

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project

Don't Talk About Us: Talk With Us!



Nikita Price, Civil Rights Organizer

I remember we did the wheat pasting.

Our office was in East Harlem and

At the time there were all these abandoned buildings.

We were passing by all these fucking stores

The stores were open every day and

People were shopping as if everything was fine and

Then it was like but *look up!*



PTH Housing Campaign, documenting vacant apartments with active storefronts below, E. Harlem 2004

And when you look up on the second floor on up

Everything was fucking abandoned!

It was boarded up! I'm like *boy!*

Those were all apartments.

These stores were actively thriving, and

I don't know what the number of shelter folks was then

But it was a high number.

And it's just like *what the fuck?*

How are we going to bring the attention to the fact that this city is housing all these people in the shelter and there's all this available land and property and buildings around?

Why don't we let the public know!

Because I don't think the public is looking up either?

Let them know about all this abandoned property.

Well, how are you going to do that?

Well, we can spray paint on the building.



PTH Housing Campaign Meeting July 8, 2005

We could do this. We can do that.

Or we could put up signs that this property is abandoned, and it should be for homeless people.

I don't know how we came up with the design, but we said we could silkscreen.



PTH Housing Campaign silk-screening posters for wheat-pasting, E. Harlem, February 16, 2006

That was something that was really impressive to me.

That's when I started finding out
Really putting it together

How homeless people take little to nothing and make it work.

You know, you really understood that with street homeless folk
Because they take elements and they thrive in it.

We made fun out of getting ready to let the fucking city know



PTH Housing Campaign silk-screening posters for wheat-pasting, E. Harlem, February 16, 2006

That you're allowing people to suffer

Whether they're on the street or in the shelter, by having these buildings.

That's when I was finding out then, that a lot of these buildings had been vacant, the apartments anyway, for years and years and years and years.



PTH Housing Campaign documenting vacant apartments over active storefronts, E Harlem, July 21, 2004

And the stores are open, so that made me angry.

So, it's like, what are we going to do?

So now, we've got to go out

We can't put this shit up in the daytime, so how are we going to do this and

Make this fun, make this exciting, you know?



PTH Housing Campaign wheat-pasting vacant buildings in E Harlem, 2006

That was the whole sense of, when the sun goes down, homeless people are going to get out. It kind of reminded me of shit you would see in a cartoon.

Where people go to sleep and everything is fine, and then when they wake up shits like, *where the fuck did that come from?!*

So, you know, I remember us planning this.

We're just going to hit all these buildings and we're going to call attention. I remember we all met up. I think there was more than one group.

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



PTH Housing Campaign silkscreen "Property of Homeless People", 2006

And I remember, meeting Turhan, who at the time was on crutches. He had a cast or something like that. And you know, I always want to make fun out of whatever the situation is, and I was calling him gimpy, and like *you got to keep up. You got to keep up. Come on.*

Because we were doing shit that probably, we could probably get in trouble for, if we got caught.

To see a person on crutches out there doing something like that, I was impressed with that.



Corner of Madison and 116th St, vacant building with silkscreen, 2006

We've always been a small group of folks who finally got it, like, *if we don't say something or do something, that shit's going to continue.*

We'd have to go back to our environments and see people that were suffering that had resigned to, *well my fate is whatever my fate is going to be.*

Whereas, the folks at Picture the Homeless said, *my fate is going to be whatever the fuck I want it to be.*

So, I'm going to do whatever I have to do to make that.

And if I have to step out of my comfort zone, and let it be known and tell you that, then I'm going to do that.

I think what Picture the Homeless offers.

Nikita Price spent several years in the NYC shelter system as a single father. After joining PTH's shelter campaign, he was in the first organizer trainee cohort at PTH and was subsequently hired as a full-time organizer. Nikita was the organizer for the Rental Subsidies campaign and then returned to PTH as a wellness instructor and then civil rights organizer. He has been with PTH since 2007.

This series of zines are based on oral history interviews with homeless social justice leaders, staff and board of Picture the Homeless (PTH) as well as political allies.

Each zine highlights several themes that have emerged from the oral history interviews. Nikita Price was interviewed on December 2, 2017. His story teaches the resilience and resourcefulness of homeless folks and the importance of direct action in building resistance relationships and educating the public. We hear his outrage at the fact that in NYC apartments sit empty while people are warehoused in shelters. We also hear the joy of collective resistance and the importance of making direct action exciting and fun and incorporating the element of surprise.

The themes that we hear in this story, such as the belief in community, in joyful, collective resistance, justice, the system, inspiration, leadership and education.

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project documents the first 17 years of Picture the Homeless (PTH) using a participatory oral history approach. The interviews breathe life into PTH's vast archive which contains thousands of photos, press clippings, videos, testimonies, emails, meeting notes, flyers, etc. The archive tells us what happened when. The interviews tell us why those decisions and events were important and what they meant to the people who made them happen.

We center the homeless leaders who have been with PTH for a minimum of 10 years and are still active. We want to understand why homeless folks came to PTH – and why they stayed. Ultimately, our goal is to interview a minimum of 50 PTH members and leaders, staff and political allies and to make these audio and transcripts – as well as the archive – digitally available. We're creating popular education materials using text from the interviews as well as items from the archive. We're also dreaming of a book!

Our intention is to support homeless and poor folks organizing and building power to win justice. 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 are endless, often in the face of extreme hardship. This project honors their knowledge, courage, commitment and leadership.

By listening and understanding what organizing means to PTH's homeless leaders, staff and allies, this project documents PTH's campaigns, organizational development and how we did our work in order continue to build power for homeless folks by sharing what we've learned.

The PTH Oral History project is a work in progress. Email us if you would like to stay in touch!

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project

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