

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project

Don't Talk About Us: Talk With Us!



Mrs. Avernetta Henry, Civil Rights and Housing Campaign
Leader

Being at Picture the Homeless it was very important

That we get involved in order to understand the process of the system.

If you didn't get involved, you would be just part of the system, accepting what was happening to you. That was the furthest thing from the truth!



PTH Civil Rights Campaign, making props for Days of Rage in protest of police killings of black people December 2016

So we learned how to fight back.

How to write chants.

How to stand up to the government.



PTH Housing Campaign, speaking to members of the Black, Latino and Asian Caucus of the NY City Council, about ending the warehousing of vacant property, 2007

We're human beings!

We're not a piece of meat that you can shuffle from place to place.

We're not your commodity!

We don't believe that you have the right
To keep us out of these vacant houses
That I know for a fact are vacant.



PTH Housing Campaign, counting and researching vacant buildings and lots for our report, *Banking on Vacancy: Homelessness and Real Estate Speculation*, 2011

We learned how to go around and search for vacant property.

We learned how to log property and to research property and to find out who's the landlord.

Who owns this property?

Why has this property been vacant so long?

At the same time, members

Because this was a member led organization

Members were learning how to lead

How to stand up

And fight back.

We learned the importance of speaking to the Senator, or the politician.

And their role.

And when they wouldn't listen

We had leaders that would show us how to grab your attention through the public eye.

How to get the media's attention.

What to say and not be tricked.



PTH Civil Rights Campaign action protesting targeting of Freedom House shelter residents by the NYPD, June 18, 2014

The media would allow you to be interviewed and
We would learn these interviewing techniques and
At the same time learn to take that interview to use it
To the advantage of the homeless population.

We learned so much at Picture the Homeless!

I just recently did a health rally with my Church.

I said, I know how to do security.

I know how to chant.

I know how to carry a banner.

They were looking at me and said, Ms. Henry!



Press conference in support of Intro 48, September 29, 2010

I have to say Picture the Homeless has done a lot for me.

I have travelled across the world

Through having people from other countries

Come into our organization and

Speaking about the homeless plight.

How they would like to see



PTH Housing Campaign, Community Land Trust Visioning, 2015

How Picture the Homeless handled it.



PTH Housing Campaign Demanding Housing Not Shelters, June 10, 2015

How they were able to get their government to listen to them.

I'm talking about countries like South Africa, Germany, England.

Different places coming to our country

Coming to our organization and interviewing, asking questions

We are able to impart that wisdom and knowledge



PTH Housing Campaign Press Conference, September 29, 2010

That we learned from the leaders at Picture the Homeless!

Arvernetta Henry is a native New Yorker, Harlem born and raised in public housing in the Bronx. She is a retired NYC school teacher, a mother and a grandmother. She spent nearly ten years in the NYC shelter system and that same amount of time as a PTH housing and civil rights campaign leader.

Arvernetta was instrumental in the expansion of the Homeless Organizing Academy and an active civil rights and housing campaign leader. She has been a leading voice in catalyzing the emerging Community Land Trust movement in NYC and nationally – to ensure that housing created on Community Land Trusts includes housing for poor and homeless community members.

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. Arvernetta was interviewed on September 28, 2017. In Arvernetta's story we hear how much she values education – as a teacher and as a learner.

The themes that we hear in this story are about education: educating ourselves and educating the public, collective resistance, leadership, democracy in action, justice, the importance of knowing your rights, leadership and the importance of homeless folks speaking for themselves. These are the types of qualities that social justice warriors like Arvernetta teach us.

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**
pth.oral.history@gmail.com