this survey and report, the term "canners" refers to people who collect cans, bottles and/or plastics for the 5 cent deposit

Findings

145 distinct supermarket complaints were documented, several of which referred to the same stores. 77 unduplicated supermarkets or drug stores with verifiable addresses were identified. The survey predominantly documented violations of the Bottle law, but also provides insight about a range of harassing practices that supermarkets and drug stores illegally employ against canners.

- ✓ 73 of the 77 identified supermarkets were found to be in violation of the New York State Bottle Law.
- ✓ 68 of the 77 were in violation of the legal minimum limit of 240 recyclables per person per day (worth \$12.00)
- ✓ Associated and Gristedes were the worst offenders, accepting on average 50 pieces (worth only \$2.50 to the canner who must then continue hauling his/her load to cash in).
- ✓ Gristedes tops the list with 31 complaints covering 21 different stores, followed by Associated with 27 complaints covering 14 different stores and Food Emporium with 18 complaints covering 9 different stores.
- ✓ Stores with malfunctioning automatic redemption machines were in violation by not providing a staff person to assist canners.
- ✓ Stores imposed unlawful limits for accepting glass containers, or established other unlawful procedures such as requiring canners to have their picture taken, before allowing him/her to cash in, demanding purchase receipts, restricting the hours or days canners could redeem, or requiring boxes or clear bags.
- ✓ Several stores force canners to wait for up to 4 hours to redeem recyclables.
- ✓ Other forms of harassment include verbal abuse by supermarket employees

Significance of Findings

The Canners survey represents only a fraction of the total number of stores in NYC that are in violation of the NYS Bottle Law. It is based on a limited sample of the total number of New Yorkers who collect cans, bottles, and plastics. The nearly universal reports of violations of the Bottle Law by supermarkets and drug stores revealed by this small sample, however, indicate that action to strengthen enforcement of the current law is necessary.

Many canners have developed routines and travel routes that circumvent the lawbreaking supermarkets and drug stores in order to avoid daily hassles in the course of carrying out their work. Certain stores are known as consistent violators (such as Gristedes, Associated, Fine Fare, Pioneer). Since the canners' objective is to cash in their recyclables in order to earn a living, many will not attempt to cash in at stores which violate the Bottle Law, or otherwise abuse canners. The word spreads quickly among canners—which are the few law-abiding stores and which stores violated their rights or give them a “hard time.” Alternative routes to seek out compliant supermarkets or redemption centers force canners to travel long distances by foot or public transportation—creating a hardship for canners by taking a lot of time as well as putting them in the position of being harassed by police (NYPD and MTA) for having carts or bags of cans on sidewalks, trains, or other public spaces.

PTH Canners' Committee Mission Statement is led by canners and organizes to build power as a workforce, to assure that the legal rights of canners are enforced and expanded, to improve working conditions and to increase respect for the environmental contributions of their work.

CANNERS CAMPAIGN ID CARDS

The Canners campaign created ID cards for campaign members who often didn't have any other form of photo ID. The lack of a government issued photo ID was often used as a pretext by the NYPD to arrest people.

Canners Committee

Membership Card

Eugene Gadsen is a member in
good standing of the Canners
Committee at Picture The Homeless
170 E. 116th St., 1 W, NY, NY 10029
For information call: 212-427-2499.



Date issued

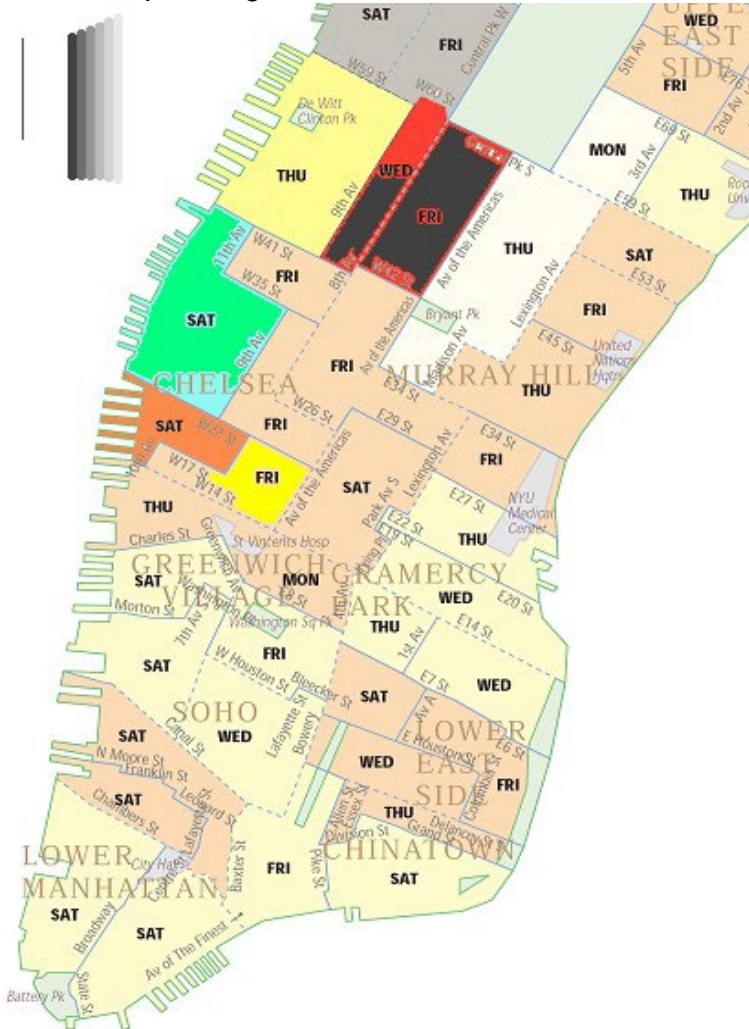
Member's signature



Eugene Gadsen working the streets of midtown Manhattan
with his shopping cart Betsy. 2005

MAPPING

Canners navigate the streets, knowing what night recyclables were put out on the sidewalk in “blue bags”, knowing what redemption centers were in that neighborhood (if any) and/or what stores would allow them to cash in and redeem their legally allowed 240 cans or bottles per day. These maps were also crucial to planning outreach.



CANNERS CAMPAIGN FLYER

Did You Know That This Associated is Breaking the Law? Tell the Manager, Joe Viscomi : Let canners cash in their 240 Cans!

Canners contribute significantly to the success of the recycling system, thereby providing an important service to society! (Statistics suggest that Canners bring about 10% of the total amount of cans and bottles in New York State with deposits back into the recycling system.)

Canners save the taxpayers money by diverting large amounts from the landfills and helping recycle valuable material resources and energy! In the past 20 years canners kept out of our landfills more than 500,000 tons of plastic, glass, and metal.

But the majority of the more than 1000 New Yorkers who depend on collecting cans and bottles as a means of daily survival are homeless because of their low earnings. A major reason is the fact that most of the stores violate the existing law – the NYS Bottle Bill – which states that “*[a] dealer may not limit the number of empty beverage containers to be accepted for redemption at the dealers place of business to less than **240 containers per redeemer per day**”(NYCRR367.5 (d)). 240 containers amount to \$12.*

Sponsored by the Canners Committee at Picture the Homeless
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PTH CANNERS CAMPAIGN TAKES ACTION



Charley Heck and Jean Rice, PTH Canners Campaign, protesting Associated Supermarkets violating Bottle Bill. April 2005

Michael Williams, In "Can Man" outfit preparing for Associated Action by Canners Campaign. April 2005



Tyletha Samuels: It was fun to see all that, and to see how seriously people—that's like their job, their livelihood, you know? To see how seriously people take this—and then you have all these cans, and here's a supermarket only going to take two dollars' worth? Come on with that! I got to eat! And I got twenty dollars' worth of cans, and you're going to take two dollars' worth? No, I don't think so. So, to me, it's fun to challenge these places and to scare them half to death at the same time. Because that supermarket was not feeling us. And to know that we were right, and that we wasn't leaving until they took our cans. I mean like, it's fun.

THE INDYPENDENT

a FREE paper for free people • Issue #68, April 20 – May 3, 2005



Canners Seek Redemption

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY ANTRIM CASKEY

If you put a bunch of soda and beer cans in a bag and go to a supermarket or drugstore where these items are sold, the New York State "bottle bill" guarantees you a five-cent return deposit per container. Many homeless people rely on redeeming cans and bottles for their livelihood. But most stores do not comply with the law, which says they have to take up to 240 containers of brands that they sell.

Led by the Canners Committee of the homeless advocacy group Picture the Homeless, about 30 canners and supporters marched on April 13 to the Associated supermarket on Second Avenue and East 48th Street to protest the stores that refuse to take 240 containers.

"D'Agostino is the only one that really takes 240," said John Z, a canner for about seven years. "Associated and Gristedes, they only take about 20-40." At five cents a can, that's \$12 for a full load of 240, which generally fills one large garbage bag.

"You can't take your cans with you in the shelter or drop in center," explained John Robert Jones. "You don't want to, after working six or seven hours, to babysit the cans overnight. You want to get rid of them."

At the Associated supermarket, four men with garbage bags slung over their shoulders walked into the store and asked to turn in



From top left: Eugene Gadsden bringing in the haul. Ana Martinez DeLuco says canning makes it easier "to live with less." Eugene Gadsden and Jean Rice are both longtime members of Picture the Homeless who have been canning for twenty years.



their cans, while the rest of the group stayed outside. The store manager refused to take any cans. The men began to argue.

When the police arrived, an officer named McCann spoke to the manager and then ordered all the canners to leave the store. He said that they could come back in, one at a time, and redeem 20-30 cans each. The canners erupted in anger.

"It's a civil matter," McCann explained, when asked about the law requiring stores to accept up to 240 containers per person per day. "The store has its own policies that are separate and distinct."

Mary Moore, director of public affairs for

D'Agostino Supermarkets, characterized the canners as "a sympathetic lot," but said the volume of redemption places a serious burden on grocery stores — especially on D'Agostino's, which was sued about 15 years ago and as a result, is one of the few major chains that complies with the law.

In 2001-02, she said, D'Agostino supermarkets in the city and Westchester took in 19.6 million cans. The company sold 8.8 million returnable containers, collecting \$440,000 in deposits. D'Agostino receives two cents for each container as a handling fee, but paid out more than \$1.1 million in return deposits and processing costs, for a total net loss of \$285,000

— about 1.5 cents for every can it took in.

Another issue, Moore added, is "sanitation," both of the people who return cans and of storing dirty cans and bottles in a food store.

Markus French from Picture the Homeless said the canners are mostly people who have difficulty finding regular jobs: some because they have felony records, some because of their immigration status, and some who had jobs that evaporated, like the older Chinese women who used to work in textile factories.

John Robert Jones fondly recalls WE CAN, a nonprofit organization that helps people collect and redeem bottles for redemption. WE CAN lost its former redemption space on West 52nd Street last October.

The state's bottlers keep from \$88 to \$140 million each year in unclaimed deposits from cans and bottles that are not redeemed, according to estimates by the state environmental department and NYPIRG. Over the past 20 years, NYPIRG says, the bottle bill has kept more than five million tons of plastic, glass, and metal out of landfills and incinerators.

A bill now in the state Assembly would extend the deposit to water and juice bottles, and would require the beverage industry to return all unclaimed deposits to the state to help fund municipal recycling programs.

City Limits WEEKLY

Week of: **April 18, 2005**, Number: 481

CANNERS' CRUSADE

Homeless protest supermarkets' limits on can and bottle redemption. >

By Cassi Feldman

After 21 years on the streets of Manhattan, Eugene Gadsen knows everything there is to know about collecting cans and bottles. He knows which recyclables can be redeemed, which buildings have friendly supers, and which events yield the most cast-offs (Gay Pride is a doozy, he says). And he knows which supermarkets are willing to cash them in.

Despite a state law requiring any store that sells beer or soda to accept a maximum of 240 cans or bottles per person per day, many simply refuse, setting arbitrary limits of 100 or 40 per person instead. The state Department of Environmental Conservation has fielded 460 complaints about violations of the law in New York City since January.

For those, like Gadsen, who rely on the meager deposits for survival, redemption limits can mean one less meal. "It's not right," he said, eyes yellow and watery. "Just because they're a big chain, they think they're above the law."

Gadsen and other canners took their frustrations to the street on Wednesday at a protest organized by the nonprofit Picture the Homeless outside an Associated supermarket at 2nd Avenue, and 48th Street. Dragging huge clear garbage bags full of cans and bottles, the protesters chanted outside the store:

"What do we want?
Redemption. When do we want it? Now."

Police officers pulled up within minutes and attempted to corral the crowd. After a brief confrontation, the protest was over. Inside the supermarket, assistant manager John Polanco looked stunned. He admitted that the store only allows 40 cans per person and stops redeeming after 9 p.m. "What it is, is the lack of space," he said, nodding toward a side room where recyclables are stored. "If we took hundreds of cans, where would we put them?" Polanco said he was unaware of the state "bottle law," which specifies that "a dealer may not limit the number of empty beverage containers to be accepted for redemption...to less than 240 containers per redeemer per day" unless the limit is clearly posted, and canners are offered special appointments to return larger amounts.

Associated isn't the only offender, notes Picture the Homeless. The group interviewed 52 canners, mostly in Manhattan, who reported more than 70 different supermarkets and drug store branches that were flouting the

law. Gristedes, Associated and Food Emporium were named most often. In addition to the limit, canners complained about broken redemption machines, long waits and harassment by store employees.

"I've always found that managers try to be as kind to them as they can," said Matt Wanning, a spokesperson for Gristedes. But he also expressed aggravation with the law. "I believe Albany made a mistake," he said. "You can't sell groceries if you've got one of these homeless guys standing in the corner putting dirty cans into the machine." A spokesperson for Associated, who declined to give his name, agreed. "It's a very unfair law. The city should create recycling centers instead of pushing that responsibility onto us."

The city used to provide space to We Can, a nonprofit that helps homeless canners—but took back its West Side property in the mid-1990s. The group has since opened recycling centers in Harlem and the Bronx and runs a mobile service in Manhattan. Ed Snowden, who coordinates the group's collection network, says the city should do more to recognize the environmental role played by collectors—and their economic rights. "You'd be surprised at how resourceful people can be," she said. "You can really build a life on redeeming."

CANNERS CAMPAIGN MEETING FLYER



• ¡Cada supermercado tiene que aceptar por lo menos 240 latas o botellas por persona y día!



- Estamos colaborando con el Abogado General del Estado de Nueva York para enfuerczar la Ley de la Botella. Diga a nosotros cualquier violación de la Ley de la Botella! Especialmente cualquier nueva violación de Food Emporium, Gristedes, Associated
- ¡Incluso Duane Reade, CVS, Rite Aid and Eckerd tienen que aceptar latas y botellas de bebidas que venden!
- ¡Cada violación de esa ley, hay una multa de hasta \$500 dolares por el supermercado!
- ¡Luchamos para que se recicle tambien las botellas de agua, las latas ice-tea, los jugos y los sport-drinks!



¡Conéctate con nosotros! Venga a nuestras Reuniones de Lateras/os a Picture The Homeless Todos los Viernes a la 3pm.
(Tendremos refrescos y metrocards)

Picture The Homeless,
170 E. 116th St. #1W (entre 3^{ra} & Lex Aves.),
Telefono: 212 427 2499;
info@picturethehomeless.org

Jean Rice: Picture the Homeless organized to make sure that two things happened. We wanted the Better Bottle Bill to stay in place, point one. Point two, we wanted to streamline and institutionalize the redeeming end of the retrieval process, for people that worked so hard to pick up these recyclable containers.

So, around those two objectives, Picture the Homeless provided—*the space, the leadership, and the technology* to mount a campaign around *those two objectives*. I don't know if we would ever achieve that without an organization like Picture the Homeless. Through that campaign, I *truly learned* that those who society at large might call, “the least amongst us”, the marginalized, the criminalized... We don't have to be apathetic. *We've got power, if we just use it*. Picture the Homeless taught me that, because look what happened!



Leroy Parker, Efraim, Charley Heck, Jean Rice Cannery action debrief. April 2005

So, we held another meeting and then part of the meeting, we designated part of the meeting to—Economic Justice. So, we formed a semi-committee, called the Economic Justice committee. In that setting, I was privileged to meet Brother

Charley Heck, Gregory, Red, Charles from Saint Mary's Church. God was bringing all this together, through this movement—these powerful brothers! Charles at Saint Mary's, one of Kooperkamp's most devout disciples. Oh, what a dynamic guy!

We communicated to the State Attorney General, then Eliot Spitzer with the aid of people like Reverend Earl Kooperkamp, and we met with Charlie Rangel's staff. They didn't want no redemption centers, he said, "My constituents don't want that here!" And "We can't make the supermarkets..."

But State Attorney General Spitzer delegated two people from his staff, to come to our humble office, on 116th Street, right over Cuchifrito's, and meet with the Picture the Homeless delegation!

And to me, with this textbook knowledge about public administration and criminal justice administration I had swallowed and institutionalized some of the negative about, "the homeless, the marginalized and people who didn't deserve help..." And I was appalled... That these people had the power to cause the State Attorney General, the highest-ranking law enforcement official in the state of New York, to send two members of his staff to talk to us about the dilemma around recycling containers—blew my mind!

I said, if we got that much power over this issue, we can use that power in other issues. That was a learning experience. And then! These people, they went back and reported to the Attorney General. Then they met with us again. This time we had complaints!

The first time they met with us, they said, "Okay, *prove this.*" So, they gave us a quota... My beloved organization gave us the space, where we printed out forms... Gregory and Red outside of Pathmark on 125th Street, Eugene, and Warren

Prince—up and down around Madison Square Garden... We collected these complaints.

Then when we had the quota—*over the quota*—we contacted State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer again. “We got the quota.” He sent the same two people, with a lawyer this time. The three of them from the State Attorney General Office, collected our complaints. Then they said, “You'll hear from us.”

So, we were saying after the meeting when we debriefed, “Just another politician, blowing smoke up our butt, we ain't gonna hear from this guy. Why would the top cop of the state be interested in the plight of people that walk around picking up recyclable containers?!”

Two weeks later, much to our surprise, State Attorney General Spitzer had called three major supermarkets to a table for a conference, wherein... He sent us a synopsis of the meeting, and he admonished these executives from Associated, from Pathmark, from Food Emporium that, “If they didn't change their policy about how they redeem these recyclable containers, they would be fined a thousand dollars a day, per person!” And he would see to it, “Because nobody in New York is above the law.”

I was blown away! So was brother Gregory, Red, *we were all surprised at our own power*. And I think my leaders at Picture the homeless, Lynn Lewis—I don't think that she even imagined that that would happen like that.

As a result, we made jobs for this company called Tomra. We saw how this mandate, when it struck at the pockets, the profits, of these major supermarkets, they changed their policy. They hired a company called Tomra to put reverse vending machines outside of their establishments. These machines were programmed to count every recyclable container that was inserted, and to issue receipts. Then this receipt was taken to

the cashier at these establishments, and the cashier was mandated to give whatever monetary value the receipt showed. That was an improvement. It wasn't as great as the We Can process where every State authorized check cashing place could take it. It wasn't that flexible. You had to cash it at the same place that gave you the ticket. But it was an improvement over what happened after Dinkins was replaced by Bloomberg and Giuliani.

RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT SUBSISTANCE WORK AND EXTREME POVERTY IN THE U.S.

*Jean Rice
testifying to the
first Special
Expert from the
UN on Extreme
Poverty in the
U.S., in
conjunction with
the National
Social and
Economic Rights
Initiative (NESRI).
October 24,
2005*



Jean Rice and members of PTH's canners, civil rights and housing campaigns hosted the UN representatives on a walking tour of vacant buildings and lots in Harlem and the canning machines at 125th and Lexington Avenue.

Kazembe Balagun: Knowing Jean, it really got me thinking about how I saw the street again, because then I looked at Pathmark on 125th Street, *way different* than when I met Jean. I realized that at 125th Street, around survival economies... I used to just walk through 125th Street and not even think about it. But then when I met Jean and I heard him talk, and I heard him talk about canning or bottling and stuff like that... I was like, Pathmark 125!

And it shifted the way I thought about the street. I tell people all the time, "You don't need Google glasses if you just listen to people. You know, that's the thing. That's what I felt about Jean.



Canners redeeming bottles and cans at Tomra canning machines outside of Pathmark, 125th and Lexington Ave. Harlem, NY

Liz Theoharis: I remember in particular the first year that the Poverty Initiative started. We did a couple week immersion course, where we were bringing seminarians, a couple of faculty members and others and staff members to locations, nexus of struggle, and organizing work, especially from this perspective of poor folk leading the way to change.

So we brought people to the Picture the Homeless office. I remember walking up these stairs and there was a bunch of folks that were in the space. I remember feeling really at home. It felt much like the offices of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization in Detroit, or the Kensington Welfare Rights Union in Philly or the Coalition of Immokalee Workers office, down in southwest Florida. It was abuzz with different folk that were there—both for community and for solving some immediate problems and also just the camaraderie of trying to build a movement together and trying to really advocate for policies and structures that were going to actually make a difference in people's lives. I remember there were some folks that that had brought their own food. But I also remember us all being offered water and other snacks and just like a total hospitality that was just felt immediately.

What we were doing in that particular visit, was introducing people to the mission and vision of Picture the Homeless, and also specifically talking about a couple of the campaigns that Picture the Homeless was working on at the time. You know, a campaign around police accountability, some work that was happening around the rights of canners, and then also the work of the Potters Field. To see the power of people coming together and not taking the mistreatment and putting forward this vision that it doesn't have to be this way. I just remember a lot of that and the impact that it had... From the hospitality to the kind of larger politics, how it all had this really amazing impact on people, including myself.

CANNERS CAMPAIGN FLYER

Campaign flyers were translated into English, Spanish and Chinese (we attempted Cantonese and Mandarin), reflecting the primary languages of canners in Manhattan and Brooklyn where most of PTH's outreach was conducted.

您在撿拾空瓶罐維生嗎？

請讓我們幫助你！

許多超級市場拒絕兌換空瓶罐，這是不合法的。

根據紐約「瓶罐法」(Bottle Bill of Rights)的規定，
超級市場有義務回收**每人每天 240 個以上的空瓶罐**。
違法的超級市場應被處以每次 US \$ 500 美元的罰款。

我們並計畫增加回收瓶罐的種類，
例如礦泉水、冰紅茶、果汁瓶及運動飲料等。

我們的組織叫做「請為流浪漢想一想」(Picture The Homeless)，
多年來默默的為低收入的人民做事，不分人種，不分語言。

為提供撿拾瓶罐者幫助，我們於

每個禮拜一下午一點舉行集會(Canners' Meetings)

討論各種問題，會議並備有點心及地鐵票(Metrocards)，歡迎您來參加。

並請告訴我們違法、不接受空瓶回收的超級市場，
讓我們為您爭取權利！

我們的地址：170 E. 116th Street, #1W (位於 3rd Ave 與 Lexington Ave 之間)

電話：212-427-2499



PASSAGE OF THE BIGGER, BETTER BOTTLE BILL

Picture the Homeless Canners campaign members joined with the Redeemers; a group of canners organizing out of St. Mary's Church in Harlem with support of Reverend Earl Kooperkamp, as well as environmental groups like the Sierra Club, to support the passage of the Bigger Better Bottle Bill, which would expand the types of recyclable containers to include water bottles and other non-carbonated drinks.

NYC REDEEMERS COALITION CELEBRATION & FUNDRAISER!



NOVEMBER 19, 2011, 3PM-10PM
\$10* including light dinner & entertainment

3pm: REMEMBRANCES & PRESENTATIONS ON COALITION ACTIVITIES

6pm: ENTERTAINMENT, INCLUDING THE ST. MARY'S GOSPEL CHOIR

8pm-10pm: LIGHT DINNER & ENTERTAINMENT FINALE!

COME JOIN US and celebrate our neighborhood friends who clean up the recyclable cans & bottles that litter our streets & learn more about them!

@ St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Harlem
521 west 126th St., NYC, 212-864-4013

**free for redeemers*

Seeking redemption

Groups want expansion of bottle, can deposits

by Amy Zimmer / Metro New York

SEP 10, 2007

MANHATTAN. Charles Kelly earns his living rummaging through trash. With bottles and cans of soda and beer, he carts them around to collect the 5-cent-each deposit. He's been a full-time "canner" since 1984, when he lost his job at the Board of Education. That's almost as far back as when New York's "bottle bill," enacted 25 years ago, put the deposit on beer and soda containers.

For the last several years, many environmentalists and homeless advocates have been pushing Albany to pass what's known as the "Bigger Better Bottle Bill." The proposed legislation would update the law to include bottled water and other non-carbonated beverages that have since exploded on the market.

Kelly and other canners who meet at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Harlem call themselves "redeemers." They, along with Bronx-based group Picture the Homeless, support the expanded bill, but also want to open their own mobile redemption center. "Redemption centers treat us with disrespect," Kelly, 58, said. "The stores make 8-cents a bottle. We make a nickel. No one is getting a free ride." Stores are supposed to take up to 240 bottles a day per person, which is \$12 worth, even though Kelly says many redeemers collect \$40 to \$50 worth of cans a day.

GROUPS CHEER PASSAGE OF BIGGER BETTER BOTTLE BILL

Update of State's Bottle Recycling Law Hailed as Major Environmental Victory

(Albany, NY) Groups from across the state applauded passage of the Bigger Better Bottle Bill today as part of the 2009-10 state budget. This momentous achievement is the first major overhaul of the state's bottle deposit law since it was created in 1982, and caps a grueling nine-year campaign to expand and update the law.

The update expands New York's bottle return law to include water bottles, which comprise nearly a quarter of all beverages sold in New York. The law also requires beverage companies to return 80% of the unclaimed bottle and can deposits to the state, generating upwards of \$115 million annually for the General Fund.

"This is a huge victory not only for the environment, but for the people of New York," said Laura Haight, senior environmental associate with NYPIRG. "As a result of this law, we will have noticeably cleaner communities and far more recycling. At the same time, the money from the public's unclaimed nickels will go to work for us, not for Coke and Pepsi."

The expansion, which goes into effect on June 1st, will require a deposit on all water bottles sold in New York. According to the Container Recycling Institute, more than 3.2 billion water bottles were sold in New York State alone – nearly a quarter of the state's total beverage sales. Bottled water represents 70% of the total noncarbonated beverage sales in New York which previous versions of the bill sought to capture. Water bottles are one of the most common items found in litter cleanups in New York. Without a deposit, most of these containers end up in the trash or polluting our communities.

A NEW GENERATION OF ECOLOGICAL ENGINEERS

Marcus Moore: I learned that when I'm out there recycling, and have been recycling over the years, that being sustainable in all types of fashion and ways, *is genius*. I learned that and that's for me, that's the light bulb right there.

Once I learned what the community was doing to sustain itself, that kind of took me to another level as far as homesteading, community land trusts—because we was no longer waiting for institutions or individuals. You kind of learned how to do these things and get resources with community, or with individuals.

Jean Rice has taught me to say, “ecological engineer.” So, when I go to different places, I'm often introduced as an ecological engineer. Some people don't know how to pronounce it, but it's okay. I get what they're saying. I have learned how to build my economy by recycling cans and bottles, and making it work for me from time to time.

These are the type of things that I was using as life experiences and tools and resources, to help me to be able to maintain off the land the same way my ancestors have always done, who lived off the land and know how to treat the land and the earth in a way where they can be resourceful and full.

So, I used to use these cans, and I still do it from time to time. Others try to make me feel a certain way, because they're doing *this* and they're doing *that*. But I know that cans and bottles has been sustaining people, for quite some time now.

It's been very helpful for me because I've lived in a lot of places and I've been able to use the money from picking up cans and bottles to buy tools for the house, to help to buy

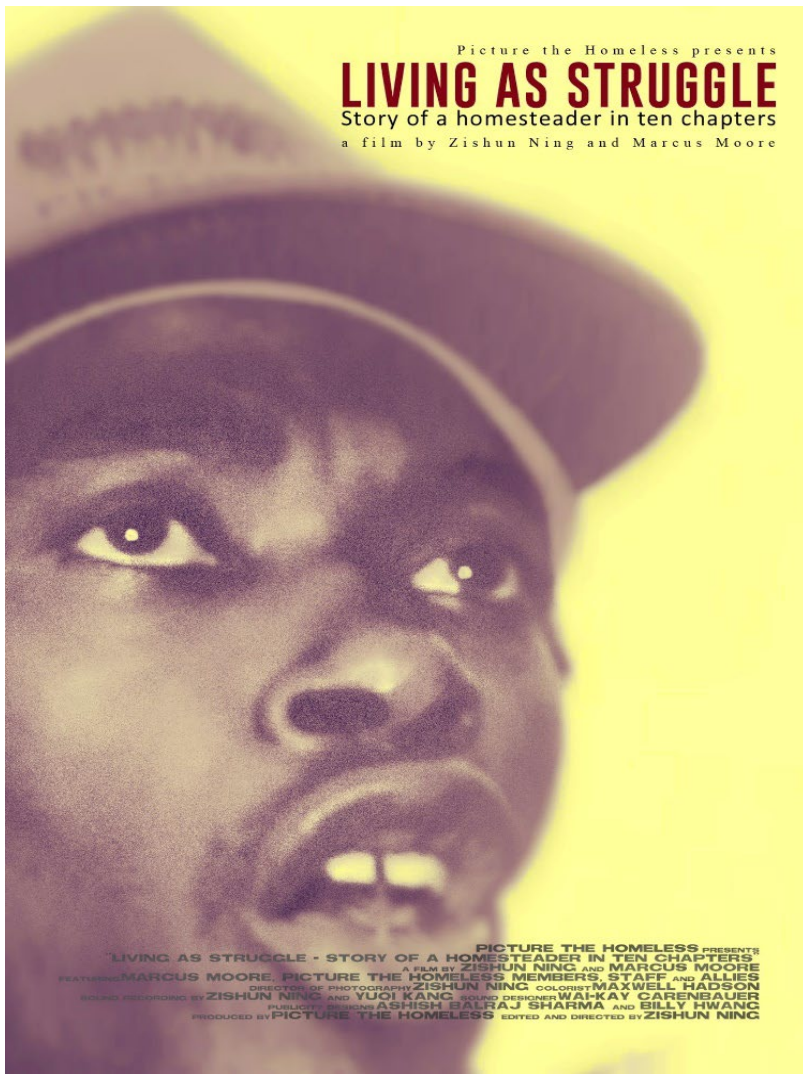
groceries for myself. So, from time to time, I really didn't have to count on public assistance to feed me, you know? I developed my own resources from pantry to picking up cans and bottles and going shopping for myself and which things that I want to eat, or little miscellaneous stuff around the house and whatnot.



Marcus Moore: It's really a way of living in a society where they discriminate when it comes to employment. You get a chance to create your own job and people respect it! I get all types of people that come on the train, and you have these personal conversations with them, and they often tell you, "I respect what you're doing." You know, people respect what you're doing, others like to still look at you like you got three heads.

It seems like I'm always in survival mode. Through the course of my day, I will take out my gloves sometimes. I have my work with me. I might have my pick-up stick and I might just pick up, or go to work somewhere before I go on the train. It could be in Queens... It could be in the Bronx... It could be anywhere.

That's one of the beautiful things about recycling, you can start work any time, tell your crew, "Listen, I'll see you'll guys later..." Walk around the corner, throw on them gloves, open your bag... Look and see what time it is, what day it is... It's time to go to work. Some days it's better to recycle than other days—though you can really recycle any day. But you throw on your head phones, turn on some jazz, and you're in your own little world—you working.



Flyer for a documentary about Marcus Moore, including his work as a canner.

The New York Times

Editorial | The City Life, Gleaners of Cans, Working Overtime

By FRANCIS X. CLINES. January 1, 2013

Every night until dawn, after people in apartment buildings and houses put out their sorted and bagged garbage for pickup from the sidewalks, the waiting piles are quietly picked over by some 5,000 scavengers called “canners.” In the dark, they loom as silhouettes carrying giant plastic sacks to cart away countless soda cans and bottles, redeemable for 5 cents each.

“It’s a beautiful thing,” explains Marcus Moore, a canner who roams his unofficial territory barely ahead of the sanitation trucks. He makes maybe \$500 a month from canning — peanuts, he says, compared with the take of Gene Rice, a kind of canning Jedi master who tutored him at Picture the Homeless, an organization that serves people living on the city’s edgier corners.

Mr. Moore is refashioning himself as an “ecological engineer,” he says with a laugh, while warily looking out for rats attracted to the same garbage piles. Seven years ago, Ana Martinez de Luco, a Roman Catholic nun, became a canner herself in creating Sure We Can, a project for the destitute, with the help of Eugene Gadsden, a street legend as a scavenger. Sister Ana estimated that the garbage piles back then were worked by about 2,500 people, who were predominantly poor and black, often mentally ill loners. But now in the struggling economy, there are Hispanic families, Chinese couples and other newcomers who are laboring overtime in what Sister Ana says is a doubling of the volume of empties being retrieved and cashed in.

Jean Rice: The things that mean the most to me are not the individual accomplishments, like helping to be a founding member of the Picture the Homeless board, helping to be a founding member of our civil rights committee. What I get the most satisfaction from is the victories that Picture the Homeless has achieved that affected *multitudes of homeless people*.

For instance, defending the Better Bottle Bill, and getting it *expanded* to where it includes plastic water bottles. And when I walk down the street people that don't even *know me*, they don't even know



Canners redeeming bottles and cans at Tomra Canning Machines outside of Pathmark, 125th and Lexington Ave. Harlem, NY

Picture the Homeless—they're lined up at these reverse vending machines, that I could remember when they weren't available. And they are getting revenue without confrontation, without being dehumanized. And that gives me great satisfaction.

And when we win the right for homeless people not to be victims of selective enforcement in public space, those are the kinds of victories that mean the most to me because it impacts the most people. And I got that concept from my training in public administration. *That impacts the common good.*

PTH CANNERS CAMPAIGN WRAP-UP

2004 Increased our capacity to document injustice and create solutions to the problems canners were dealing with on a daily basis.

2006 Moved the Office of the Attorney General to prosecute supermarkets violating the bottle law. This made life easier for thousands of very-low-income people who make a living and keep our city clean by picking up cans and bottles from NYC streets.

2006 Hosted the first ever Special Expert from the UN on Extreme Poverty in the U.S. in conjunction with the National Social and Economic Rights Initiative. Members of PTH's Canner's Campaign presented testimony about the existence of extreme poverty in the United States.

2007 Laid the groundwork for the launching of Sure We Can

2009 Contributed to the passage of the Bigger Better Bottle Bill, putting more nickels in canners' pockets.



ORGANIZING LESSONS LEARNED:

A small grass roots organization can use participatory action research and direct action to educate the public and build support for our work with like-minded allies. Without Direct Action we don't win anything!

Multiple tactics are crucial:

- Diversity of tactics is essential
- Keep doing outreach and listening to folks
- Document what is happening in the streets
- Surveys help build our capacity to analyze
- Collective analysis of issues and solutions is necessary as well as analysis of the political conditions locally
- Political Education about root causes is critical
- Research!
- Write your own reports
- Be inviting to folks, especially folks sleeping in the streets, parks, etc.
- Know Your Rights education
- Support homeless folks to visibly represent the group
- Creative actions create space for media coverage and narrative shifting
- Whether you're filing a lawsuit or proposing legislation, direct action is needed to keep up momentum and pressure
- Find other groups that share your mission and values to form coalition with – some might surprise you
- Without direct action we don't win anything
- Good props lifts spirits and educates
- Everyone loves street theatre
- Have fun

Narrators:

Anthony Williams
Lynn Lewis
Tyletha Samuels

Jean Rice
Marcus Moore

Kazembe Balagun
Rev. Liz Theoharis

CANNERS ACTION CHANTS

240 or fight!
240 or fight!

240 is what we demand
break the law and you'll be canned!

Associated gives us flack
Angry canners fighting back!

500 bucks per incident
fining waits and you'll repent!

Gristedes also don't behave
Better watch out, cause you're not safe!

It's not a favor to follow the law
Or else we canners' make you fall!

We have to wait outside your store
For hours, we won't take no more!

Rejecting us, it is a crime!
Redeem our cans, stop wasting our time!

Law-breakers will soon not stand
Associated you've been canned!

About this Project

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

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

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

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project
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