

# **The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project:**

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## ***Don't Talk About Us, Talk With Us!***

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## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis is dedicated to Lewis Haggins and Anthony Williams, the visionary co-founders of Picture the Homeless. Lewis and Anthony stand on the shoulders of our many ancestors who have struggled for dignity and respect, and they are s/heroes. I will forever be grateful to the narrators of the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project for your generosity. Thank you Jean Rice, DeBoRah Dickerson, Marcus Moore, William Burnett, Rogers, Arvernetta Henry, Rob Robinson, Nikita Price, Sam J. Miller and Anthony Williams for your time, your wisdom and all the ways in which you have made New York City and this world, a better place.

## I. Introduction

Picture the Homeless (PTH) is a grass roots organization founded by Lewis Haggins and Anthony Williams in November of 1999. Lewis and Anthony were both homeless at the time, residing in New York City's Bellevue Men's Shelter.<sup>1</sup> PTH remains one of the few homeless-led organizing groups in the United States.<sup>2</sup> PTH's co-founders believed that developing the collective political leadership of homeless folks was necessary to win their civil and human rights.<sup>3</sup> In their refusal to be stereotyped and marginalized, homeless New Yorkers created an effective, solutions based organizing methodology by centering the collective analysis and demands of its homeless members. For example, PTH resurrected the issue of vacant property in the NYC housing movement through sidewalk sleep outs, large scale takeovers of vacant buildings and lots and other forms of direct action coupled with research,<sup>4</sup> effective media work and engaging political allies. PTH utilized the same tactics of direct action, research, and media work to shift the issue

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<sup>1</sup> PTH was founded by Lewis Haggins and Anthony Williams in Bellevue Men's Shelter, but this is not where they initially met. This oral history project reveals this, and many more details, of PTH's evolution that have not previously been made public.

<sup>2</sup> Homeless folks were deemed "unorganizable" by seasoned organizers accustomed to organizing practices such as door knocking or centering campaigns around physical locations such as the workplace, university, or housing complex. Anti-homeless stigma and anti-black racism also contributed to the view that homeless folks were unorganizable: too damaged, too poor, too troubled to organize.

<sup>3</sup> The original Picture the Homeless Mission Statement, in the author's possession, will be archived in the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project.

<sup>4</sup> Among PTH's participatory action research projects are, *Banking on Vacancy: Homelessness and Real Estate Speculation*, New York 2012 and *Homeless People Count: Vacant Properties in Manhattan*, New York: 2007.  
<http://picturethehomeless.org/home/blog-and-press/reports/>.

of Broken Windows policing<sup>5</sup> towards the center of the police reform movement in New York City through intersectional<sup>6</sup> analysis and coalition organizing.<sup>7</sup> PTH shut down the homeless family intake center<sup>8</sup> over criminally negligent conditions, and was in the leadership of the launching of a Community Land Trust movement in New York City. Achieving these victories and many more<sup>9</sup> were made possible by PTH's support of its homeless leadership. PTH positioned homeless intellectuals and leaders on panels and in media interviews,<sup>10</sup> insisting that homeless folks were the experts on homelessness. Building political power for homeless folks was<sup>11</sup> rooted in homeless members developing the organization's collective analysis and representing it. Homeless leadership was celebrated and supported because it was understood by the co-founders of PTH, as

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<sup>5</sup> Alex Vitale, *City of Disorder: How the Quality of Life Campaign Transformed New York Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2008) effectively draws the connection between Quality of Life and Broken Windows policing. Jean Rice, founding board member of PTH and narrator has also written extensively on this issue.

<sup>6</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991).

<sup>7</sup> Communities United for Police Reform is an alliance of organizations in New York City working to end bias based policing; [www.changethenypd.org](http://www.changethenypd.org). The United is spelled with a small u in the name of the organization.

<sup>8</sup> The Emergency Assistance Unite (EAU) was the only entry point for homeless families with children into the city wide shelter system, located in the S. Bronx. It was the subject of lawsuits and protests for several years. PTH began focusing outreach efforts at the EAU in 2002 and was instrumental in the appointment of a Special Master panel which ultimately recommending closing the EAU. PTH's recommendations mirrored those of the homeless families the Special Master Panel; <http://picturethehomeless.org/home/blog-and-press/reports>.

<sup>9</sup> The PTH website lists their major accomplishments; <http://picturethehomeless.org/home/about/timeline-of-impacts>.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Jon Swaine. "New York abandons plan to clear subways of sleeping homeless people," *The Guardian* (London, U.S. Edition), February 24, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/24/new-york-subways-sleeping-homeless-people>.

<sup>11</sup> Past tense is used throughout this thesis because the time frame of this oral history research project ends in January, 2017.

well as early staff and leaders as necessary to any social justice movement. It is most certainly necessary to end homelessness.<sup>12 13</sup>

As rare as it is for homeless folks to create and sustain a political organization, the struggle of homeless New Yorkers collectively, expressed through PTH, echoes the origins of struggle of all oppressed people's throughout history. We might ask ourselves how could homeless people *not* at least attempt organize to change their conditions. Oppressed peoples have, against daunting odds, launched and won revolutions: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."<sup>14</sup>

### **My relationship to Picture the Homeless**

I met PTH's co-founders, Lewis and Anthony, two months after they began the organization. It was in January of 2000 at PTH's first public meeting, which I attended with my son. The meeting was held at CHARAS/El Bohio Cultural and Community Center<sup>15</sup> on the Lower East Side of Manhattan (Loisaida<sup>16</sup>). I committed that night to support Lewis and Anthony as they continued working to create a homeless-led

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<sup>12</sup>Talmadge Writght, *Out of Place: Homeless Mobilizations, Subcities, and Contested Landscapes* (Albany: State University of New York, 1997), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Lynn Lewis, "Racialized Homelessness," (unpublished paper in the author's possession, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Donald Keys, *Earth at Omega: Passage to Planetization* (Brandon Publishing Company, 1982), 79. This quote, widely attributed to Margaret Mead, was on a poster in the PTH office, prominently displayed.

<sup>15</sup> CHARAS/El Bohio Cultural and Community Center on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, functioned as a hub of community and political organizing; <https://www.placematters.net/node/1432>.

<sup>16</sup> Bimbo Rivas, a poet and founder of the Nuyorican Poets Café, coined the name Loisaida to reflect the way that Spanish speakers pronounced Lower East Side, immortalizing the word in a poem by the same name.

organization. I stayed with PTH for seventeen years, playing a significant role in the PTH story, particularly in the development of its organizing methodology. As the only person who worked with Lewis and Anthony during this early period, and the one who remained after they left PTH, I was the bridge between the co-founders and the organization. My formative organizing experience was as a tenant leader at the Cooper Square Tenant Association<sup>17</sup> in the early 1980's. At that time I had been both homeless and on public assistance for brief periods as a single mother, and had close family members and friends who had been homeless as well. In 1981, pregnant with my daughter, I engaged in civil disobedience for the first time: opening up vacant apartments for homeless families with Cooper Square.

I left New York in the mid 80's to live in Nicaragua during the Sandinista Revolution. In the late 1980's to the late 1990's, I returned to the U.S. and worked in various capacities in the homeless services field in Florida. During that period I gained homeless advocacy experience at the local, state and national levels. There was a sharp increase in homelessness during the 1980's and 1990's and in many places in the U.S. very little services and even less housing was being developed to meet the growing need of the very poor. However, homelessness was often portrayed as the result of individual dysfunction. Systemic injustice such as racism, sexism, poverty and gentrification were rarely raised as concerns for homeless advocates to tackle. Homeless individuals were criminalized and vilified as deviant. I believed that the same principles of community

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<sup>17</sup> The Cooper Square Tenant and Businessman's Association is the oldest anti-displacement tenant organization in the U.S., founded in 1959. The surviving founder, Frances Goldin had a significant influence on my organizing practice.

organizing that applied to solving other community problems also applied to ending homelessness. I concur with Daniel Kerr that:

It is not enough to critique the closed and ineffectual circle of discussions on present homeless policies or academic debates on homelessness without working towards building a movement of people who can add weight to the critique and leverage social change as a result. Clearly one group of people with the biggest stake in seeing things change for the better is homeless people themselves.<sup>18</sup>

I believed that homelessness was a manifestation of a capitalistic housing market that required a social justice, and not merely a social work response. It was impossible not to see that people of color, particularly people of African descent, were overwhelmingly represented among the homeless and to connect that reality to systemic racism. I couldn't accept the conventional wisdom that I heard from many fellow organizers that homeless people were impossible to organize, or too poor to be able to participate in political work.<sup>19</sup> I had lived with poor people who had done so in Loisaida and in Nicaragua. I had done so myself. Times had drastically shifted from my childhood, when a spare bedroom was sometimes occupied by a friend or relative until they could get back on their feet, to the post 1980<sup>20</sup> landscape during which homelessness increased dramatically. Getting back on your feet could take years instead of weeks or months due to escalating rents and

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<sup>18</sup> Daniel Kerr, "We Know What the Problem Is: Using Oral History to Develop a Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness from the Bottom Up," *Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003): 30.

<sup>19</sup> Among those who were organizing homeless folks were Paul Boden, Buddy Gray and Jack Graham whom I met when I joined the board of the National Coalition for the Homeless. I had initially met Michael Stoops and Mitch Snyder in 1988 when they travelled the U.S. organizing *Housing Now!* a national demonstration calling for housing for the homeless. Both are pillars of the homeless rights movement.

<sup>20</sup> The housing and economic policies of President Ronald Reagan ushered in the modern era of homelessness, as well as what Neil Smith and others have described as the return of the wealthy classes to inner cities.



the shift to a low wage service economy. For me, homeless folks were a few steps over on the housing crisis spectrum from low income tenants such as me and the majority of my family and many friends and acquaintances who were struggling to hold onto our homes.

These experiences and more fueled my enthusiasm in January of 2000, when I heard about the two homeless men who founded PTH and were having a meeting at CHARAS. Seventeen years later, I was ready to step back from my role as Executive Director of PTH in order to analyze and document the lessons we had collectively learned. I had always felt that it was essential to honor the founders' mission, analysis and practices over those seventeen years and wanted to extend those values into the design of a documentation project. This is why I chose to pursue an MA in Oral History at Columbia University. I wanted to ensure that the lessons learned by all of us who participated in PTH could be shared with other homeless organizing efforts. I knew that if others could hear the homeless leaders who shaped PTH and in whose name we struggled to change the way that people *picture* the homeless, then we could move them to follow the leadership of homeless organizing efforts. I knew how important representation would be to impart those lessons and oral history was the right fit for this work.

### **Reflections on Methodology**

PTH's history and lessons are most powerfully revealed through the stories and analysis of its homeless members. They are in a position to interpret its meaning from a vantage point that no one else occupies. Oral history centers the knowledge of its narrators as the primary source of knowledge production. Respect for the narrator's analysis "allows us to

see that those who are traditionally portrayed as ‘victims’ of catastrophe are, in fact, history’s agents who define for the rest of us the multiple ways in which history is experienced and read.”<sup>21</sup> It is PTH members’ commitment which made PTH possible. Without their efforts there would be no items to archive, no events to document. For social justice workers, understanding the history of social movements and organizations from the perspective of the individuals who create and lead those efforts is essential to learning from, and improving upon, our work. Constructing a collective history of PTH without erasing the significance of each narrator’s remembrance and the meaning that they assign to it is necessary to understanding - and even replicating - how individuals build collective resistance to form the social movements whose goal is freedom from oppression and social transformation.<sup>22</sup>

The narrators of the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project reveal the conditions by which a “small group of thoughtful, committed”<sup>23</sup> homeless New Yorkers built a homeless-led organization in order to transform society. This thesis presents primary findings from eighteen oral history interviews and assesses the first phase of the project. At PTH, homeless folks collectively identified the root causes of their oppression, and they were multiple. Issues were discussed that affected many communities because homeless folks are members of many, intersecting communities.

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<sup>21</sup> Mary Marshall Clark, “Case Study: Field Notes on Catastrophe: Reflections on the September 11, 2001, Oral History Memory and Narrative Project,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Donald Ritchie (New York: Oxford, 2011), 257.

<sup>22</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “Oral History as Genre,” in *The battle of Valle Giulia : oral history and the art of dialogue*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 6.

<sup>23</sup> Donald Keys, *Earth at Omega: Passage to Planetization* (Brandon Publishing Company, 1982), 79.

The title of the organization's brochure is an example of naming the root causes of homelessness. "It's not a homeless crisis, it's a housing crisis." The analysis contained in these nine words is a paradigm shift away from the underlying ideology that informs homeless policies, service delivery and punitive systems such as the policing of public space. They assert that the crisis is not about homelessness or homeless people. The crisis is produced because housing is a profit making commodity. This analysis formed the basis of PTH's collective truth because it resonated with people who knew the challenges of securing housing once they lost it. During spirited conversations over coffee in the office or quiet ones on the sidewalk, PTH was a place where homeless people were welcomed to gather, to analyze their conditions and take action to fight for their civil and human rights. Their truth was respected and they had the opportunity and resources to dream of an end to the indignities of homelessness. It was a place where collective homeless resistance emerged:<sup>24</sup> As Paolo Freire instructs:

It is necessary that the weakness of the powerless<sup>25</sup> is transformed into a force capable of announcing justice. For this to happen, a total denouncement of fatalism is necessary. We are transformative beings and not beings for accommodation.<sup>26</sup>

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project mirrors PTH's organizing methodology by centering the homeless narrators in both the interview and the analysis phases of this project. This is why oral history is an acutely useful approach to studying PTH's history

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<sup>24</sup> Lynn Lewis, "*Racialized Homelessness*." (unpublished paper in the author's possession, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Powerless here refers to the political power of homeless people, and not their individual power, resilience and agency which is the foundation upon which PTH is built.

<sup>26</sup> Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart*, trans. by Donaldo Macedo and Alexandre Oliveira. (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

and practice. I call this Participatory Oral History Research (POHR). As Kerr notes, “By broadening the scientific community through the process of sharing authority with the homeless, one does not give up objectivity; rather one produces more objective and effective research.”<sup>27</sup> In the last section of this thesis, I more fully describe the POHR methodology used in Phase I of the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project.

### **The Story of the Mission Statement of Picture the Homeless**

Shortly after PTH was founded by Lewis Haggins and Anthony Williams in November of 1999, while both were residents in Bellevue Men’s Shelter, Lewis Haggins drafted the organization’s first mission statement.<sup>28</sup> The following is the text of the original mission statement, hand written by Lewis Haggins on a cot in Bellevue Men’s Shelter on January 3, 2000:

We’re giving the oppositional standpoint or viewpoint on the homeless situation given by the City, State and National government or the media. Our view represents our rights regardless of race, creed or color. We refuse to accept being neglected, our human rights as human beings.<sup>29</sup>

The mission statement was updated twice during PTH’s first seventeen years, and the tag line “Don’t Talk About Us, Talk With Us!” added. The first update was in 2001. Six of us: four PTH members as well as Anthony and I, travelled to learn from the San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness for a week in 2001. Emily Givens, an early, street homeless PTH leader went on that trip. She and I drafted an update of the mission

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<sup>27</sup> Daniel Kerr, “We Know What the Problem Is: Using Oral History to Develop a Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness from the Bottom Up,” *Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003): 32.

<sup>28</sup> Anthony Williams, interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, January 3, 2018

<sup>29</sup> The original Picture the Homeless Mission Statement, in the author’s possession, will be archived in the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project.

statement in Junior's Restaurant in Brooklyn not long after that trip. We had learned the importance of stating what PTH wanted to change, instead of simply stating what PTH was opposed to, and we included how we would win that change. The tag line, "Don't Talk About Us, Talk With Us!" was conceived in my apartment in East Harlem with Anthony Williams and Irma MacKechnie in 2002, the same night as we created the logo. The second update was much later, sometime around 2012, when we added "gender identity, sexual orientation and migration status" to reflect inclusivity and the expanded political consciousness about our work by PTH members, staff and board.

The logo was inspired by hand drawn stick figures by Lewis Haggins on PTH's first letterhead. We also came up with PTH's colors that night. Carlito Rovira, a former Young Lord<sup>30</sup>, gave Anthony Williams and me advice one day. It was in 2001, when WBAI<sup>31</sup> was broadcasting in exile from CHARAS. Carlito was there selling buttons. He and I were friends and we stopped to talk. I introduced him to Anthony and we told him about PTH. Carlito told us that PTH needed colors and a logo so that people would recognize us. He said that even if there were only a few of us, it was important for the movement to know that we were present. That night in my apartment, Anthony Williams suggested blue and black for PTH's colors, because most homeless people are black and they live outside under a blue sky.<sup>32</sup> The twice updated, current mission statement reads:

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<sup>30</sup> The Young Lords were a revolutionary Puerto Rican organization founded in the 1970's. Carlito Rovira was the youngest member to participate in several large scale mass actions of the Young Lords.

<sup>31</sup> WBAI is a public radio affiliate in New York City.

<sup>32</sup> Lynn Lewis, interview by Anthony Williams, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 25, 2018.

Picture the Homeless was founded on the principle that homeless people have civil and human rights regardless of our race, creed, color, gender identity, sexual orientation, or economic, disability, or migration status. Picture the Homeless was founded and is led by homeless people. We refuse to accept being neglected and we demand that our voices and experience are heard at all levels of decision-making that impact us.

We oppose the quality of life laws that criminalize homeless people in any form by the city, state and national governments. We work to change these laws and policies as well as to challenge the root causes of homelessness. Our strategies include grassroots organizing, direct action, and educating homeless people about their rights, public education, changing media stereotypes, and building relationships with allies. *Don't Talk About Us, Talk With Us!*<sup>33</sup>

The PTH tag line, “*Don't Talk About Us, Talk With Us!*” is an invitation to dialogue. It affirms that homeless folks represent PTH and speak for themselves. The words and the visual image of homeless folks naming their reality and speaking their truth challenged mainstream narratives about who homeless folks were and about homelessness itself. Homeless folks offering solutions to problems that confront not only homeless people, but many New Yorkers, was revolutionary. The invitation to dialogue privileged the knowledge of homeless New Yorkers as a resource. It asserted that entering into dialogue with homeless folks is a potential and valuable site of knowledge production. It upended anti-homeless stigma and embodied equality. Speaking and listening are fundamental ways through which we are able to connect our common humanity and both are fundamental to the practices of oral history research and community organizing. This is the impetus behind my evolving participatory oral history research practice.

In 2018, eighteen years after the PTH original mission statement was written on a cot in Bellevue Men's Shelter and PTH's first meeting was held at CHARAS, co-founder

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.picturethehomeless.org>.

Anthony Williams spoke at a celebration of the passage of the Housing Not Warehousing Act by the New York City Council.<sup>34</sup> The passage of these two bills was ten years in the making but the issue of vacant property had been raised by PTH's co-founders from the beginning. Not only vacant property, but the issues that PTH identified as important during its founding remained central to the work of the organization over the seventeen year period covered by this project. Visibly moved, Anthony addressed the crowd gathered in the PTH office, most of who were homeless members of PTH and issued a call to continued action:

It's very important to understand that being homeless and fighting for your rights is the most important thing because you have the power, you are the leaders and you are the ones that bring the change. Understanding the nature of the funding, following the money, understanding how it works, all the discrepancies of the shelter, all the problems in the shelter, the street homeless population, all these issues from our first meeting the homeless folks were saying: we want the cops off of our ass, we want them to stop fucking with us. This was in our first meetings and that's what we took on! We didn't act like we weren't going to try. No! We really stepped forward and that's what we did. And after that it just opened up a whole other, not a can of worms, but a slew of other issues, with the families in the EAU (Emergency Assistance Unit), the policing, you name it. It's the beginning of us and the beginning of the work that makes a difference and that's what made a difference for us.<sup>35</sup>

Homeless New Yorkers were under assault by the police, the media and elected officials in the late 1990's and early 2000's. Systemic violence, in the form of the gentrification of communities of color including the Lower East Side, Harlem and Central Brooklyn, was pushing lower income residents from their homes. The New York City Homeless

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<sup>34</sup> Abigail Savitch-Lew, "Is 'Housing Not Warehousing' Next?" *City Limits*, (2017), <https://citylimits.org/2017/09/29/is-housing-not-warehousing-next>.

<sup>35</sup> Anthony Williams, remarks made at celebration for the Housing Not Warehousing Act passage on January 22, 2018; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHN\\_s7zl-F8&t=7s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHN_s7zl-F8&t=7s).

Shelter census was exploding. In the passage above, Anthony provided a brief history lesson about PTH's early work to the crowd of mostly homeless members and drew a connection to the Housing Not Warehousing legislative victory. He advised PTH members to understand the bigger picture: the funding streams impacting them, how the shelter system functions, and what street homeless folks face. He went on to teach that police brutality was raised in the very first PTH meeting and affirmed that PTH stepped forward to meet those challenges; which revealed many other issues that PTH subsequently took on. For Anthony it was the issues raised by homeless folks that gave PTH meaning and which were the "beginning of us".

### **Thesis Overview**

This thesis offers an assessment of the research methodology of the first of three phases of the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project and explores some key preliminary findings. During this first phase, three key areas of research emerged from the interviews and the methodological process. Each is explored as a distinct section of this thesis. The first area of research is an analysis of the political impact of PTH's origin story on members and staff. This section explores the relationship between individual, inherited and collective memory and the construction of collective resistance. The second area of research is a review of the themes that have been identified across multiple interviews conducted thus far. These themes reflect what PTH means for this initial cohort of narrators.<sup>36</sup> All of the narrators interviewed for Phase I of this Project - whose interviews are analyzed for this thesis - have a minimum of ten years or longer with PTH. All but

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<sup>36</sup> The initial cohort of narrators was comprised of leaders and staff of PTH who had been with the organization for ten years or more. A more detailed description of the narrator selection process is provided in the section on methodology of this thesis.



three were homeless during their participation with PTH. These narrators are not a representative sample of homeless New Yorkers and this thesis isn't intended to draw conclusions about homeless New Yorkers generally. I began the project with them because their longevity and commitment provide lessons about PTH. These lessons also speak to basic elements of community organizing, particularly among folks experiencing homelessness. Extrapolating lessons that may be applied to community organizing and social movement building requires identifying ways in which generalizing from the experience of the narrators to a broader homeless population is valid.<sup>37</sup> In the methodology section of this thesis I provide a fuller description of the narrator selection process and my initial findings. The fourth and final section of this thesis provides an overview of the project's methodology and offers some reflections which I will incorporate into Phases II and III of this project.

Subsequent Phases will include creating the PTH archive, which will offer material evidence of the process and the outcomes of PTH's work. The use of the PTH archive in this oral history project is not intended to "prove" the narrators accounts as true, but to provide context and different types of lessons. For example, the dates when a campaign began, the tactics used to achieve major milestones and how those decisions were made, all contain important organizing lessons. Just as important are the narrator accounts about why they chose to engage with that campaign, and what their analysis of that work is:

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<sup>37</sup> Linda Shopes, *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

As a matter of fact, written and oral sources are not mutually exclusive. They have as common as well as autonomous characteristics, and specific functions that which only either one can fill (or which one set of sources fills better than the other).<sup>38</sup>

Narrator accounts are often non-linear. They may not recall dates “correctly” or be able to name everyone who participated in an event or the sequence of events as they occurred. There may be conflicting accounts. There is meaning to be found in both the narrator’s recollections and the archive. Both are equally valuable and they are complementary. Nor should we legitimize one source of information over the other, or draw too hard of a line distinguishing them. Much of the archive is also based on the telling of events or of their meaning as they occurred. Newspaper clippings have dates that are “objective”, telling us that a particular demonstration happened on a particular day. But those same newspaper clippings also include why PTH held the demonstration, what happened, who attended and what PTH achieved or didn’t achieve. This project honors the different types of knowledge produced by the narrator’s recollections and the meaning that they assign to them as well as the information contained in the archive.

### **Notes on Transcription, Editing and Representation**

I’d like to note my approach to transcription and editing before moving into the Section II. Each word expressed, as well as body language and tone of voice, is a source of potential meaning, both latent and explicit.<sup>39</sup> I applied equal standards for editing out

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<sup>38</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 46.

<sup>39</sup> Oral historians and community organizers listen closely for latent and explicit references to issues and themes. Latent refers to something which is implied whereas an explicit reference would more overtly denote meaning.

superfluous words and phrases such as “sort of”, “like,” and “um” to my questions as well as in narrator’s responses. I retained repetitious words and phrases when they were made to emphasize a point. Brackets indicate when the narrator or I paused, laughed or otherwise evidenced a significant thought process or emotion. Ellipses indicate where I deleted a section of text (although the full transcripts will be made publicly available in a later phase of this project). It was important to me to be mindful of the power of editing and transcribing and to not place myself in the position of gatekeeper or filter for the narrator’s words or their analysis. Portelli<sup>40</sup> describes a process by which the historian speaks through the sources, quoting their words to make a point. This is not my aim. I strove to find the common themes within narrator’s interviews to put them into dialogue with one another, and with myself as a historian and as a participant in this history. Because one goal of this project is to create a vehicle for hearing and understanding the point of view of the narrators individually, as well as PTH’s analysis and history collectively, transcribing and editing decisions reflect my fundamental values about representation:

What do we, as historians, do with the aesthetic project of many narrators, with the beauty incorporated in so many of the stories we hear? Do we, as purveyors of truth, expunge these features from our work (thus, of course, maiming the authenticity of the document), or do we recognize them as also facts in their own right, to be acknowledged and used? The way in which the narrator’s voices are included in the historian’s book also depends on whether the effect that the book is striving for is one of material factuality, or whether the aesthetic value of a good story, invented or not, is taken as a sign of cultural or individual subjectivity...In the apparent opposition of truth and beauty, perhaps beauty can

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<sup>40</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “Oral History as Genre” in *The battle of Valle Giulia : oral history and the art of dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 13.

be, rather than superfluous ornament, another – and perhaps the only possible – way of telling other truths.<sup>41</sup>

## **II. Inherited and Collective Memory and Their Relationship to Collective Resistance: The Picture the Homeless Origin Story**

The seeds of PTH’s political identity are contained within the origin story of its founding. Each of the narrators for this project reference the co-founders - and PTH’s origin story - as a source of inspiration for their commitment to the organization. Lewis and Anthony are heroic figures to the homeless members and leaders of PTH. The living memory of PTH’s founding is now Anthony’s alone. Lewis Haggins passed away in 2003. The story of PTH’s founding is inherited memory for the rest of us. As we identify with PTH as members, staff, board or even political allies, these inherited memories become our own and in so doing become collective memories that provide meaning for our own relationship to PTH. They are a treasured heirloom that inspire dignity and provide hope that we too can contribute to collective homeless resistance. They form the basis for PTH’s political identity. We connect our own lives to PTH through these collective memories which form the basis of the group solidarity necessary for collective resistance. The founding story of PTH was used during outreach/recruitment and has been recounted endlessly. It was referenced by every narrator interviewed for this project. PTH’s origin story is a living history and was relevant to each narrator’s own story and commitment to PTH; not merely as a “quaint or historically interesting”<sup>42</sup> fact. Both Charlotte Linde and

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<sup>10</sup> Portelli, “Oral History as Genre” in *The battle of Valle Giulia : oral history and the art of dialogue*, 20.

<sup>42</sup> Charlotte Linde, “The Acquisition of a Speaker by a Story: How History Becomes Memory and Identity,” *Ethos* 28, no, 4 *History and Subjectivity* (2000): 616.

Anna Green's work on inherited memory were helpful to me in understanding these processes.

Charlotte Linde described<sup>43</sup> how the MidWest insurance company utilizes inherited memory to engender organizational culture, identity and loyalty through the use of its founder's story and visual cues such as the photographs displayed in their corporate offices. She described how the inherited memories, which MidWest "works intensely," are also situated as part of a larger matrix of cultural values,<sup>44</sup> which amplify their power. Her work resonated deeply as I recollected how the photos of PTH actions were displayed alongside photos of famous civil rights struggles of the 1950's and 1960's, intentionally placing PTH historically within that matrix of struggle.

I conducted three interviews with the surviving co-founder Anthony Williams in January of 2018. He also interviewed me during that same month. Anthony shared previously unknown details about where and how he and Lewis Haggins met and filled in gaps in the origin story timeline. His interviews offer important lessons about organizing, leadership, and representation. They also provide an opportunity to reflect on the ethical considerations of "correcting" the historic record when everyone implicated in that record isn't able to provide consent. It is PTH's origin story, but they are also Anthony and Lewis's individual stories. Lewis Haggins is deceased and unable to provide consent. During my interviews with Anthony he stated several times that he

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<sup>43</sup> Charlotte Linde, "The Acquisition of a Speaker by a Story: How History Becomes Memory and Identity," *Ethos* 28, no. 4 *History and Subjectivity* (2000).

<sup>44</sup> Charlotte Linde, "The Acquisition of a Speaker by a Story: How History Becomes Memory and Identity," *Ethos* 28, no. 4 *History and Subjectivity* (2000): 614.

wanted to set the record straight about those early years of PTH. Recalling Grele's theory that there are three types of relationship in an oral history interview,<sup>45</sup> it was clear that Anthony was intentionally speaking to history (relationship type three) by offering details about PTH's founding which Lewis had told him not to share. Anthony also converted our interviews into opportunities to have conversations about our own relationship that we had never had (relationship type two). I am grateful that Anthony trusted me to record and interpret the history of PTH even as I continue to encourage him and all the advisory board members to wield authority with me as *we* develop this oral history project. Through Anthony, we learn the complex and nuanced history of the origins of PTH. Like Anthony, I am ambivalent about sharing details of where Lewis Haggins and Anthony Williams first met, out of respect for Lewis's wishes. Anthony's version of the PTH origin story also introduces us to new information about the skilled and tenacious organizer that Lewis Haggins was. The truth is more powerful than the truncated version on the PTH website. Lewis's demand for justice for homeless folks rose up from under the weight of the exceptional challenges and adversity that he faced:

So he says, "Anthony. Don't mention that we met in a detox." "Fine, we met at Bellevue"—until I met his sister, and she said, "Anthony, you should tell that story." I said, "But Lou didn't want me to." And she said to me, "But he was getting help. People need to know that. He was getting help, Anthony." I said, "I know, but he said; I'm just telling you what he told me, and I just wanted to run it past you." And she goes, "You should tell it. He was getting help." Even his dad said he looked better than when he was at home, because that's how bad alcoholism had—he looked better in New York City when his father saw him in

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<sup>45</sup> Ronald Grele, "Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical problems in Oral History," in *The Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, (New York: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1981 ), 136.

New York City doing stuff in the media and stuff. He said, “He looks better, he looks much better than when he was here.”<sup>46</sup>

Lewis, was an experienced racial justice organizer who participated in the founding of the National Action Network (NAN).<sup>47</sup> Lewis would have known that an organization started by two homeless black men: both alcoholics and one of whom was also addicted to drugs and on psychiatric medication, would play into anti-homeless and racist stigma. Just picture those headlines in a media climate dominated by Rudolph Giuliani, who was New York City’s Mayor at the time. I imagine that Lewis considered that the truth of *where* they met would distract from the truth of *why* they founded PTH. I also imagine that Lewis didn’t want his personal business made public.

High wrote that “what is remembered and why are vitally important in oral history.”<sup>48</sup> Organizations create narratives to convey meaning to achieve specific objectives. The embrace of the vilified word “homeless” in PTH’s name transformed the stigma contained in the word “homeless” in order to create counter narratives about homeless people. The official PTH origin story created meaning by silencing and omitting some facts in order to illuminate others. Omitting where they actually met, Lewis created a counter narrative to how homeless folks are viewed conventionally. Evidence of the political impact of the origin story is heard in the narrators’ interviews for this project. These silences and omissions deny the truth of the more nuanced origin

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<sup>46</sup> Anthony Williams, interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan.3, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> The National Action Network is a civil rights organization led by the Reverend Al Sharpton.

<sup>48</sup> Steven High, “Blurred Boundaries,” in *Oral History at the Crossroads*. (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2014), 39.

story told by Anthony in his interviews for this project, but they served a political purpose.

The origin story that is on the PTH website is sufficient as a brief introduction to PTH's founding. It is true but it is incomplete. Omissions and silences occupy points on a spectrum. There are omissions born of forgetting or of thinking that someone or something isn't important to a story. In an effort to be concise, details are omitted. Silences feel different. We silence details that might harm or embarrass someone. We silence details that divert attention from the meaning of a story. Anthony made public for the first time the omitted and silenced details of how he and Lewis met as he described the events and political context leading up to PTH's founding. For folks who want to gain a deeper understanding of the founding of PTH, the full origin story is being made available through Anthony William's interview.<sup>49</sup> Anthony also provoked the breaking of my silence through his questions of me during an interview when he was the interviewer and me, the narrator/interviewee. The only justification for correcting the historic record of PTH's founding against what we know were Lewis's wishes in 1999, is that PTH and other homeless people may benefit.

Hearing Anthony's story is important for PTH leaders, staff and board members because it has implications for who is defined as able to do this work. It instructs that the very people who are defined as the most marginalized can and do lead. It is fair to say that it was because of the crushing conditions of their marginalization they found the means to rise up make history. Anthony describes his first meeting with Lewis Haggins:

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<sup>49</sup> The audio of Anthony William's interviews is available on [www.thepicturethehomelessoralhistoryproject.com](http://www.thepicturethehomelessoralhistoryproject.com).



Yes. So, I was struggling with substance use, alcoholism and crack, so, you know where to go: go into a detox. You drink a beer; you go into a detox. That's how it was in New York. In order to get help, I couldn't go into detox and say, "I'm a crackhead," because they wouldn't accept me. I had to go there as an alcoholic, and then they accepted me. Then, I said I did coke and other drugs. So, I went in as a crackhead, but with the cover of alcoholic, and so I made it in. I got in; I got a bed that night, and I was detoxing from drugs and alcohol, and I think, I didn't even know Lou was there. Like, I didn't know who he was....

What happened was, there was a crazy little Italian cat, [laughs] that got into a beef with these Bloods that were, I would say, hanging out, hiding out in the detox, because you knew they weren't drug addicts, and you knew, well, why are you there? But they were there. They were young, and they were there, and I know it had to be they were hiding out. And so the little rowdy Italian cat got into a big beef with them, I mean bad, and those guys were going to put a beating on him. So, they were going back and forth arguing, so, I went to the Bloods and said, "Hey, come over here. Let's talk. Have a seat." And I said, "There's something I have to tell you. I'm going to tell you something about my life, and how you don't have to go through the struggles of life. You could avoid a lot of unnecessary pain and hurt if you listen to me."

I just told them about my life, how I grew up in foster care, how I didn't have parents, that I struggled—I was in my thirties then, and I struggled so much, I struggled so hard to just maintain in life—and, "You're not going to throw your life away because you're mad at a crazy little Italian. This is a detox; this isn't jail. This is where people come to get help, and they have issues." So, this guy comes over, and says, "I listened to your whole story." He said to me, "I know a film guy, and," he said, "I would like to hook you up with this film guy, and you could even do a documentary or tell your story, because your story is very powerful." [laughs]<sup>50</sup>

Anthony exhibited empathy and leadership by sharing his life story in order to deescalate a violent conflict. Lewis responded to that even as he struggled with his own recovery. Anthony had been homeless for most of his life. His story may have helped Lewis understand homelessness from the perspective of someone who had been homeless for so long. When we meet both Anthony and Lewis through Anthony's stories, we encounter

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<sup>50</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

two men struggling with multiple, crushing issues. This makes their choice to stand up and fight for the rights of all homeless folks even more compelling:

So, of course, in detoxes, you hear everything. You hear all kinds of stories. You don't know who to believe, not to believe. You don't take things—so it was a process of Lewis getting to know me in the detox, because he was really in bad shape. He was very dehydrated; he was in bad shape. But you could tell that it was more to him, than the fifty—what is it—the fifth of vodkas, the fifth of Jack Daniels that he consumed every day. There was a reason why he did that, to the point that he would kill himself, and that's how he ended up in the detox. I was really messed up emotionally, and I had to go back on medication, and get help and get therapy. Then they kept me even longer.<sup>51</sup>

Anthony described Lewis' organizing experience in the early years of NAN and his close relationship with the Rev. Al Sharpton. He tells us that Lewis knew people at radio stations WBAI and WBLS and had political connections with local activists and organizers in both Harlem and on the Lower East Side. Lewis shared his power by working hard to support Anthony to “tell his story” even before PTH had a name or was “officially” an organization:

Lou would always come up to me. [laughs] So he would always come up and say, “Hey! How you doing, man?” He goes, “Man, you've got a powerful story.” He goes, “Would you like to do an interview on the radio at WBAI?” And I said, “Not really, no.” He goes, “Well, I think you have a powerful story, and I think people need to hear your perspective.” And I was like, “Well, all right, whatever.”<sup>52</sup>

Lewis embodied PTH's organizing practice of homeless folks representing themselves. His approach to organizing is evidenced by his commitment to supporting Anthony's leadership by encouraging him to speak to the media, rather than to occupy that role

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<sup>51</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

<sup>52</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

himself. Community organizing is based on building relationships and requires patience and persistence. Anthony described it as a process. He resisted Lewis's attempts to convince him to go on the radio over several weeks. Lewis didn't only attempt to persuade Anthony to tell his story: he took the time to get to know what types of issues Anthony was struggling with. Lewis's intervention on his behalf in the weeks leading up to the founding of PTH got Anthony's attention. Lewis approached Anthony again:

“When you leave here, where you going?” I said, “Well, they want me to go to this Saint Francis thing in the Bronx, I don't know. I don't really want to go there.” And he goes, “Well, you know they got beds at Bellevue, in the clean and sober dorm.” I said, “Yes, but I am on psych meds, and I don't think they're going to accept me.” He goes, “Well let's see about that.” [laughs] I said, “Who the hell are you going to see about that? I mean, who are you? You're going to tell my social worker that ‘this guy deserves to go there,’ and what the hell is this?” I said, “Okay, though, go ahead. All right.”<sup>53</sup>

Anthony had refused Lewis's multiple invitations to speak to the media but accepted his help to obtain a better shelter placement, allowing Lewis to speak with his case worker.

Their relationship shifted at this point:

I didn't want to go to the Bronx, so I was glad that he was fighting for me. And finally, she said, “Okay, off the record, I'm going to write you a referral, and do not mention that you're on meds.” And I said, “Fine,” and I did. So, Lou was happy. [laughs] For whatever reason, he was like, “Oh, cool, good, good.” So now, he's got me close to him. Right? So now he has me and more close to him now. I didn't realize this until later, but he actually had it where he wanted me close to him. He had a vision that I knew nothing about, and he had things going on that I knew nothing about.<sup>54</sup>

Lewis “winning” a placement for Anthony in Bellevue by convincing his caseworker to break the rules taught Anthony three essential lessons and it deepened their relationship.

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<sup>53</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

<sup>54</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

It taught Anthony that Lewis cared about him and would go out of his way for him (although he still didn't know why), that Lewis wanted to continue to build a relationship with him by having him placed in Bellevue, and that Lewis had power and could get things done that Anthony thought were impossible and wouldn't have tried himself. This relationship building, initiated by Lewis, helped to create the conditions for Lewis to engage Anthony politically. It is the first time in Anthony's telling of the origin story of PTH that we hear him describe himself and Lewis with the words "glad" and "happy." Once at Bellevue Men's Shelter, Anthony mentioned accompanying Lewis on outreach to other homeless shelters prior to going to WBAI with him. This may signal that Anthony was more comfortable speaking with other homeless folks than going on the radio. Anthony sheds light on the political climate created by then Mayor Giuliani for homeless men on the streets and in the shelter system that immediately precedes when he agreed to go to WBAI with Lewis:

[...the Giuliani administration was saying that] "We have to get those crazies off the street," and that "we have to do something about the homeless." So they did a sweep, a whole, all-out assault on the homeless population. People living in boxes—wherever there were homeless people, they were targeted, and roused up. The shelters were—I mean, we even went to other shelters to find out that they were doing the same raids.<sup>55</sup>

Anthony described the moment when he made the decision to go with Lewis to WBAI. The rooms at Bellevue were dormitory style. When Lewis witnessed the NYPD warrant

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<sup>55</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

squad<sup>56</sup> physically assault another shelter resident, he went to Anthony's room and demanded that they do something about it:

What happened was the Warrant Squad came in, made him [Lou] get out of bed, roused him up, and slammed him up against the wall. I mean, they really roughed him up, and Lou watched it, and Lou came over to me, and said—he came to my room, like 3:00 in the morning, pissed: “We’ve got to do something about this.” I’m like, “What?” “They just beat up a homeless guy that was sleeping right across from me.” I said, “But that’s nothing new.” He goes, “No. No. We’ve got to do something about this, Anthony.”

“So, what are we going to do? This is what they do. This is the shelter. This is the norm. This is, yes, this is what they do. You know if the Warrant Squad come in and wake you up out of bed, and if you attempt to resist or whatever, if you attempt to resist, then you get an ass whooping, and that’s what you get, because you’re homeless. You get what you deserve, right? An ass whooping.” “No,” Lou said, “No, no. It’s just wrong. I watched them beat this guy up, with no clothes on, just in his underwear, okay? No. This is just—we’ve got to do something, Anthony.” And so, I was like, “Well, this is—I don’t know what we could do. What? You know what I mean? Like, what?” And so, that’s when I went, decided to go with him to WBAI.<sup>57</sup>

The official PTH origin story states that Lewis and Anthony met in Bellevue and joined together to create PTH, walking to WBAI in the wee hours of the morning to tell their story. It omits the work that it took for the two of them to make that journey, together. Later in the interview, Anthony returned to the moment when he decided to go with Lewis to WBAI. It is telling that in the two excerpts Anthony emphasizes two different reasons for deciding to accompany Lewis. This is not a matter of misremembering.

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<sup>56</sup> The Warrant Squad is a unit within the NYPD whose purpose is to arrest people with outstanding warrants. Quality of Life offenses such as public urination, are less than misdemeanors and not classified as crimes although the NYPD has the discretion to arrest people for committing them. It is a crime to not pay the fines for Quality of Life offenses and they revert to warrants. The Warrant Squad was used by then Mayor Giuliani to harass homeless New Yorkers in shelter and is an example of selective enforcement.

<sup>57</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

Consistently, across the interviews for this project, there are two elements present in narrator accounts that describe when they made a decision to join, or to deepen their commitment to PTH. Anthony's story is no exception. One element is an external crisis, in this case, the NYPD warrant squad beating up a homeless man. That however, in and of itself didn't automatically move Anthony to join Lewis. The other element that moved Anthony to take action was Lewis's persistence:

He kept saying to me, "Anthony," he would come to my room every night and say, "Want to go down to the radio station and do an interview at WBAI?" "Ah, no." So I kept telling him "No, no, no." We still were in the same outpatient program, B.R.C., so I would run into him there, and he would say it, same thing to me again. "Anthony, you want to come to WBAI?" And I was like, "Ah, I don't know." He goes, "This is the last time. This is it. This is final. It's either you're coming to the radio station, or this is it. It's your last shot. This is it." I said, "Okay, Lou, I'll come with you." He goes, "You got to get up, 3:00 in the morning, and walk down to Wall Street." I said, "Okay, I'll be up at 3:00; I'll be up at 3:00." And sure enough, I got up at 3:00 and we left Bellevue and headed south towards Wall Street, from Thirtieth Street, no money, no food, no nothing, just going to a radio station, and early in the morning.<sup>58</sup>

We learn from Anthony's interviews that it took time, and more than one catalyzing factor to move him to accompany Lewis to speak publicly about homelessness. Lewis had already invested weeks in developing a relationship with Anthony, almost on a daily basis. When the NYPD escalated their assaults on homeless New Yorkers Lewis was able to convince Anthony to do something that he had never done before – to go on the radio to expose the conditions that homeless New Yorkers were subject to. Lewis made Anthony *picture* the homeless differently, as people with rights, and to see himself as

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<sup>58</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

someone who could fight back. Anthony recounted what Lewis told Errol Maitland,<sup>59</sup> producer of WBAI's Wake Up Call show:

“I’ll talk about Giuliani. I got that. Don’t worry; I’ll talk to you about Giuliani. But, you need to hear from Anthony of what’s really going on with the homeless, because he knows.”<sup>60</sup>

Lewis emphasized to Errol Maitland that he needed to hear from Anthony, “because he knows” what’s going on with the homeless. Lewis positions Anthony as an expert with the media and he supports Anthony to accept that role. Anthony described how Lewis finally convinced him to go to WBAI:

Consistency. He kept pressing. Because he asked other guys; he was asking other guys in the shelter! Don’t think it was just me. No, he was asking other guys. And, he couldn’t get anybody to go, and he just felt that he had a shot with me. He just felt it. He just knew that, “I’ve got to get this guy, because I heard him talking in the detox. I’ve got to get this guy. I’ve got to get him.”<sup>61</sup>

Anthony’s interviews revealed an evolving relationship with Lewis Haggins and the political context in which their relationship evolved. There was the external assault on homeless people being promulgated by then Mayor Giuliani and the NYPD. There was the shift in the relationship with Lewis after Lewis assisted him with something that mattered to him personally. Lewis’s personal intervention on Anthony’s behalf created space for Anthony to engage with Lewis politically.

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<sup>59</sup> Errol Maitland was a reporter, engineer and host of WBAI’s early morning show Wake Up Call.

<sup>60</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

Contrast Anthony's account in his interview for this oral history project with that of the PTH website.<sup>62</sup> The official origin story conflates Anthony and Lewis as if they were one person, "our co-founders," and compresses the time and the process between when they met and when PTH was founded:

Anthony and Lewis knew that nothing would change until homeless people were able to shift the narrative about why folks are homeless. The name *Picture the Homeless* itself is a reflection of our co-founders' analysis about how important the ways in which people "picture" homelessness results in negative public policies that actually harm homeless people. One of the first things that they did was walk from Bellevue Men's Shelter to WBAI early in the morning to get on the popular program 'Wake Up Call' by 6:30am.<sup>63</sup>

After Lewis and Anthony took action, together, by walking to WBAI, Lewis continued the work of creating a homeless rights organization with Anthony. The story of how PTH got its name also speaks to Lewis's organizing practice. His continuous respect for Anthony's knowledge about homelessness is revealed in his asking Anthony to name their organization. Anthony's choice of the name *Picture the Homeless* provided insight into Anthony's analysis:

It's probably like 12:00, 1:00 in the morning, and he comes to my room and says, "We've got to call ourselves something now".... I didn't even know a mission statement was on the scene. This was just naming ourselves something, right? That, I didn't even know that. So I said, "Okay."

So I'm walking back and forth, and I'm like, "Oh! What about *Picture the Homeless*?" He goes, "What do you mean?" I said, "Picture that person that you see every day. Picture what's going on. Picture this. Picture that. Picture the Homeless. Picture the people. Understand who the people are. They're not just a photograph or a photo op; it's picturing the person. It's seeing the person. It's picturing their life. Picture the Homeless. We're talking about actually picturing someone's life. We're looking; we're talking about the inside of people, picturing

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<sup>62</sup>I drafted this version of PTH's history when I was the Executive Director of PTH in collaboration with Sam J. Miller who was Communications Director at the time.

<sup>63</sup> <http://picturethehomeless.org/home/about/early-history-and-founders>.



that person, and you're looking at that person." He goes, "Oh, wow, I get it!" He goes, "I get it, Anthony, okay. Good."<sup>64</sup>

Once they had a name, Lewis began organizing the first PTH meeting at a Lower East Side political hub, CHARAS. Lewis had been attending AA meetings and checking out brochures and other political materials left by the other groups who met there and engaging CHARAS leaders in conversation.<sup>65</sup>

A couple of days later, he comes to me and he goes, "I got this article about this organization on the Lower East Side." I said, "Yes?" He goes, "It's called CHARAS, and they're having problems with their building, but they have plenty of space for meetings," and, he said, "I want to have a meeting with the homeless. We should have a homeless meeting there." [laughs] And I was like, "Uh—Okay." So then, the next day, he comes back and goes, "I got a waiver. They're not going to charge us to use the space." I'm like, "Okay, but how are we going to get the message out?" He goes, "Oh, I'm going to do flyers. I'm going to put flyers around the shelter, about this meeting," and I'm like, "Well, when is this meeting going to be?" And he goes, "Well, I'm going to have to set the date up, I've got to sign some stuff with CHARAS; I've got to sign a waiver, whatever, and then, I have to write this letter."<sup>66</sup>

Their organizing begins to not only draw attention from other homeless folks but the staff at Bellevue Men's Shelter as well:

So we've got flyers up around the shelter now, and the shelter's up in arms. "What is this? Who is these people? Who are these guys?" And, they started hearing us on the radio. So they heard us already on the radio. Now they're hearing this, "Picture the Homeless, Picture the Homeless, these homeless guys, two homeless guys, whatever, Picture the Homeless." Then so now, a lot of people heard us on the radio, so the word is out that there's this group of two guys

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<sup>64</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

<sup>65</sup> Carlos "Chino" Garcia, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Aug. 21, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

out here that's talking about rights, and rights for homeless people, and changing the system at the same time.<sup>67</sup>

Anthony and Lewis's relationship continued to evolve. Initially, Lewis worked hard in his attempts to engage Anthony, and other homeless folks, in acts collective resistance. Anthony, however, began to seek Lewis out while they were still in Bellevue, after going with him to WBAI. Lewis continued to invite Anthony into every step of creating PTH, teaching him in the process about organizing as well as creating an organization:

So I went to check on him one night, you know, in his room with Russell and they're all there, and he's writing. He's sitting on a bed, writing, and he goes, "I'm writing a mission statement. Want to help me write a mission statement?" [laughs] I said, "What is that?" And he goes, "Well, we need a mission." [laughs] "That's like, a mission for what?" He goes, "Well, you know, you need a mission statement to say what you do and how you do it, and why you're doing it, so that people can understand what you're doing. It could be like, 'We are not going to be the flunkies of the city, and we're not going to tolerate this and that.'" He was explaining to me the wording and how to put the wording together, and he put the wording together, and he says, "No race, no color, no creed," bu-buh-buh, all that, he put. So he said that, and then I said, "Okay, and we're not going to be the whipping boy"—oh—"refugees of the street," yes. And so, yes, he wrote it! Then I signed it—I don't think he had me sign it. I don't know if he did. No, I don't think we signed it. I don't know.<sup>68</sup>

Lewis invited Anthony to go to CHARAS with him, introducing Anthony to Chino Garcia.<sup>69</sup> PTH had its first meeting there on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2000. It was at that first meeting that I met them, through Chino. It had taken time for Anthony to join Lewis in organizing PTH, but once Anthony became engaged he was frustrated that other

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<sup>67</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

<sup>68</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Carlos "Chino" Garcia is a founder of CHARAS and long time Lower East Side housing and cultural organizer,  
[http://www.gvshp.org/gvshp/resources/oral\\_his.htm#CG](http://www.gvshp.org/gvshp/resources/oral_his.htm#CG).

homeless folks weren't also standing up for their rights. That was PTH's first public meeting but Lewis and Anthony had already put in a lot of work over two months – speaking on WBAI, meeting with other organizations, developing their analysis and their relationship and most importantly, speaking with other homeless people:

So now we got you, we got Steve Loff that wants to film and interview, then we got Lewis and another guy, and your son, and we had set up all those chairs. [laughs] I didn't know how to feel, but it was kind of disappointing. I felt kind of disappointed. And I felt like, dag, man, you know? Wow. They don't care? This room should be full of homeless people. Right? This room should be *packed* with homeless people. And we only got like four people. The one guy was talking about how his shelter was, and then Lou said, "Hey, we're here to change the system. We understand your plight, but we're here to change the system," and I think that's what got you.<sup>70</sup>

I would have been ecstatic to see a room full of homeless people but Anthony was right. What "got me" was Lewis saying that "we're here to change the system." I was ready to follow the lead of homeless folks who wanted to organize to end police brutality and to fight for housing for the poorest people. My intuition told me that they were sincere. That was enough for me to offer to support in any way that I could. Below is an extended passage from Anthony Williams' interview with me. I included his questions because they reveal him using the interview to deepen our dialogue about PTH as well as our relationship:

Williams: Hello. So, hi. My name is Anthony Williams, co-founder of Picture the Homeless, and today is January 25th at Lynn's apartment. And I'm going to be interviewing her about Picture the Homeless, which I'm very excited about. And here we go. So, I and Lewis [Lou] met Chino Garcia at CHARAS. And when Lou was setting up for the meeting, I think we went down to give him the waiver for the meeting, and then Chino asked us, "I have a friend that might be interested

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<sup>70</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

in coming, is that all right?" And we said, "Yes, sure." So, what was your conversation with Chino about Lewis and Anthony?

Lewis: Yes, that's a great question. I had come back to New York in October of '98, and I had been pretty much my whole adult life working on issues around housing, homelessness, land reform. And so, you know, all of these movements for social justice are really led by people that are directly affected - like the civil rights movement led by African Americans in the U.S. The women's movement is not led by men. You could argue that it's led by middleclass, white women or what have you, but every movement for social change that accomplishes anything is led by the people; and homelessness, it's a bunch of service providers..... So when Chino came and said to me, "Hey, man, these two homeless guys started an organization, and they want to have a meeting at CHARAS, and I thought you might be interested," I was very excited. I had a friend—he's passed away—named Jack Graham and he was in Chicago, and he had been homeless. He and I, Paul [Boden]—there were several of us on the board of the National Coalition for the Homeless that were talking about organizing, but the majority of the people were not talking about organizing. They're talking about, you know, advocating for homeless people.

Jack Graham,<sup>71</sup> I interviewed him about organizing homeless people in the early '90s, and he told me a story. He said, "You know, they tore down all the old tenement buildings in Chicago, built a highway, and then a whole bunch of us became homeless," kind of like what we talked about in Baltimore. He said, "So, these homeless people hanging out in the McDonald's or the Burger King"—I don't remember—"because you could get free coffee refills, and it's cold in Chicago." The staff called the cops, and they would run homeless people out, not other people just homeless people. So, there's some students who were around, and they were like, "Hey, well, that's not right," and they organized a protest so that homeless people could stay in the McDonald's, and homeless people didn't go. Jack's telling me this story. He goes, "And the students said, 'Well, we did this for you, why didn't you—why don't you be part of it?'" And they said, "We don't want to be here all day. We don't want to fight for the right to be in a McDonald's all day. We want housing. That's not what we want." I was very excited to hear about you and Lewis, and I was involved with CHARAS for years, right? A lot of amazing groups came out of CHARAS. So, for me, Picture the Homeless was part of this landscape of organizing. I was like, far out, that's great. And so, yes, that was it.

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<sup>71</sup> Jack Graham was a member of the board of directors of the National Coalition of the Homeless and a homeless rights leader in Chicago.

Williams: So our first meeting with you and your son, when you met me and Lewis, what were your thoughts when you saw Steve Loff, I, and Lewis at that meeting?

Lewis: Well, I have a picture of that meeting in my mind because it was—you know when you went into CHARAS, it was an old school building right? If you walk in, you're in an old school building. There's a big lobby and hallways going off, right, to both side and stairs. So, if you go to the left, you go into the office. If you go to straight, there was a big, giant room that they converted into like a gallery, but also there were—you've got meetings in there. You've got events in there. So, I go in there, and there's all these folding chairs setup.... I have my son with me. He was eleven, and he went to school in the neighborhood there because that was my old neighborhood that I couldn't afford to live in anymore. So, all this big circle of empty, folded chairs and you, and Lewis—and Steve Loff is a big, tall, white guy who I didn't know, who I met. And I was like, "Okay!" you know? [Laughs] I would have been super happy if it had been full of homeless folks. I'd have been like, "Yes, man, here's the revolution." [Laughs] But I wasn't disappointed that it was you and Lewis because everything has to start somewhere. And so, I was really interested in who you—who are these guys, you know? And there was a lot going on at the time. [Rudolph W.] Giuliani was mayor, this big police crackdown. A month after that was when Amadou Diallo was murdered.

Williams: Murdered? Wow, yes.

Lewis: So, I came back to New York. I left New York in 1985, and I went to Nicaragua during the Sandinista Revolution, and I lived down there. In my mind, New York was a radical place because the part of New York that I lived in, in the early '80s was a radical place, the Lower East Side. There was a lot going on, and that's how I got trained. So, I came back to New York, and Giuliani's mayor, and William Bratton is the police chief, and I'm like, Where am I? And all my friends are all like, "Oh, aren't you glad you came back from down south," and I was like, These people sound just like those people, you know? And so, I was kind of disoriented. Gentrification had just taken over a lot of neighborhoods. I couldn't live in the Lower East Side anymore. I was living in Brooklyn, and I was just like, "This is not the New York I know." And so, when I went into that meeting, I went into that meeting with all those thoughts in my head.<sup>72</sup>

Anthony's suggestion that he interview me made me change my mind about being interviewed for this oral history project. Other PTH narrators had also urged me to be

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<sup>72</sup> Lynn Lewis, Interview by Anthony Williams, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 25, 2018.

interviewed because I am a part of the story. I had agreed to be interviewed but was still ambivalent until my conversation with Anthony. Some of it is my personal reticence as an organizer not placing myself too visibly in the work, although this has also resulted in other silences and omissions in the history of PTH in terms of my own contributions. As an oral historian I was comforted, learning that others in the field are also navigating this new territory.<sup>73</sup> My omissions and silences around Lewis and Anthony leaving PTH and related events had not been broken during these seventeen years. However, during the first two interviews with Anthony in Baltimore in early January 2018, and subsequently in late January in NYC, Anthony gave me permission to tell these stories which had been silenced. His permission also came in the form of answers that he provided to questions that I hadn't asked. They came in the form of questions that revealed details about events that I wouldn't have shared. I followed his lead and we grew closer. The passage of time and the practice of oral history allowed us to speak to one another through this project in ways that we never have, about events that at the time, tore us apart and which had the potential to destroy PTH. The fact that I avoided listening to this interview until four months after we recorded it tells me how deeply moving it was for me. But the painful times described by these stories were also exciting and powerful times. As we wrapped up our third interview, it is clear that Anthony felt the same way:

It's very important to let you know how much I love you and how much you're credited. And I'm giving that credit. Because no one else can really give you that. I can. I can really give you that much.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Steven High, foreword to *Oral History Off the Record*, eds. Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrazycki (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), xvi.

<sup>74</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 22, 2018.

Anthony and I succeeded in fulfilling Lewis's vision by establishing one of the only groups in the U.S. to organize homeless folks. We made a difference through the initial building of PTH and we – along with all of the narrators for this Phase of the project and others such as Emily Givens who are no longer involved with PTH but who played an essential early role – created the space for hundreds of homeless folks to do so as well.<sup>75</sup> It has only been through the leadership of homeless New Yorkers that PTH has been able to win the types of systemic change that Talmadge Wright and others have described and called for: "Recognizing the agency of the homeless is absolutely necessary if we are ever going to see any substantive social change."<sup>76</sup> Anthony was the right person to interview me for this project. No other interviewer would have elicited the same information from me. After my own omissions and silences all these years, it was Anthony who gave me permission to tell a story that isn't solely mine to tell.

PTH's early organizational development was informed by the political relationships built by Lewis and Anthony immediately after PTH's founding as well as those gained through their relationship with CHARAS and later on, my own relationships with groups such as Cooper Square and The San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness. Anthony described Lewis's intersectional approach, which informed PTH's later practice:

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<sup>75</sup> "Timeline of Impacts," Picture the Homeless, accessed September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018. <http://picturethehomeless.org/home/about/timeline-of-impacts/>

<sup>76</sup> This is one of the only books on organizing by homeless folks that I have found. It deeply influenced me when I first encountered it over ten years ago. Not surprisingly, this quote was also used by Daniel Kerr. Talmadge Wright, *Out of Place: Homeless Mobilizations, Subcities, and Contested Landscapes* (Albany: State University of New York, 1997), 6.

So, Lewis had these linkages with the community on the Lower East Side, and the organizing efforts, but he was taking the homeless issue, along with the housing issue and the bulldozing of the gardens, and bringing us all together.<sup>77</sup>

PTH filled a vacuum in the New York City social justice movement landscape. There were no groups organizing homeless people in New York City and few nationally. Lewis's intersectional approach and diverse political connections and Anthony's leadership and in-depth knowledge of homelessness positioned PTH to fill that vacuum. Below is a description of PTH's involvement in the struggle to save the Esperanza Garden<sup>78</sup> on the Lower East Side. There were often tensions between preserving community gardens and building affordable housing. These were false tensions created by the City administration which pitted the need for the gardens and housing against one another. PTH's position was clear from its founding: no gardens should be destroyed for luxury housing. The definition of affordable housing excluded the lowest income households.<sup>79</sup> PTH joined with the gardeners to save the Esperanza Garden because the

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<sup>77</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 22, 2018.

<sup>78</sup> The Esperanza Garden was one of hundreds of community gardens established by community residents in neighborhoods that experienced a decrease in residents in the 1970's.

<sup>79</sup> What is defined as affordable housing is established by Federal standards based on the Area Median Income (AMI). AMI is calculated and divided into income bands, with extremely low income defined as 30% of AMI or lower; which requires the highest amount of subsidy to operate at low enough rent levels. The definition of affordable housing covers a wide range but most often isn't "low enough" to actually provide housing for the lowest income community members. For more information on the gentrifying affects of the "affordable housing", see Samuel Stein, "DeBlasio's Doomed Housing Plan" in Jacobin Magazine. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/10/de-blasios-doomed-housing-plan/>.



proposed housing was not intended for low income people. The space-claiming direct action tactics used by the gardeners were also appealing to Lewis:

“Ant, you’ve got to come check this out. They’ve got a laptop up there, and you go in there, and you climb up there, and they’re holding down this garden.” And I went up there, and it was like, wow. But this is about green space. But it was important somehow to talk about green space, homelessness, and housing, and align them together somehow, which was hard. It wasn’t an easy sell. I mean, I don’t think it was, but we did it. I don’t know how we did it, but we did it, because we were able to do a press conference, with the Green Guerillas, with the garden folks, and talk about the bulldozing of a garden, and space, but also no affordable housing. You want to build luxury housing. That’s what it was. You want to knock down a garden to build luxury housing, but you’re not building housing for low-income people. You’re building luxury housing. So, we’re not for that. We’re totally not for developers bulldozing gardens for luxury housing. If they want to build housing for affordable, for folks that are homeless, then we’re all for that, but no, we’re not for you bulldozing a garden. So that’s what I talked about in a press conference,<sup>80</sup> with Aresh (Javadi)<sup>81</sup> and them and we talked about homelessness, and they talked about—you know, and stand in front of bulldozers. And so, not only did Lewis have a relationship with Aresh, he had a relationship with Michael Shenker,<sup>82</sup> and he had a relationship with (Seth) Tobocman<sup>83</sup>... The ultimate was the squatters, because they told me, “We want to help you guys take over buildings. We’ll show you how to do it.” And I was like, “What?” They go, “This is what we’ve been waiting for. We’ve been waiting for this. We want to show you stuff.” They all were like, “This is what we’ve been waiting for, the homeless. We want to open up buildings for the homeless. We want to open up space for the homeless.”<sup>84</sup>

Effective resistance to oppression generates more oppression. Lewis and Anthony were organizing against police brutality, shelter conditions and the lack of housing being

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<sup>80</sup> <http://papertiger.org/play-for-keeps-the-struggle-to-save-nyc-community-gardens>.

<sup>81</sup> Aresh Javadi is a nature based activist and founder of More Gardens, [www.moregardens.org](http://www.moregardens.org).

<sup>82</sup> Michael Shenker was a Lower East Side squatter and activist who passed away in 2010.

<sup>83</sup> Seth Tobocman is comic book artist, cultural worker and activist. In 2009 he created one of PTH’s most iconic visual images of a bolt cutter cutting a chain link fence around a heart, [www.sethtobocman.com/bio](http://www.sethtobocman.com/bio).

<sup>84</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

preserved or developed for the very poor. They were organizing and exposing these conditions on the radio while they were still in Bellevue Men's Shelter. Their courage came with consequences because they choose to stand up for their rights while still vulnerable to abuse from the very systems they were exposing. The Department of Homeless Services allowed shelter transfers with less than 24 hour notice. Shelter residents were subject to being transferred from one shelter to another with little notice or accountability on the part of staff. Shelter transfers are often used as a means to control shelter residents, or to punish them. Anthony and Lewis had to make a choice between organizing for homeless rights and leaving the shelter system, or accepting an emergency transfer that would take them far from the city and from one another:

So, Bellevue was getting intense. They were threatening to send Lewis to Camp LaGuardia<sup>85</sup> and he just kept ignoring the notes. But they didn't leave me a note; they came and got me. Security came. They said, "You're getting out of the shelter tonight and you're going to Bellevue [Camp LaGuardia]." Lewis was getting these warnings, notes. But, they came directly and got me. They came and like, "Hey." And I said, "Lewis, what are we going to do, man? I can't be here tonight. I'm going to Camp LaGuardia." He goes, "No you're not; we're leaving together." [laughs] I said, "Okay, you ready?" I said, "Yes!" He says, "Yes, I'm ready." I said, "Okay, let's go do this. Let's go, let's go." And that, the next day, man, was the roughest.<sup>86</sup>

Anthony and Lewis were now on the street and they continued to organize. They had to improvise where they met:

So, we went and talked to Chino, me and Lewis, and we were kicked out of the shelter. We had slept in SoHo the night before and went over to the Bowery Mission to eat, and then from there, we went over to CHARAS. We went to the Catholic church across from CHARAS. What's the name of that church? I and

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<sup>85</sup> Camp Laguardia was a New York City shelter for homeless single men over age 35, located 90 miles north of the City in Chester, New York.

<sup>86</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

Lewis went to Trinity, and they turned us away. I was pissed. I was pissed! I was like, “Why? Aren’t they supporters for CHARAS? Aren’t they like this, that, what?” Anyway, so we go into CHARAS, and then Chino says, “Hey! What about Judson [Memorial Church]? Why don’t you go check out Judson?” And then I was like, “Fuck them churches.” You know what I mean? Like, “Fuck them. I’m not going, I’m not, no. Fuck it, I’m done.” And Lou was like, “Anthony, we’ve got to go to Judson. We have to go talk to them.” I said, “No, I don’t have to talk to them.” And I said, “I’ll walk over there with you, but I’m not going in that church to talk to them.” He goes, “All right, I’ll be back.” So he went in. He went in the church, and talked to Peter Laarman, and he came back out, and said, “Anthony, they want to meet with us. The Reverend wants to meet with you.” I was like, “Hell no, I don’t want to meet with him.” He goes, “Anthony, come on.” Really, he was like, “Hey, I need you to come and talk to him. We need you to talk to him. I need you to talk to the Rev, to Reverend Peter Laarman. He wants to hear what we have to say, so we should at least let him hear us out. Okay?” And I said, “Okay.” Peter Laarman looked at me as the weaker one, and looked at Lewis as the stronger one. For whatever reason, he pegged Lewis as the stronger, although he listened to what I was saying about the homeless and the plight of the homeless. He said, “Okay, let’s do a vigil for you guys, for going up to Camp LaGuardia.” I was still overwhelmed with that. I was like, “Wow. Wow.” Then you came, that day, right? We were out there for how long, twenty-four hours? Angie<sup>87</sup> came. Yes, it was cold, and we were staying, so they left the door open so we can go inside and lay down and get warm.<sup>88</sup>

Those were the days before cell phones or widely used internet and we had to find ways to communicate with one other and with homeless folks about meetings and events. We held meetings on the Lower East Side and in Harlem. Anthony’s friend Jennifer Roberts allowed PTH to meet in the back of the International Bar where she bartended. Her home phone number is on PTH’s early flyers and correspondence. Occasionally we met in my apartment in Brooklyn and more frequently when I moved to East Harlem in 2000, although by then Lewis and Anthony had secured office space:

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<sup>87</sup> Angie Hernandez is a long time member of CHARAS and cultural worker. Angie was very supportive of PTH and had been homeless with her children in the Martinique Hotel in midtown Manhattan during the early 1980’s.

<sup>88</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

Anthony and Lewis started to refer to me as their secretary. I supported them as an organizer by listening, learning the issues, discussing strategy, researching and sharing information, making flyers, taking minutes, typing letters and beginning to build the PTH archive but the closest thing that Anthony could relate this to was that I was his “secretary”. “I would call you my secretary. That’s my secretary; she’s great. That’s my secretary.”<sup>89</sup> I think this reflected a gendered assumption. As a woman, what else would he call someone who typed and wrote letters? This became an inside joke between the two of us. Lewis continued to build and deepen existing political relationships but he also continued to struggle with alcoholism. His health was surely harmed by choosing to fight for homeless rights and build PTH over keeping his shelter bed at Bellevue. Lewis continued to organize, but then he began to participate in PTH less frequently, beginning in the early spring of 2000. Later in 2000, Lewis told us that he was moving to California. We lost touch with him, although we remained in contact with his family. Soon after that, PTH moved into an office space in Judson’s basement:

So after the twenty-four-hour action that we did, Peter said, “We have an office downstairs, just, it’s full of stuff. If we can clean that out, we can give you an office.” And I’m like, “Really?” He goes, “Yes, we just need to clean it out,” which took a long time, right? We took a while but, at least we made it in. We got in. Wow. So, yes, we got a phone; they supported us with a phone. We had a phone. Then we got a computer. Then, we were doing side businesses but people were coming to see what we do, and again, you can’t show people something that’s not there. Right? It has to be there for you to show them, for them to do it, and the only way to get what you need is by showing them that you have something unique, and you have something that’s worthwhile for them to come and support. And we had that. We had all that. We had every bit of it.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

<sup>90</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

Lewis and Anthony were opposed to making money off of homeless people, feeling that they would be replicating the system. I knew there was funding for community organizing to change the system. Once we opened the office in the basement of Judson Memorial Church (which is now the elevator shaft), we began holding weekly membership meetings on Wednesday nights. Homeless people whom we met during outreach were coming to the office with ideas and wanting to talk and take action. Someone had to be there to welcome folks into the work and to follow up on all the things members discussed on Wednesday nights. It immediately became clear that there were homeless New Yorkers who would join PTH. At that time, I was a single mother and my youngest child was still underage and living at home. It would take nearly two years after its founding until PTH obtained funding for two staff. Anthony worked odd jobs cleaning carpets during this period and began sleeping on a friend's couch. He was the first to be paid by funding that we secured and was responsible for covering the office during the day. He was incredibly effective at outreach and engaging other homeless folks in conversation and analysis. Anthony described what it was like for him when we finally moved into PTH's first office space at Judson Memorial Church. I have photos of him that day, still with winter clothes on, surrounded by boxes of things that belonged to the church which they hadn't yet moved out:

Wow. Whew. [pauses] It was amazing. It was different. It was—wow, yes. I was a little worried. I was scared. I had fears. I had fears of, are we going to be successful? How are we going to do this, get a phone? Everything was on experience, experience as you go. You're experiencing it as you go. So you don't know; I didn't have a start point when we moved into that office. We just moved in and then we started. Right? And then, it flourished. No plan, we didn't plan it; I didn't plan it. There was no plan, but we got an office, and you stayed with me;

you helped me to stay on top of Peter, because I think he was getting a lot of flak from his board. I didn't see the flack that he was getting, but he knew what we had was something, when he met with me and Lewis that day, and I think he even said, "This is amazing to me. Long as I've been here, in this church, and looking out the window and seeing homeless people, wow, this is the," he mentioned that, said, "this is the first time I—wow." And he saw something. He pictured something, yes. And he said, "Let me get them guys an office." Like, who would give two homeless dudes an office, or offer them an office? Why? Because you pictured something in them; you saw something in them, right?"<sup>91</sup>

When I affirm to Anthony that yes, "you made them see something, also" his reply reveals his ambivalence about claiming credit. Anthony pauses and then says "Mm-hmm. And those are hard words to say, but they have to be said, because yes, we did make them see something."<sup>92</sup> The PTH origin story is much more than the details of where Lewis and Anthony met. The political essence of the origin story is that two homeless men stood up for their rights and founded PTH. This is what moved Peter Laarman in the excerpt above, and it is what moved me and countless others to join, to support, or to work at PTH. The political essence of the origin story speaks directly to homeless folks as they inherit the memory of their organization's founding. Naming it and repeating it through collective action directly connects them to PTH's co-founders. This is part of what moves PTH members to join PTH or to deepen their commitment to collective resistance, as the next section reveals.

### **Representation and the Connection Between Collective Memory and Collective Resistance**

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<sup>91</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

<sup>92</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

Picturing Anthony and Lewis as social justice leaders is an invitation by PTH to see both homeless people and the systems they intersect with through their eyes. It is an invitation specifically to other homeless folks to stand up for their rights, just as Anthony and Lewis did. The invitation extends to all community members, to *picture* the homeless differently. The PTH website<sup>93</sup> uses visuality and text to tell the official origin story of PTH. The history section of PTH's website features photos of PTH's co-founders looking straight into the camera, returning the gaze of the viewer.<sup>94</sup> Contrast their visage with the standard representation of pitiable or scary homeless people, who are also often black men. The absence of homelessness and homeless people in movement media reveals that the issue of homelessness was not conceived of as a social justice issue in NYC prior to PTH. I drafted the official version of the PTH origin story when I was the Executive Director of PTH. It is based on the story that Anthony and Lewis both told about PTH's founding. The official origin story is my memory of what Lewis and Anthony told me. It also incorporates my memory and interpretation of the political context of those days. The official origin story is where their memory and mine collides and colludes.

The origin story shared by all of the narrators (except for co-founder Anthony Williams and Chino Garcia) is based on inherited memories.<sup>95</sup> The efficacy of the PTH origin story as a political construct is seen most clearly in the impact of the origin story

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<sup>93</sup> <https://www.picturethehomeless.org>.

<sup>94</sup> <https://www.picturethehomeless.org/history>.

<sup>95</sup> In addition to Charlotte Linde, my thinking about inherited and collective memory was also informed by Anna Green's article, "Individual Remembering and 'Collective Memory': Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates," *Oral History* 32, no. 2 "Memory and Society" (Autumn, 2004).

on members of PTH. All of the narrators interviewed during Phase 1 of this project reference the impact of PTH's origin story on their own political commitment. Rob Robinson (2007 to present) described what the founding story of PTH meant to him when he first came to PTH:

That was important to me. That's where I first said that OK, people can rise up and fight back, but also be recognized for doing that, right? Especially who it was; people of color; I've experienced growing up: discrimination, race discrimination, people being outcast, your problem being pushed to the side, saying it's your problem, put on you. But here's somebody organizing people to say we have a voice together and I've always believed in that togetherness. So it was a message that resonated with me. Hearing the story, and hearing how [Haggins] he passed and where he was, that was moving. Right, like, you know, "F. that." That's not the way it's supposed to go down. You've got to stick with this.<sup>96</sup>

The respect assigned to the co-founders by PTH because they "fought back" was a critical aspect of the origin story for Rob. So was PTH's use of representation and visuality, which resulted in race being at the core of PTH's analysis. This resonated with Rob's experience of racial discrimination growing up. He valued the "togetherness" that PTH offers, which is connected to collective resistance. In similar ways that Luisa Passerini describes being "comforted by a form of memory which was not personal memory but the stories that my grandmother told me."<sup>97</sup> The PTH origin story offers emotional comfort as well as political inspiration. The text below doesn't reveal the emotional resolve of DeBoRah Dickerson (2005 to the present) tone of voice as she described how the dream of PTH's co-founders inspired her. The context for the

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<sup>96</sup> Rob Robinson, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, May 7, 2018.

<sup>97</sup> Luisa Passerini, "A Passion for Memory," *History Workshop Journal* 72, Autumn (2011), 241.



following excerpt is her description of PTH's work to expose the warehousing of vacant property as a solution to the housing crisis:

Where they have left us out: I say, "You can't leave us out!" If our former founders, they took a little something, a dream and look at it now. So, you may push us out, but we're not out of the universe. We have work to do.<sup>98</sup>

Marcus Moore, (2008 to the present) stressed the importance of education and representation during his first interview, connecting to the seeds of PTH's founding. Marcus has participated in many workshops and conferences over the course of ten years but when I asked him to name an example of what he had learned at PTH, the first thing he mentions is the origin story and PTH's co-founders:

I got a chance to learn some things about the organization; when it was founded, who our founders are, you know, I got a chance to talk in public [voice rises as he gets enthusiastic describing public speaking] about some of the work that we are doing at Picture the Homeless. You know, stereotypes, teach, kind of like help people to understand the stereotypes when it comes to challenging homeless people.<sup>99</sup>

Rogers (2004 to present) was already an experienced organizer and Harlem community leader before he became homeless. He had interacted with PTH in that capacity. He described what attracted him to PTH once he became homeless himself. Collectivity, political analysis and homeless leadership were the primary reasons Rogers joined PTH:

I didn't see enough people being organized into one voice until I was reading some of what Picture the Homeless – some of what Anthony and Lewis had done and were saying. Because that was the coming together of united voices against the gentrification, against the profiteering, against the elite landowners and – if you want to call it, the municipal land barons. That was part of what was being

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<sup>98</sup> DeBoRah Dickerson, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Oct. 27, 2017.

<sup>99</sup> Marcus Moore, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Nov. 13, 2017.

done by Picture the Homeless in many ways better than anyone else was doing it. So I said this is something I see, I understand, and I agree with.<sup>100</sup>

Lewis Haggins wasn't defined by his homelessness, he responded to it as an organizer. His actions teach us to not *picture* or define people based on their lack of housing. Lewis identified qualities in Anthony and recruited him to form a homeless led organization. Anthony was the only other homeless person to accept his invitation. In a relatively short period of time (from roughly November 1999 through sometimes in mid to later 2000) Lewis brought his connections with housing activists, media makers, gardeners, faith leaders and cultural workers to build support for PTH at a time when no one else was organizing homeless New Yorkers and he brought Anthony into those relationships. The work that Lewis put in to make that happen was perhaps at the expense of his own recovery and ultimately his life. Anthony rose to the occasion by taking a leap of faith and joining Lewis. That his choice was not informed by formal political experience does not diminish his political leadership. Anthony quickly evolved from believing that nothing could be done about police brutality towards homeless folks to anchoring PTH - which was still a fledgling homeless rights - organization after Lewis left. He described us as not having a plan during those early days and weeks at Judson but he doesn't give himself or us enough credit. Anthony is now a homeless leader and playwright in Baltimore, Maryland. Together, we continued the work of organizing homeless New Yorkers who were eager to make the New York City a better place. Once PTH had an

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<sup>100</sup> Rogers, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 18, 2018.

office space at Judson, we were able to build on Lewis's organizing methodology that was enhanced by Anthony's thorough knowledge of homelessness.

### **III. The Meaning of Picture the Homeless**

The meaning of PTH has its roots in the origin story. The narrators for Phase I of the project described what PTH *meant* to them, not only the details or chronology of specific events.<sup>101</sup> PTH's mission statement begins by asserting that homeless people have civil and human rights. Lewis's political strategy to win those rights reached beyond strictly "homeless" issues: such as shelter conditions. Lewis's political work prior to becoming homeless informed his homeless organizing. He saw the intersections with racial and economic justice and immediately began with Anthony, to take these issues to the media. After travelling to WBAI to expose police brutality towards homeless New Yorkers, one of PTH's next actions was joining in support of a community garden that was being destroyed by luxury housing developers. Civil rights and housing affordable to the lowest income New Yorkers remained the two primary issues that PTH worked on for the seventeen years covered by this oral history project. It was grass roots organizations primarily led by people of color who also organized around those issues, not homeless advocacy or homeless service organizations. Organizing for homeless rights for PTH meant connecting with the broader social justice movement, not isolating homeless rights from struggles against racism and poverty: the root causes of homelessness.

The PTH narrators interviewed for this phase of the project are not representative of the general population, or even of all homeless New Yorkers. They are a unique

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<sup>101</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

subset of homeless folks who have committed ten years or more of their lives to a homeless rights organization. Their commitment to dignity and respect is a bond that they have in common with PTH's co-founders. It is important to begin with them because they embody the foundational values on which PTH was constructed. The narrators inherited the memory of the origin story. Yet it is their own analysis of their circumstances which provided the motivation to claim PTH's legacy as their own and to continue the work that PTH's co-founders began.<sup>102</sup> The following section is organized around the themes that were most frequently cited by the narrators: being welcoming, representation, education, individual and collective resistance and leadership. These themes are interconnected, and do not exist in isolation from one another; they are the vehicles by which PTH's mission was actualized in its organizing practice.

### **Welcoming**

There are endless stories of how homeless New Yorkers got involved with PTH. What they have described as an underlying factor is feeling that PTH was a place where their humanity was respected. This is in sharp contrast to the disrespect exhibited by shelter staff and the very design of homeless programs, by the police, by welfare, by the mainstream media, by the disregard in the eyes of people in public spaces who refuse to physically come near them or even to make eye contact. PTH was an antidote to the

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<sup>102</sup> An exploration of the concept of affective community is beyond the scope of this thesis but I found Anna Green's work on this topic inspiring and extremely helpful is one that I would like to explore further.

toxicity of homelessness. Joan Harrison's<sup>103</sup> (2008 to present) eloquent description of the toll that homelessness takes on homeless people's well-being is from the PTH archive.

She has been street homeless since 2012:

The same as you or anyone else we need a place to recover from daily indignities. We need a respite from city chatter and other noises. We need a safe place to keep our things so as not to be weighted down like pack animals when we go outside. The same as you we too need solitude for reflecting. We too need to be able to prepare our own food. Our minds too need the solace of dreaming. Most of us were not born homeless. Most of us worked, loved, had hobbies and hopes, knew joys and sorrows the same as anyone else, and many of us had or still have families. We all long to return to our lives again or to begin new lives – yet far too often our longings seem futile. Many of us work and still have no home. Many of us are eager to work yet work is unavailable. Many of us are retired or else unable to work and cannot afford rent. Many of us have talents that we fear will atrophy.<sup>104</sup>

The first step was creating a welcoming physical space as a symbol of the social transformation sought by homeless folks. Much of the hardship experienced by homeless folks is the constant messaging that they aren't "welcome." Police issue move on orders in public space to remove homeless people,<sup>105</sup> and have protocols for when "two or more homeless people" are seen in public space.<sup>106</sup> Defensive design creates physical barriers explicitly designed to deter homeless people from utilizing public spaces.<sup>107</sup> PTH was

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<sup>103</sup> Joan Harrison is a long time member of PTH who was active between 2009 and 2012. We are in touch via facebook and email and I've asked her to allow me to interview her for this project and she has said that she will consider it.

<sup>104</sup> Joan Harrison, "Notes" in *ThePicture the Homeless 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Gala Program* October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2014.

<sup>105</sup> Nikita Stewart, "New York Police Illegally Profiling Homeless People, Complaint Says," *New York Times*, (New York), May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>106</sup> New York City Police Department. "Finest Message" in *General Administrative Information* January 19<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>107</sup> Dan Neilan, "The shitty reason New York City benches are designed to be uncomfortable," <https://www.avclub.com/the-shitty-reason-new-york-city-benches-are-designed-to-1820884365>, November 30, 2017

accountable to its homeless membership by acknowledging how homeless folks are constantly subject to being removed from public space. The office space was designed to counter the disrespect, the sleep deprivation, the targeting, and the lack of privacy. It offered a place to “recover” from those daily indignities that Joan described above. It is from this physical and emotional place of respite that collective dreaming and resistance can be co-constructed in a political home. Being welcoming to all homeless folks at PTH was the act of collective resistance that allowed other forms of collective resistance to emerge. Homeless New Yorkers developed an organizational culture that allowed for a political home to flourish, by designing a physical space for that work while at the same time, acknowledging the need for respite. Just as PTH provides a counter narrative to explain homelessness, it also provided a counter experience from almost everywhere else that homeless folks go. Who is welcomed into and who controls what happens in an office space reflects who has power in the organization. It communicates to whom the organization belongs.

What does it mean to have a political home, for someone who is *home-less*? As Rogers, one of the narrators and advisory board members stated in a listening session, “when there is pain and there is love, we gravitate towards love.” The PTH office practiced love by being welcoming. Anthony described the trauma that homelessness induces. Joan and Anthony – as well as each of the narrators for this project - eloquently describe the need that homeless folks have to be welcomed and to have respite from the “daily indignities”. The physical and the political welcoming of PTH were healing,

reflecting how “trauma can be a foundation for creating counter public spheres rather than evacuating them.”<sup>108</sup>

This is trauma for them. They have to walk around all day with their bags in the freezing cold. Waiting for a shelter bed. They come to talk to us because they don’t know how to handle it; they don’t know how to deal with it themselves. They can’t deal with it on their own. We’re here because we have a place for them to come now and bring other women and say, ‘Look, Anthony, they’re not doing what they said they were going to do with the overflow.’” And that’s important, Lynn. Because of the difficulty, if they see a little bit of light, that’s good. If they can just hear somebody say, “Well, we have a space for you to— here’s a place where you can come and address this issue. And these are the people you talk to just like you did with me and Lou [Lewis Haggins, Jr].”<sup>109</sup>

Home is where we take care of our most personal needs in safety: bathing, sleeping, resting, eating, and dreaming. It is where we can close our eyes without fear, where we make love and receive friends.<sup>110</sup> When people *without* homes create an organization, the physical space serves multiple and complementary purposes but as narrators described, there was conflict. The PTH office was painted bright colors and filled with artwork. Visuality communicated resistance. Music played on the radio, and members would break out in song or even jump up and start dancing at times. This sometimes competed with the need to answer the phone, make phone calls, conduct research or have a meeting. Striking a balance between all aspects of the organizing work was a collective effort and not merely “enforced” by staff. There was an open floor plan, no metal detectors, security guards, or waiting rooms or bathrooms assigned to the “homeless clients”. For the first four years staff and members shared one office as well as the bathrooms.

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<sup>108</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 15.

<sup>109</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan.22, 2018.

<sup>110</sup> I write this even as I acknowledge that for some, home is not safe.

Members would often wash up there, or wash their clothes. There was often jostling over bathroom use, but it was accepted as part of the reality of being homeless. Resolving conflicts was an overt political act and when it worked, built empathy and solidarity among members and staff. The staff offices, when we did have them, were of the same quality as member's spaces and members often shared staff workspace including computers and telephones. This led to informal and formal conversations about the work, which deepened relationships and analysis among members and staff. It was common for a staff member to share space with a sleeping member: on a pallet on the floor or a couple of chairs pulled together. William Burnett (2004 to the present) is a board member and former PTH staff person and campaign leader. He joined PTH as a member when he was a resident at the Wards Island shelter complex. He was working at the time but could not afford rent. He described the PTH office:

You had the feel that you were in a social activist office. I mean, it was in an old apartment, [pauses] wider than yours but kind of like yours. You had your office in the back. There was an office to the side, but mostly it was just this long office, separated by a wall so that you had your conference room in the front and you had the desks. It was just all raw and but yet, put together. You had pictures and everything usually reflecting different [pauses] things that you'd want activists to see. But it was just like, one of those spaces where, you needed a space, so it was there.<sup>111</sup>

PTH's organizational home functioned in similar ways as private space does for people without homes. Many homeless people have no safe place to relax, cook, or even close their eyes, let alone take care of personal hygiene, like soaking their feet or getting their hair braided. There was no question that PTH would be a space where some of these

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<sup>111</sup> William Burnett, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Nov. 16, 2017.



needs could be met if it was homeless-led. It was necessary for members to have an opportunity to be themselves to form deep relationships and share analysis. It was unimaginable that a homeless led organization would prohibit conduct such as washing in the bathroom or police people seeking ways to rest without fear of harassment. These functions were all aspects of PTH's organizing practice. Arvernetta Henry (2009 to the present) was working as a New York City school teacher when she learned about PTH from a former student who was interning there. Once Arvernetta became homeless, she looked for the business card given to her by her former student. Arvernetta called PTH, which had moved to East Harlem from Judson, and then from East Harlem to the Bronx:

I had a bad experience in the shelter and I was frightened and he<sup>112</sup> said "Come on by here. We're located on Fordham in the Bronx." I said "Oh! I know where that is." I said that I'm coming by. But I didn't get by there until about 3 weeks later. He interviewed me and I was skeptical. I looked around, I saw there was a kitchen there [smiles] I saw furniture there, I felt like I was at home. Then one of the women came out and she said, "We fix community dinners, everybody takes turns cooking." I think it was Linda at the time. I said, this is nice, I like this. I said, "Can you help me get housing?" She said, "Well, we don't help you get housing, but we *fight* for you to get housing. We show you how to talk for yourself ." So, I said, "That's nice. This is nice." From that experience, that interview, I decided to do some time there.<sup>113</sup>

Arvernetta's description about why she continued coming to PTH is in sharp contrast to how she was treated by HRA<sup>114</sup> during this same period. Her reasons cited for her initial participation are similar to what Joan Harrison described homeless folks needing. They also mirror Rogers' quote: that when there is pain and love, we gravitate towards love. Welcoming homeless folks into the space is more than just a metaphor for welcoming them into the work. It is an essential function *of* the work:

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<sup>112</sup> Frank Morales was the PTH housing organizer during this period and is a well known leader in the New York City squatters movement.

<sup>113</sup> Arvernetta Henry, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Sept. 28, 2017.

<sup>114</sup> HRA stands for the Human Resources Administration and was the department within New York City government that administers public assistance (welfare) and other public benefits.

I started coming to Picture the Homeless more regular because I was able to get some peace and quiet and get some sleep. I can go on the porch and do my work and I wasn't far from the library. They made me feel so welcome, and so, when I finally stopped working, I would go there. I missed teaching so much, but I was trying to get housing. They [the shelter] told me that I had to go to welfare, to HRA, if I really wanted to get some help. My caseworker could not believe that I was a teacher. He would give me such a hard time. The first caseworker, come to find out, she was living in Parkchester in the Bronx. You know she had an attitude "You can't be no teacher." I said "Do you want me to show you my identification." And she said Mrs. Henry, "Why are you here then?" I said "I'm trying to find housing and I can't, I don't have enough money and I'm struggling. I have my loans to pay off and other things." She said "Well don't you have other family members?" And I said "That's how come I'm here. It's because of a family member and this is what has happened. People are sick, people die, and so, this is where I'm at now."<sup>115</sup>

DeBoRah Dickerson was a resident in a women's shelter in the Lexington Avenue Armory when she joined PTH. Similar to Arvernetta, DeBoRah was employed when she entered the shelter system. Homelessness actually caused both of them to stop working.<sup>116</sup> Like each narrator for this project, she described inhumane shelter conditions, including verbally abusive staff. She also described being frightened. She sought ways to stand up for herself and other women in the shelter and she also sought out "meaningful ways to use her time." Below is her description of her first visit to PTH:

I saw this door that said Picture the Homeless. I said "Picture the Homeless!" [laughing and voice rises] "What kind of mess is that?! Picture the Homeless!" [smiling] I said "This is crazy. I'm going to go in here and see." So I went in there and I saw this table. It had all kinds of brochures and stuff and I heard somebody say "Hi! How may I help you?" I said, "I see on your door it says Picture the Homeless. What you mean?!" [laughing] "What do you mean by Picture the Homeless?" So, it was Sam, so he says, "Are you new?" I said "Yes,

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<sup>115</sup> Arvernetta Henry, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Sept. 28, 2017.

<sup>116</sup> Arvernetta Henry had been working as a substitute teacher in the Bronx but her assignment to a shelter in Jamaica, Queens made it impossible for her to travel to work. DeBoRah Dickerson's health problems were exacerbated by her stay in the Oliveri Drop-In Center where women were forced to sleep in chairs overnight.

and I'd like for you to explain what you do." So Sam came, and then Roosevelt came out, and Tyletha was in the other room and she was talking, and she said "Hi!" and I said "Hi!" So you know, people was like really hospitable. They were coming out. So I said to them, "I was next door" and I showed them the flyer. I said "But tell me something about you. I'm kind of interested and I would like to do something. I want to know something about you." So they said, "We have a meeting later on." I said, "You have a meeting?" She said, "Yes, you can come, we would like to have you. You can come and see what we're about." I said "Oh!" He said, "We also have refreshments." I said, "You do?!" I said, "OK!" So I waited around, you know they had different ones come in. They had Jean, Jean Rice. They had John, Marco, Jean, Roosevelt, Leroy was there, Tyletha was there. People started to come in. They said, "Who's here for the first time?" You know, "Stand up and give your name." And it's been from there, it's just been, I just took it on from there because, I liked the way they greeted me, you know, and they got my nose up in the air, [smiling]. So I'm happy about that, you know.<sup>117</sup>

DeBoRah touched on several elements central to PTH's organizing methodology in the story of her first visit to the PTH office. When a new member came into PTH it was crucial to take some time to get to know them by listening to at least a bit of their story and invite them to stay or come back for a meeting or cup of coffee. Listening to, and affirming, the truth of homeless folks was crucial given that their experiences and analysis were negated by mainstream narratives about homelessness. Welcoming them by listening created safety and community. What this could look like at PTH was listening to the stories of members describing what their night was like: stories of being hit with NYPD nightsticks on the subway, seeing members come into the office exhausted and bleary eyed and needing to wash up, drink a cup of coffee and prepare for a media interview. It sometimes meant seeing the despair in parent's eyes after they and their three children were transferred from a shelter in the Bronx to one in Far Rockaway with less than 24 hours' notice - and then supporting them to engage in collective

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<sup>117</sup> DeBoRah Dickerson, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Oct. 27, 2017.

analysis and action planning with 30 other people in a campaign meeting. It is significant that DeBoRah listed the names of the people that greeted her without differentiating between staff, board members and members. While Sam and Tyletha were staff (although Tyletha and her family had experienced homelessness and stayed in the shelter system previously), most were homeless and among those, some were street homeless. Similar to DeBoRah, Jean Rice (2002 to present) didn't differentiate between staff and members when he described who he met his first night at PTH:

My orientation took place at a place called The Baggott Inn. Our Holy Communion was Black and Tans. [laughs] And after that, that time we were punctual, so he [Anthony] said, OK, let's go to the meeting. Anthony introduced me, that's when I met my sister Lynn Lewis. I met Emily Givens and some core members that were there at that time. Our other co-founder wasn't at that meeting, Lewis Haggins, but he was still alive....Because I had had the opportunity to pursue higher education - again family motivated - and I had studied Public Administration as a major, Criminal Justice Administration as a strong minor. So I'd had some studying American constitutional law, etc. Because I knew about the 14th Amendment, and ba ba ba, Lynn and Emily [pauses] and Anthony just drafted me! Like, you need me! I got drafted. [smiles] But I loved it because, seriously, it gave me the opportunity to use knowledge that I thought I would never be able to use in a positive way. I was able to use that knowledge to contribute to a progressive social and equal justice and I'm still doing that.<sup>118</sup>

The structure of PTH and the relationships between staff, members and board members is distinct from the institutional environments such as jails, shelters and service agencies that PTH members interacted with. DeBoRah's memory of who greeted her is evidence of the organizational culture of horizontality that was communicated to new and established members. PTH was homeless led. This power dynamic was a primary structural factor which contributed to PTH's welcoming homeless New Yorkers into the

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<sup>118</sup> Jean Rice, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Oct. 6, 2017.

work. The physical space and the manner in which homeless people and staff interacted with one another combined to create the sense of welcoming. The relationships between homeless members also inspired William Burnett. He was moved by the sense of community and resourcefulness among homeless members in the PTH office:

I had already seen it in the sense of, usually when, not even homeless but just poor, [pauses] and you have nowhere to turn and you really need some help, it's usually another poor person who'll be the one to respond. So there was that sense of empathy but there was also this sense of resourcefulness among the members, so that if one person didn't have a resource and another person did, and so it really gave a strong sense of an authentic [pauses] community. You know where other folks talk about community I was watching people live it out. In a space, New York City, you didn't expect people to have that community spirit. Here are the poorest of the poor, [pause] were exhibiting that community spirit as I was watching that unfold.<sup>119</sup>

Sam J. Miller, (2004 to present) was hired as the PTH housing organizer. He described the practice and the impact of being welcoming from a staff perspective:

Yeah, I mean that there's a basic level on which it was always really important to who we were that we were a space where we were happy to see people, where we welcomed people where when they walked in the door with their bags, or their stress from whatever they were going through, or any of the shit they were carrying, that had been heaped upon them by the cops, or the shelter, or the system, or the newspapers. That we were there, we were smiling, that we were welcoming them, that we were happy to see them and that if they needed to take 20 minutes in the bathroom that no one was pounding on the door for them to get the hell out. That if they wanted to just sit in a meeting and not say anything, that we were a space where people who didn't get a lot of respect in other places got respect. That where people got treated like animals, or objects, or the enemy, were treated as people, as friends, as comrades."<sup>120</sup>

Anthony emphasized the meaning of being welcoming to street homeless folks and connected the practice of welcoming street homeless members to PTH's political work:

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<sup>119</sup> William Burnett, Interview by Lynn Lewis *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Nov. 16, 2018.

<sup>120</sup> Sam J. Miller, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Nov. 30, 2017.

It shows everything that we're doing is the right thing. It's just so important that when you have a homeless person with a shopping cart come out of their way because they heard about a meeting about homelessness, to come, pull up in front, and come inside, and say, "I heard about this meeting," and get refreshments, snacks, and sit through the meeting and listen, and ask questions. ....And when I saw that shopping cart, it just kind of like—it just did a miracle inside of me. Something just—the feeling, I just can't even—just such a feeling. Because I know what it's like having a shopping cart, picking up cans, storing it, your private property. ....And people don't see that as important, they just don't, 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. They don't even see the strength of just having one. They don't even see the resources, as a homeless person having a shopping cart to get more and more resources. They just do not see that.

I see it very clearly. It's so clear. So when I see a person coming towards the building and park their shopping cart and come in, it's an honor. This guy actually is coming to a meeting. That's an honor. That's an honor in itself. Because that's why we do what we do. That's why we hold meetings. That's why we can say we deal with the street homeless population. Without telling a white lie. We deal with the homeless. We deal with the street homeless population. We work with people in tents, that live in tents, on a daily basis. We work with homeless people that have to deal with the homeless outreach team disrespecting them and telling them they can't be here or be there, they got to move over there.<sup>121</sup>

The resourcefulness and hard work of street homeless folks is transferable to political action and political leadership. Welcoming them into PTH required an awareness of and willingness to accommodate their schedules and acceptance of the fact that they may have worked at a dirty job all day or night with nowhere to bathe:

We're looking at a person that has to at least start at eleven o'clock at night and finish at seven o'clock in the morning. Or either start at six o'clock in the afternoon and finish at one o'clock in the morning. So 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 it's still harassed. Treated as if they can't return the cans to a store. Or put a limit on the cans. So that's how important it is. So yeah, it's an honor and a privilege to have those folks come to

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<sup>121</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 22, 2018.

your meeting to talk about solutions, and how can this stop. They see a person with a shopping cart; just discount them like they're a bum. But we don't. I don't. I'm like, I get excited. It's crazy. I get excited. I actually got excited.<sup>122</sup>

As a physical and a political space led by homeless folks, PTH had to be welcoming to all homeless people. Welcoming suggested a respect for their strength and resourcefulness as survivors of trauma. It also encouraged solidarity among homeless folks who experienced homelessness differently: in shelter as well as sleeping on the streets. It acknowledged the basic human need for rest, safety and simply using the bathroom, as well as the need for love, solidarity, respect, acceptance and to be understood. The recognition of these fundamental truths about homeless folks combined with a political analysis of homelessness as the result of systemic oppression signaled to potential members that they would not be “blamed” for their homelessness; that they would be heard. Being welcoming allowed homeless New Yorkers to create their own physical and political space within PTH. It also created the conditions for PTH to incubate collective resistance.

### **Representation**

Representation was one of the essential markers of what PTH meant to its members, the New York City social justice movement and to the City as a whole. The individual connection to social transformation is in evidence through PTH's commitment to homeless members representing the organization and placing them in the leadership of struggle. Homeless members identified issues and generated a collective analysis of the causes and solutions to those issues in formal campaign meetings and actions as well as

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<sup>122</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 22, 2018.

through informal conversations. Collectively prioritizing those issues and converting them into solutions based organizing campaigns that built power for homeless folks was the goal of PTH's work. But it was up to PTH's homeless members to publicly represent and lead those struggles as a means to refute stigmatizing stereotypes about homeless people and to inspire other homeless folks to stand up for their rights. When Lewis first told Anthony that PTH was for him to speak to the government Anthony revealed that he didn't understand what that meant:

I remember Lewis telling me one time on the subway, after we named the organization already, he goes, "That's for you, Anthony. It's not for me. Picture the Homeless is for you. It's for you to talk to the conferences, for you to talk to government. It's for you to let them know about the homeless situation. This is new to me, the first time I ever experienced it." He goes, "So, Picture the Homeless is for you. That's you. That's for you. We're doing this together for you." And even I didn't understand it then.<sup>123</sup>

In the following passage Anthony reiterates the importance of homeless folks representing their interests to model resistance for other homeless people:

It's important for them to see homeless people doing the work. Not relying on experts to do the work for them. Not relying on service providers. Not relying on the system. But them changing, working to change the system. They were actually doing what Lou was talking about. Changing the system. Right? How it operates. Right? Changing the system right? And the systematic change was if you throw this stuff away you're going to replace it, you're going to pay them for the hardship that you're giving them. ...It's very important for homeless people to see other homeless folks doing that same work. Although—and even if they never did that work - maybe it would give us some more inspiration to keep up the work. I truly believe that. That it would be more crucial, more beneficial. Just like

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<sup>123</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.



when HON<sup>124</sup> came to Baltimore. They told me. They'd tell me about it all the time.<sup>125</sup>

Anthony emphasized the importance of homeless people seeing other homeless people doing the work to change the system. He also expressed the importance of homeless people working to change the system, and critiqued the common practice of advocates or organizers speaking for homeless folks:

So yeah, it's very important that if you're saying that you're working with homeless people but homeless people aren't working to change anything - but you're working to change things for homeless people, then I don't think that's a good scenario. I think it's more important for homeless people to change the way these policies are written. For themselves. Because they put the work into it. They're the ones that do it.<sup>126</sup>

Anthony described one of PTH's first actions: an early takeover of an abandoned building in coordination with the National Action Network and The Direct Action Network.<sup>127</sup> Lewis's organizing practice, which emphasized the need for homeless folks to represent PTH and to teach others about the realities of homelessness, became part of PTH's practice and political identity. Through PTH, homeless New Yorkers have created the space for homeless leadership in the social justice movement:

The Martin Luther King Day of Action—was that some squatters--and I forget the guy's name, but he was the one in the building, occupying the abandoned

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<sup>124</sup> HON is a homeless led committee of United Workers in Baltimore. They came to visit PTH's office in the Bronx to learn about PTH's vacant property documentation and organizing work around Community Land Trusts.

<sup>125</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 22, 2018.

<sup>126</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 22, 2018.

<sup>127</sup> The Direct Action Network is an alliance of anti-corporate, anti-authoritarian and anarchist affinity groups. The New York City chapter held meetings in CHARAS during the same period as PTH and members of both groups began working together. Brooke Lehman, a co-founder of DAN in NYC remains a supporter of PTH.

property, bringing it to light with the media there, to talk about abandoned properties, and that we're doing this on Martin Luther King's birthday to show that we are going to take over this building, and dedicate it to Martin Luther King. And so, we're outside. They're inside. They already planned to be inside, and I think they had Teresa Ballard involved. It was a whole organized thing, and with the Lower East Side, and D.A.N. [Direct Action Network], and through other folks. So, they had it all chained up and everything in the building, and, to hold it down, and then me and Lewis were outside, Picture the Homeless. So I'm standing outside, and he goes—so he starts bringing the media to me—like, “You've got to talk to him, him. See that guy there? You've got to talk to him. Talk to him.” “Well, who is he?” He said, “Well he's with Picture the Homeless. He's one of the guys that you need to talk to. You need to hear from him.” And I talked about the significance of abandoned property, and about homelessness, and about how we need housing, right? And people saw me talking. So it made several channels that evening, and so the guys at Bellevue saw me talking on TV. They saw me, and it wasn't the first time; they saw me several times after that.<sup>128</sup>

The experience of homelessness is not generic. Some folks sleep on subways, others stay in shelters, some folks move between the two. Some folks have children with them in the shelter system and others do not. Lewis differentiates between Anthony's long experiences of being homeless from his own more limited experience. Even as he affirms for Anthony that they are doing this together, he assigns himself a supporting role to Anthony. Although Lewis was also homeless, his role was as an organizer. Lewis respected the fact that Anthony had expertise that he did not but Lewis also knew that Anthony needed support initially to assert his expertise and leadership. PTH created and maintained strict protocols<sup>129</sup> around homeless representation to force staff and members to adopt it. The horizontal distribution of power at PTH resulted in members and staff at

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<sup>128</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

<sup>129</sup> These protocols prohibited staff from speaking to the media except when providing background information. This often resulted in PTH having to support with preparation or by physically accompanying them and having more than one media spokesperson in case one wasn't available during an event or for an interview.

PTH practicing the same type of support and agitation that Anthony described Lewis using with him. PTH's aspirations for horizontal power required that homeless people impacted by specific aspects of homelessness represented those specific issues. This pushed us to get to know one another well, and it nurtured a deep bench of members who could represent a range of issues with the media, with stakeholders, or in public events. Sam J. Miller was PTH's first housing organizer. Sam's hiring took us from two staff (myself and Tyeshia Samuels) to three. Sam was the first staffer hired who had not experienced homelessness. In the following excerpt Sam tells the story of his first day working at PTH, which was also the day before a major action at the homeless families' intake center, the Emergency Assistance Unit (EAU):

I remember there was a call that came in, we were doing press calls, and somebody was like "Oh sure we'll do an interview. Who's there?" Right? I was like, "OK let me put Tyletha on", not knowing that Picture the Homeless had an organizational value that the members are the ones who speak to the media. And so you were like, "No, that's not going to be Tyletha, get the person's number and we'll call them. We'll get a member to do the interview and we'll call them back." I was like, "But they're on the phone now, what if when I call back there they've moved on? How long will it take to get, you know, whatever." So coming up against the sort of awesome, but unusual methodology, that Picture the Homeless had for organizing. My second day was the action and seeing how, [pauses] I had never seen anything like it. People were so angry and so upset about the conditions that they were in. I've never seen people mobilize like that. I had never seen so many people so angry and so powerful and compelling and how they talked about it. So you know, it was a ton of work, and it was kind of like horrifying and terrifying and stressful, but then it was this amazing action.<sup>130</sup>

When advocacy groups and staff of grass roots organizations speak for homeless folks it not only silences them. It reinforces the stigmatizing misperception that homeless people can't speak for themselves. This is a primary reason why the history of PTH is being told

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<sup>130</sup> Sam J. Miller, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Dec. 2, 2017.

through centering oral history interviews of its members. The practice for many organizations that do offer homeless people a platform to speak is to limit their remarks to telling their story of how they became homeless and how difficult their lives are. Policy solutions are left up to the advocates to tell. Significant resources were dedicated to the work of homeless members representing themselves and PTH effectively. This included creating the resources for members to conduct research, to write their thoughts down, to self-critique and to receive constructive feedback from other members and staff. In order for members to speak in public confidently, sometimes a staff person would spend the night in the office with them, or members might go home with staff or another member who had obtained housing in order to get a good night's sleep. Jean Rice, for several years, had a dresser drawer with clean clothes in my apartment when I was the civil rights organizer, and spent many nights with me and my family. Jean and Sam J. Miller, both narrators of this project, developed a training for members on public speaking that they co-facilitated. When new members took on the role of publicly representing PTH, or when an older member began doing so, they were celebrated. Copies of newspapers articles were made for example, and passed around so that all members could see a fellow member represent the group. PTH developed innovations such as video recording members practicing a speech or comments so that they could see themselves and prepare accordingly.

Nikita Price (2006 to present) joined PTH as a member while staying in a family shelter as a single father with his teenage daughter on the Upper West Side. Nikita described when he first realized the importance of representation. He recounted

explaining to homeless members of PTH the significance of them getting the attention of decision-makers that hold the power to make the changes that PTH is fighting for:

You're the one that has to get their attention and not the people that are getting a paycheck because you're the one that's living this. And once you're able to articulate that to them, you do a couple of things. You've identified the problem, you've offered solutions, and you push back against the myth that homeless people are pretty much worthless. You show them that yeah, you have the same worth as anyone else. You have the same intelligence than a lot of cases. Your present situation does not define who you are. It defines the system and what you're caught up in right now. If you're looking to change that here are viable solutions that someone who you deem not intelligent enough, not having the wherewithal, not having the balls to tell you you're wrong, this is what you need to be doing. This is what we have available. Stop lying to people.<sup>131</sup>

Sam J. Miller, a long time organizer at PTH described PTH's organizing culture as rooted in listening as an expression of being welcoming. His description is applicable to the essential elements of this oral history research project and to community organizing:

I think that when we're at our best as organizers, as staff, at Picture the Homeless, we are really listening to people. We are really building the kind of deep relationships that will enable them to be fully honest with us and we're pushing each other, right? We're all sort of moving together outside of our comfort zones in ways that will help create change and really start to address power. So there's a love. There's a sort of mutual accountability that helps us do things that we're not comfortable with.<sup>132</sup>

Organizers supported community members to take action or engage with others. Organizers at PTH pushed members beyond their comfort zone and were transparent about our willingness to move beyond our own. Even as organizers pushed, and pressured, members to come to meetings and to take action, it was necessary to respect the hardship that community members were experiencing in order to do so. It was a

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<sup>131</sup> Nikita Price, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Dec. 2, 2017.

<sup>132</sup> Sam J. Miller, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Nov. 30, 2017.

shared responsibility to create possibilities for their participation and risk taking. Homelessness takes an immeasurable emotional and physical toll on folks, and ending homelessness is among the things that folks dream of. Converting those dreams into possibility is why homeless folks engaged with PTH.

It isn't automatic for people who have been silenced to suddenly find voice and directly confront their oppressors, even when invited to do so. For homeless New Yorkers who are stigmatized in all their intersectionality and who must navigate systems established to control and contain them, the offer by PTH to speak for themselves and the organization is a process; just as it was work for Lewis to convince Anthony to go with him to WBAI. These processes are replicated with each new PTH member. Speaking out and becoming visible carried the same risk that Lewis and Anthony faced when they were forced to leave Bellevue Men's Shelter. Yet there were always members of PTH who were willing to take those risks. As a result, PTH shifted media narratives about homeless people and homelessness by embodying counter narratives through representation. Although many media venues continued to represent homelessness in a negative manner PTH became a resource for many journalists. Without PTH's homeless members representing PTH, the hundreds of newspaper articles, radio and television interviews that *have* featured homeless New Yorkers representing solutions to homelessness would never have happened. Representation isn't limited to media work. Without homeless New Yorkers representing their own interests, most housed New Yorkers wouldn't be aware of those issues or their impact on people's lives. Johanna Miller, an attorney with the New York Civil Liberties Union she shared with me that she

didn't think that the selective enforcement of Quality of Life violations was an important issue until she met Jean Rice. I asked her to draft the following fundraising appeal several years ago:

I first encountered PTH about 5 years ago, when they approached NYCLU with the seeds of a campaign to eliminate unnecessary arrests for the lowest-level infractions-- things like having an open container, public urination, and "disorderly conduct" (a catchall statute that is used by the police to lock up people they find annoying). I was thrilled to work with them on drafting the bill, and they helped me understand our broken system-- where people (especially people experiencing homelessness) can spend a night in jail for putting their feet on a subway seat. The members had such power and such clarity of purpose; they changed my entire conception of who the homeless in New York City are. Today, I'm proud to stand side-by-side with them on many important legislative issues, including the Ending Unnecessary Arrests Act, which we are still working to enact into law. It's not an exaggeration to say I see my City through new eyes because of the work of Picture the Homeless. I hope you will join me in supporting their cause.<sup>133</sup>

Social transformation demands that individuals become agents of that social transformation and inform its outcome. Johanna Miller described the power of homeless self-representation on her own thinking and reflects the extent to which representation is key to educate the public about issues that they would otherwise never be aware of. Another example of the power of homeless self-representation was illustrated during an early East Harlem/El Barrio Community Land Trust meeting where the difficulty of obtaining financing for housing for the very poor arose. There were housing developers and community based organizations in the room and everyone agreed that housing for poor and homeless people was important but that it was a "heavy lift" and not feasible. Arvernetta Henry, a narrator for this Project, stood up and berated those present, stating something along the lines of "will you all just erase us from this Community Land Trust

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<sup>133</sup> <https://picturethehomeless2016.causevox.com/johanna-miller>

work because it is too hard to find the money when it's my sweat and labor that have helped to create it? We who are homeless have no choice but to fight for the money and to make the City do what is right!"

PTH's political analysis was based on the premise that homeless New Yorkers were the most qualified to analyze and to represent their own conditions, to identify solutions to their problems and to lead the fight to make those solutions reality. PTH's organizing practice stemmed from the acknowledgement of the power of homeless leadership. Members of PTH are now among the leadership in movements working towards social justice. PTH has shifted the ways in which people literally *picture* the homeless because members represented themselves and the organization. There was never a shortage of ideas in the PTH office. Early on we came across a quote by Peter Marcuse that we copied onto a giant poster board, hanging it on the office wall: "Homelessness exists not because the system is failing to work as it should, but because the system is working as it must."<sup>134</sup> We made fast friends with some of the most radical intellectual critics of capitalism. Through PTH, homeless folks moved from the streets to the halls of academia, to meetings and hang outs with former Black Panthers and Young Lords, squatters, community organizers, faith leaders, and an array of brilliant cultural workers. PTH was successful at ensuring that homeless New Yorkers spoke for themselves and for PTH. Part of the process of preparing and supporting members to confidently represent PTH required the transmission of collective memory and the political identity of the group. Representation reinforced the inherited and collective

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<sup>134</sup> Peter Marcuse, "Neutralizing Homelessness," *Socialist Review* 88, no.1 (1988): 93.



memories of PTH among a wide pool of members. The work of ensuring that some of the most marginalized and stigmatized New Yorkers were cast in the role of expert and spokesperson was one of the most powerful ways PTH's communicated its mission.

### **Education**

Homeless New Yorkers were welcomed into PTH through the complex organizing practice of listening to individual perspectives, identifying common themes, creating spaces for collective analysis and community building, and supporting members to represent the collective and not only their individual opinions. This required the creation of educational opportunities to educate PTH members and staff as well as educational opportunities designed to educate the political allies and the general public. Education infused all aspects of PTH's work because every member was perceived as having something to learn as well as something teach the rest of the group. This practice began with Lewis and Anthony:

So Lewis, he knew, he understood starting an organization, organizing an organization, and with his skills with outreach and media, and bringing and taking your story, just like with [Michael] Stewart Story, like with the people that were affected by the killings, the Amadou Diallos, and the Patrick Dorismonds.<sup>135</sup> Well, that's the kind of stuff that Lou was doing with the National Action Network.<sup>136</sup>

Anthony also taught Lewis. He helped orient Lewis to a world of resourcefulness and survival and taught him lessons about organizing homeless folks through his participation. Lewis was able to move Anthony to take action to change systems that

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<sup>135</sup> Michael Stewart, Amadou Diallo and Patrick Dorismond were each murdered by the NYPD.

<sup>136</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

Anthony previously believed were immutable because he took the time to learn what was important to Anthony and to assist him. Anthony was willing to learn from Lewis because they had established trust. In our discussions of the importance of education at PTH, Marcus Moore mentioned the word “teachable” several times in his second interview. I asked him to define what that meant for him:

That’s very important. A lot of us are not teachable, because we don’t want to learn. We don’t want to listen. We are not teachable, because we do not want to listen, because we think we know it all. Got to be humble, and listen, and let somebody teach you. Let somebody teach you. They want to teach you something. It might lead to a good relationship. Let them teach you. It doesn’t matter if they’re a boy, a girl, a man, or a woman. Let them teach you something. Stop acting like you know it all. Even if you do know, let them teach you.<sup>137</sup>

Marcus described the potential for anyone to learn if they are prepared to be “teachable.” He placed the responsibility for education on both the member as well as on PTH. Anthony described the ways in which homeless folks educate one another through dialogue:

It’s homeless people talking to homeless people. It’s like the sisters from Sister Place [phonetic]. They see a guy with a shopping cart and they say to him, “Hey, you okay today? How you doing? They talk about homeless issues every Friday down there at that church.” Guy might say, “Where? What church?” He said, “They have coffee, refreshments down there every Friday morning at ten o’clock. At First and Third.” “Mm. What do they talk about?” “Oh, you know, shelters, programs, housing.” “Oh, okay. Maybe I’ll check it out.” “Yeah. Maybe you should. Maybe you can give some input. Maybe you can tell us what’s going on on the street.” Because we don’t know everything, they’re the ones that know. They’re the ones that know about the violence. [laughs] Because they’re in the middle of it. So yeah. That’s what it means to me. It means them educating us and us educating them.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Marcus Moore, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 11, 2018.

<sup>138</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 22, 2018.

When Anthony learned of Mayor Bloomberg attempting to end the New York City recycling program in 2001, he reached out to canners<sup>139</sup> around Judson Memorial Church. Anthony approached canner Warren Prince as someone with expertise – not only about how to pick up cans, but about the public policies related to canning. Anthony’s approach signaled respect. He invited Prince to teach him about the law and public policies regarding canning, and invited him to take action. Prince soon joined PTH and a month later, brought his cousin Jean Rice to his first PTH meeting. Prince became the first chairman of the board of directors of PTH two years later and Jean became PTH’s founding board secretary:

So I see this guy in the trash can. I say, “Hey, man. I see you’re a canner.” I said, “What do you think about the Bloomberg administration taking your can away, your nickel away?” He goes, “Well, he can’t do that.” I said, “Well, I just heard him on the radio talk about doing that.” He goes, “Well, that’s a State thing.” Then 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.” I said, “You can come down if you want now and have a cup of coffee.” And he came down, and we started talking. He says, “I’m probably not the one you should be talking to. You should be talking to my cousin.” And he says, “The next time I see him, I’ll tell him that you and I talked.” And every time I saw him I would ask him. I said, “What about your cousin?” “Oh, I told him, but he’s not really serious about it.” I said, “Well, tell him he should come down and meet with us. And you should come too.” He goes, “Well, I already came but that’s the kind of stuff my cousin is into.” I said, “Oh, okay.” Finally they both came on a Wednesday night.<sup>140</sup>

PTH staff were expected to be teachable through deep listening. Nikita Price joined PTH as a member and was hired as a staff organizer after completing PTH’s first organizer

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<sup>139</sup> A canner is someone who collects bottles and cans for their 5 cent deposit. Among the PTH’s Canners’s Campaign many achievements was the launching of Sure We Can, a canners cooperative located in Brooklyn, NY.

<sup>140</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

trainee cohort.<sup>141</sup> Unlike Anthony, Nikita had never been street homeless but he described how he learned to appreciate street homeless folks' survival tactics, which allowed him to become an effective civil rights organizer:

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 almost nothing other than the elements and they thrive in it.<sup>142</sup>

Cardboard, milk crates and shopping carts have meaning for street homeless folks that they may not have for other sectors of the population. Nikita learned those meanings by working as the civil rights organizer. Being welcoming creates the possibilities for dialogue. Through dialogue, an organizer is able to actually learn new words, or new meanings, signaling respect. The different ways that we engage with another impact the type of information that is generated. "The point here is that different forms of exchange generate different genres of discourse."<sup>143</sup> Similar to Portelli's description of thick dialogue,<sup>144</sup> I refer to deep listening throughout this thesis.<sup>145</sup> Being welcoming means making the effort to engage in deep listening in order to learn what is important and relevant to each person. Nikita explained the importance of decoding language and gave the example of applying those lessons during outreach:

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<sup>141</sup> The PTH Homeless Organizing Academy was created in 2006 to train PTH leaders to become community organizers so that PTH could hire staff from the membership as well as to become more effective leaders and to create pathways to joining the board of directors.

<sup>142</sup> Nikita Price, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Dec. 2, 2017.

<sup>143</sup> Portelli, "Oral History as Genre," 11.

<sup>144</sup> Portelli, "Oral History as Genre," 11.

<sup>145</sup> Portelli, "Oral History as Genre," 11.

I can't go to homeless people that are living in the park and talk to them about how bad it is, and how shitty the food is in a shelter. You just don't do that. It makes no sense. It's like “*get the fuck away from me. I'm digging in the garbage or begging outside of a restaurant. I don't know what that means. You are getting a meal.*” I think I always had to be respectful of whatever the situation was.<sup>146</sup>

Education at PTH was based on the analysis that the expertise of homeless people is not limited to homelessness as an isolated condition from poverty, racism, gentrification, misogyny, and other forms of inequality. Marcus described how this was modelled for him by PTH members at his first civil rights campaign meeting, because of the way the meeting itself was run but also what was discussed in the meeting. This harkens back to Anthony's emphasis on the importance of homeless folks seeing other homeless folks engaged in resistance work:

So two o'clock came and I got a chance to sit in on this meeting. I'll never forget it. I'll never forget it. This meeting was a bunch of homeless and formerly homeless people. A lot of them had pens, pads [he describes this with obvious relish]. They were taking notes! And these people, when they talk, I was like where did they learn all this from!? I saw white men. I saw black men. I saw all types of racial groups in that room. Men, women, and right away I took to it and I just, you know, it just made me want to fall back and take notes internally. Because now I have left, years ago, my sociology class in college in New Jersey, where I never really finished, but I was now getting the life experience on dealing with people and where they come from. So I didn't, I was getting another type of lessons that I didn't, I'm not sure I was ready for!<sup>147</sup>

Another lessons learned by PTH staff from its membership was the importance of having set meeting schedules for organizing campaign meetings. Set meeting schedules designed around soup kitchen schedules and shelter curfews signaled respect and helped

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<sup>146</sup> Interview by author, with Nikita Price, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Dec. 2, 2017.

<sup>147</sup> Marcus Moore, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Nov. 13, 2017.

to create the conditions for homeless folks' ability to collectively analyze their circumstances and identify issues and engage in plans to carry out collective resistance:

The one thing that was constant was the meeting schedules, which people—those were the days when you saw the most people. So Tuesdays was civil rights and Thursdays was a housing meeting, you know? So that's when you saw the people really come in. So that idea of if you're angry about it, come on this day if you're about this, and come on this day if you're about that really worked. So you started to see because those are the days that the people were in the office. Okay, I've got to go to this meeting because it's this day.<sup>148</sup>

Representation, welcoming, resistance, leadership and education are all elements present in Marcus's first encounter with PTH. He saw (and heard) other homeless folks be knowledgeable about issues that mattered to him. Seeing others in that position welcomed him into PTH by teaching him that he could also learn:

By the end of that meeting, I was so high on these people and the stuff that they knew, it just infatuated me to want to come to the meeting on Thursday. ....I felt very comfortable you know on Thursdays talking about housing issues, and why the unbalance, and why so much vacancies is going on. It was like night school to me. I found something that I can be part of and be learning at the same time.<sup>149</sup>

Marcus described learning survival tactics from other homeless folks in informal settings:

Once I saw how the community was sustaining themselves, I learned how to get on the bandwagon. I learned what they learned. There's no egos. I stayed to the point where I was teachable, where people didn't mind taking me with them and going places to get resources. I really didn't ask much questions. I really learned how to be a follower, to the point that this is what I must do to get this. This is what I must do to—well, if I say this, then I will be able to do this. If I act this way, then I know that they'll let me stay here and get that. I learned how to maintain my hygiene. I learned how to use—I should say, without spending money, I learned how to use clothes to help me to maintain.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Rob Robinson, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, May 8, 2018.

<sup>149</sup> Marcus Moore, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Nov. 13, 2017.

<sup>150</sup> Marcus Moore, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 11, 2018.

Marcus utilized his homelessness as a site of knowledge production and viewed other homeless people as his teachers. He used the term “homeless geniuses” in his interview and said that “I think the lessons learned while you’re struggling are able to enrich your spirit.”<sup>151</sup> He has evolved into a poet and satirist and goes by the name “The Homeless Poet.” He no longer considers himself homeless because he is homesteading a formerly vacant house in the Rockaways. Marcus’s respect for homeless resilience and resourcefulness as a source of material for his artwork, as well as his desire to maintain social relationships, and to remain legitimate in the eyes of his homeless networks, drive his efforts to remain connected to homeless folks:

But I have to continue to stay connected to the people. That's what I try to do a lot of times, because sometimes when I go to different soup kitchens to eat, it's not that I really be knocked out hungry or starving. It's just that a lot of times I go because I want to see who's in there, who you know, sometimes what I want to go just for is the company. You know just to kick it with certain people I haven't seen in a long time. So these things keep me connected. That I must stay connected. Sometimes I want to know what's happening, what's happening on the scene so I can write new material, so I can continue to keep being that dude or that individual, that people can say “you know what? He's right. This is what's happening.”

And these are the things that I know that mainstream media or all of these critics are not too much interested in talking about or really bringing to the light because in this capitalist system if it's not really about money, or stocks and 401 K's, why we go talk about some some damn homeless folks, you know what I'm saying? What do they contribute to? That's where I come in at, because I get a chance to continue to build my platform. I can, I get it, I get a chance to continue to be around different walks and different artists, and people and professors who are not connected anymore. So I don't think I can be bought, but at the same time my audience, and my base, is really those grassroots people who are, who continue to fight for the issues, for our brothers and sisters who can't fight for themselves. These are the, that I must continue to stay connected and still be able to show people respect, so I can continue to have respect, and continue to be someone that

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<sup>151</sup> Marcus Moore, Interview by Lynn Lewis, Jan. 11, 2018.

people don't mind, you know, sitting down talking about this and say "Marcus you know this is what it is." You know, people share deep conversations with me and give me ideas to talk about stuff and look at stuff from a different perspective.<sup>152</sup>

Arvernetta Henry is a retired New York City school teacher had has been in the shelter system for ten years. We learned that she sought respite at PTH because she was having a difficult time with HRA caseworkers and shelter staff. It was the physical space and how she was treated by staff and members that created the conditions for her to learn both survival and political skills at PTH:

I met Lynn Lewis [smiles] and she was like, "Oh, you need to speak up. You need to learn how to empower yourself because we can't get you housing." I said "But you're Picture the Homeless!" She said "No, we empower you, we teach you. We show you how to speak, and we show you how to speak to the government." I said, "Oh wow, I got money, I'm just running short." Nobody was telling me about any resources that I can go to to get extra help. I just started working more closely with the organization. I learned that there were ways to get housing, but there were certain criteria. Because I had a background in teaching and education I just did not fit in. I felt that it was so unfair. I wasn't a senior citizen, and I wasn't mentally ill, and I didn't have a handicap. My handicap was lack of housing.<sup>153</sup>

Not long afterward Arvernetta began bringing her skills as a teacher into PTH:

Education is very important to me. I see it as a way of survival. You don't always have to be in an institution of education, a school building. You can learn anywhere when you want to better yourself, improve your life...And so I went to people at Picture the Homeless, and I started saying, "I can teach, I can help people."<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Marcus Moore, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Nov.13, 2017.

<sup>153</sup> Arvernetta Henry, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Sept. 28, 2017.

<sup>154</sup> Arvernetta Henry, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Sept. 28, 2017.



Jean Rice has been a civil rights leader with PTH since 2001 and was one of the people with “pens and pads” that Marcus described earlier. Jean Rice was street homeless on and off for approximately 30 years. The excerpt below beautifully illustrates the type of knowledge - and the ability to articulate that knowledge - that impressed Marcus at his first civil rights campaign meeting. It also illustrates the connection between representation and education. Jean described the lack of awareness among “liberal allies” about broken windows policing. He, as a black, street homeless canner and directly impacted by these practices was effective in representing PTH in educating political allies:

One of the main [pauses] impediments that Picture the Homeless had when we tried to secure public space for our unhoused sisters and brothers who were New York City citizens was this broken windows policing concept. I mean, even well-intentioned so-called liberal allies, they seem to think that broken windows operated in the common good, and it was OK. Picture the Homeless, along with a few other allies, were quick to point out that when you start a police state, you always start imposing these draconian policies against the people at the bottom of the socio- economic strata. I mean the Jews in Germany is a good example. First, the vagabonds and the hobos, then the intellectuals, and so on, and so on. And then, as the poem goes, “When they came for me there was nobody to help me.”<sup>155</sup> So, in America, and in New York City in particular, the homeless! People that fell between the cracks, I mean, “Who cares if their civil liberties are transgressed upon? Who cares if we put this draconian measure before the City Council? As long as it's directed at these particular people....As long as you take this draconian law and you only do it to homeless New Yorkers, and I don't see the impact and I don't have to deal with the impact, and you keep them from blocking up my sidewalk, and when I come from work I don't have to see them homeless, dirty people. I don't have to smell them. As long as you do that, I don't care how you do it! Take away all their civil liberties. I don't care! As long as it's them and not me.” But, I guess these people spend too much time going to and from work to read world history and American history because no elite group, no power mongering dictator stops with one group. It always starts with the group

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<sup>155</sup> Jean Rice often cites this poem, *First They Came For The Jews* by Martin Niemöller.

that's least popular. He always uses sensationalism and propaganda and the media to demonize these people first. Demonization comes before criminalization. But after demonization and criminalization comes institutionalization.<sup>156</sup>

PTH opened doors for homeless folks to enter spaces where they otherwise would have been excluded or even thrown out of and placed its members in the position to open those doors to invite and to teach others:

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 how Picture the Homeless handled it. How they were able to get their government to listen to them. I'm talking about countries like South Africa, Germany, and England. Different places coming to our country, coming to our organization and interviewing us. Asking questions and we are able to impart that wisdom and knowledge that we learned from the leaders at Picture the Homeless!<sup>157</sup>

One of the impediments to organizing is internalized oppression. Internalized oppression prohibits us from seeing ourselves as the powerful leaders we are and can be. It also leads us to see others in our same circumstances through stigmatized lenses. Homeless folks aren't immune to anti-homeless stigma. To offset internalized oppression PTH created an organizational structure that upended who has power and who is perceived as valuable. It was a process that occurred through action, and not solely through political education workshops. Reflecting back on Anthony's emphasis on the importance for homeless folks to see other homeless folks leading and representing PTH, collective resistance created opportunities to re-educate ourselves and one another. Rob Robinson described his process with un-learning anti-homeless stigma:

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<sup>156</sup> Jean Rice, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Oct.20, 2017.

<sup>157</sup> Arvernetta Henry, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Sept. 28, 2017.

I don't believe in a lot of things that I was taught, and as I connected the dots through my own lived experiences and the history of my family, I've been able to create another narrative, a real - I like to frame it - a real narrative of what really happened versus what I'm forced into. And some of that—and I'll be honest and I hate to say this—this comes from family, too, like if your family absorbs narratives. I can remember going down the street as a kid with my dad and there's a man asking for a quarter. You know back in the day, it wasn't a dollar. Today, it's a dollar but asking for a quarter. You say, "Dad, give me a quarter. I'm going to give it to the man." "He's a bum. He doesn't want to work."<sup>158</sup>

Rob continued, describing how his experience of being homeless taught him to question his learned views of homeless people and led to his own evolution as a social justice leader:

So when I say transformation, that—those two and a half years on the streets of Miami and then ten months in New York City's homeless shelter changed me. I'm a different person than I was prior to that. I think that experience and then spending ten months in a New York City shelter and watching—first in Miami, watching the people who were there and what they went through, and then watching the people in the shelter who was getting housed and who wasn't, transformed the way I look at the world. And when I use that word transformation, I often say there were a lot of things I learned about this issue of homelessness that I had to unlearn. But for me, I started to look in the mirror and said, "Well, wait a minute. I worked thirty years before I went homeless. I have a college degree, so working and education aren't the issues. Never diagnosed with a chemical addition or an alcohol problem and I don't have mental illness."<sup>159</sup>

Rob's emphasis on self-representation as a strategy to defeat stereotypes through story telling is closely linked to the PTH mission and this oral history project. Below he also includes it as a means to end our complicity in internalizing oppressive narratives:

This is a country and a world where we absorb narratives and we live with them. Some of us directly affected by those narratives still absorb them, right, so we're somewhat complicit in our own problems for absorbing that narrative. I don't

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<sup>158</sup> Rob Robinson, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, May 8, 2018.

<sup>159</sup> Rob Robinson, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, May 8, 2018.

think anybody else should paint a narrative for us. You should be able to tell that story and tell it to those who are behind you so that maybe whatever story you share with them prevents them from going down the same paths, or the same lines, or whatever happened to you from happening to them. I think that's so important in this work. So that's the transformation.<sup>160</sup>

Jean Rice described how taking action with others who they may previously have considered unworthy is a powerful tool to dismantle internalized oppression. Jean Rice was a founder of the PTH canner campaign which fought for the rights of people who pick up bottles and cans for their 5 cent deposit:

State Attorney General, Eliot Spitzer delegated two people from his staff to come to our humble office on 116th St., right over Cuchifritos and meet with Picture the Homeless delegation! And 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, the 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 officer in the State of New York to send two members of his staff to talk to us about their dilemma around recycling containers. Blew my mind! But, I said if we got that much power over this issue we can use that power in other issues. That was a learning experience.<sup>161</sup>

Jean's negative perception of other homeless canners was proven wrong through PTH's organizing methodology and is directly connected to education through representation and collective resistance. Even though Jean helped develop this methodology and had seen it in action from when he joined PTH in 2001, the direct experience of gathering canners together to address representatives of the Attorney General's office revealed to him that he still had to address vestiges of his own internalized oppression. Jean recounted one of his proudest moments for me during his third interview. Although Jean

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<sup>160</sup> Rob Robinson, Interview by Lynn Lewis, May 8, 2018.

<sup>161</sup> Jean Rice, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Oct. 13, 2017.

has represented PTH on countless panels in academic and faith based institutions, has testified to the New York City Council and spoken at rallies to audiences in the hundreds, it means a lot to him to be respected for both his academic knowledge and that gained from lived experience as a homeless person. The following connects the themes of representation, education and leadership and shows the importance of having PTH resources to assist him in his research process:

That's where I met this distinguished professor from Columbia, Professor Harcourt, who had already shared my belief that broken windows policing was a hoax, a bill of goods being sold to the public. So his book, *Illusion of Order*, and he was on that panel with me! When I saw his bio, I said to myself, "Well I think my group, and my director and I, had gotten into water over my damn head this time." [smiles] The place was packed too. Back to preparation, I did research, background research. I used the facilities at Picture the Homeless. I used our computers, our ability to go to Google. I found out the origins of broken windows policing, *Atlantic Monthly* magazine, again, my group at Picture the Homeless helped me. I didn't prepare by myself. So I was able to get a copy of that *Atlantic* magazine article. I was able to determine who the co-authors were. I did a background check on both of them; part of my preparation. Then, I read that *Atlantic Monthly* magazine article almost continuously. I'd wake up and read it in the morning. I read it so much until part of it was retained in my subconscious. ...The part that I remember most vividly, was that in the article Kelling and them admit that there will be civil liberty abuses! But that they could convince the public that the civil liberty abuses were necessary to make the community at large safe! That's the premise of broken windows policing. You don't have to read through all the pages in that magazine article, but if you want to get to, if you want to get to the bottom line, Kelling, the Manhattan Institute, Rudolph Giuliani, all the advocates of broken windows policing, are asking the community at large to accept unconstitutional treatment of a small segment, so that the rest of the community can be saved. It saddens me to see how effective that is. Charlie Rangel has bought into that. The silent majority that backed the Rockefeller Drug Laws. Afro American bourgeois that E. Franklin Frazier talked about, that Franz Fanon talked about! They're more detrimental than Heather MacDonald and them!

So, I was really, really gratified and honored, after that panel on broken windows Professor Harcourt sent me a copy of his book and took the time to inscribe it and told me, layman Jean Rice, Picture the Homeless board member, "*that I inspire him!*" That book, that's motivation money can't buy, that book is priceless to me

and to my organization. Then later on, I meet people that were in the audience, or people that had watched it and they was telling me how compelling that my presentation was. In preparing - I'll stop where we started. In preparing, I always try not to be redundant and repetitious. I always want to know who's going to be on the panel with me. I want to know what order is my speaking. If I'm first, I can break the ice. If I'm last, then I can sum up and issue a challenge for next steps; solutions. So a lot depends on, a lot of your presentation to me, depends on what the topic is, who the audience is, and who are your fellow [pauses] sisters and brothers on the panel. What key point do they hit? What did they miss that's key, from your perspective representing undomiciled citizens. For instance, stereotyping, now someone might be a victim of stereotyping because of their gender preference, their sexual orientation. Someone else might be stereotyped because they appear to be Asian or Arabic. I might be stereotyped because I appear to be undomiciled. Still, in our America, in our New York City, selective enforcement, profiling is wrong. Judge Harlan said, in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, our Constitution knows no caste, no color line. We are all equal before the law. So if you don't respect Jean Rice, you don't respect *Picture the Homeless*, you need to respect the great dissenter Justice Harlan and remember that we're all equal before the law.<sup>162</sup>

Jean wouldn't have been known to the conference conveners without PTH. Without PTH's organizing methodology - that is rooted in respect for homeless people's knowledge but also works to create the conditions where members and staff can continue to learn and teach one another through collective analysis and collective resistance - Jean Rice wouldn't have been offered a forum to lecture seated next to a Columbia University Professor.

### **Individual and Collective Resistance**

Individual homeless New Yorkers carry out acts of individual resistance as a fact of daily life. Arvernetta refused to provide information to a caseworker because she felt it was "none of her business. Marcus Moore described his resistance to what he observed was

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<sup>162</sup> Jean Rice, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Oct. 20, 2017.

an unhealthy strategy by some homeless men in the Wards Island shelter to get a housing voucher:

It just got to the point where people were doing things desperately, like, taking pills just to get housing fast. Because you take some kind of pills and the doctor, you know could provide some kind of description to make it out that you need some extra attention then you get your place faster. To this day I, you know, that's not talked about enough. But I'll never forget when fellows was trying to get me to take this pill so I can get my housing faster. And I came into the shelter system as healthy dude and I plan on leaving, and I left as a healthy individual in my right state of mind.<sup>163</sup>

Similar to Lewis Haggins and several narrators of this project, DeBoRah had organizing skills prior to becoming homeless. Once homeless, she had to gather the strength to use them to organize other homeless women to stop an abusive shelter staff person. DeBoRah brought political skills that she had learned as a youth to resist the injustice impacting her and other homeless women in the Lexington Avenue shelter:

Yeah, I came with skills, organizing, in the Crown Heights that I grew up, and even I can say on my mother's side, I have a statement that either you're going to be part of the problem, or part of the solution...Instead of sitting around saying *oh this is wrong, that's wrong*. Do something about it!<sup>164</sup>

In DeBoRah's story we hear that other homeless women in the shelter also brought similar skills in their efforts to stand up to resist abusive shelter conditions:

I said "Whoa, we need to do something about that because this woman can't be doing that. She almost be having you have a heart attack!" It was really, you know, really frightful. I told them, I said "Yes, let's write and tell them that she's with this bullhorn." *Rise and Shine*. Somebody said, "Let's take a picture of it. Somebody sneak something" And I said, "Let's take a picture and send to them." That was one of the beginnings of some stuff that I did in there. She got written

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<sup>163</sup> Marcus Moore, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Nov. 13, 2018.

<sup>164</sup> DeBoRah Dickerson, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Oct. 27, 2017.

up but she didn't know [laughing] that I got a lot of people because I know what it means to have petitions.<sup>165</sup>

DeBoRah described becoming educated about the issue of warehoused apartments and connecting that issue to ending homelessness through her participation in the PTH housing campaign's vacant property count. In DeBoRah's interview, as in each of the others for this Phase of the project, we are able to trace the connection between collective resistance and education:

One thing, when we did the count, that made it so important. I was like in another world, I didn't realize, and when the actuality of us going out and counting it made it so real. I thought, what about those people, we can do something with these places. I didn't mind doing that. We were counting vacant buildings and properties. We were having a meeting one night and I got so fired up and mad. I said anger can be constructive and destructive. I'm going to talk about the constructive part of anger. At 116th St. between Lexington and 1st if I'm not mistaken, if my memory corrects me because I don't remember everything [we both laugh], we had some buildings and these buildings had commercial on the bottom and apartment buildings on the top. Lexington Avenue from 116th to 114th I remember there was one block it was nothing but commercial buildings on the bottom and apartment buildings on the top. I said, "Oh my god. Those could be homes for people. They don't have to stay in the freaking shelter." That was just the beginning of a little seed that has blossomed. I'm like, wow.<sup>166</sup>

In the examples provided, neither Arvernetta, Marcus or DeBoRah use the actual word "resistance." We clearly hear them describing individual and collective acts of resistance

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<sup>165</sup> DeBoRah Dickerson, Interview by Lynn Lewis, Oct. 27, 2017.

<sup>166</sup> DeBoRah Dickerson, Interview by Lynn Lewis, Oct. 27, 2017.



through latent content. In order to survive the institutional systems that they are subjected to with their dignity intact, the narrators engaged in acts of individual resistance. Once they joined PTH, their individual memories resistance combined with PTH's inherited memories of collective resistance. When there is alignment between the individual homeless New Yorker and PTH in the belief that homeless folks have civil and human rights, there is power. The institutional systems that homeless folks must engage with force individual compliance (such as the shelter system, public assistance programs and policing). PTH honored their claims to human dignity through supporting their acts of resistance on the individual and collective levels. While thousands of homeless New Yorkers passed through PTH's doors, not everyone stayed involved at the same level of participation. The narrators interviewed for Phase I of this project were homeless New Yorkers who valued PTH as a political home and site of collective resistance. The PTH housing campaign resonated with Marcus. He described having two jobs and still not being able to afford rent. His mother had educated him about the wastefulness of vacant buildings in Brooklyn when he was a child and he carried this analysis with him into PTH. But it was PTH that put him in a position of being able to do something about vacant property through collective resistance. He observed PTH members speaking with politicians when he joined PTH, and then became educated to be in that position himself. He relished the reaction of politicians to homeless people having important things to say even though they "couldn't afford" to wear a suit:

That was the first time I'm really hearing how these people in this particular organization actually, you know, talk to politicians! I'm like man, these guys are talking to politicians. I don't see nobody here with a suit on. It don't look like to me that these people in here can even afford a suit! But as time went on I realized

that some of these, a lot of these including myself, that I was going to these places and having meetings and [slows his words down] and people [pauses] was just accepting me, it wasn't so much what I had on, but what was coming out my mouth, where politicians were like, "Where did these people come from?!"<sup>167</sup>

Rob Robinson described himself as “the one” to speak up prior to becoming homeless. When he became homeless he brought those skills and that confidence into his analysis of homelessness. He found a connection between his proclivity to resist what he viewed as unjust to PTH’s practice of collective resistance. Rob described the importance of education, and interpersonal relationships through collective resistance:

That whole process was a learning experience for me. I had never done the organizing. In my regular workplace, I would be the one out of the group who would speak up and challenge management because everybody's "Oh, it's just how it is. You take the paycheck." "No, like F that," right. [Laughs] I'm going to go into his or her office, and I'm going to say something. So I think, it's similar—it's a place where, for me, I got a foundation of how to organize. And then I went to that organizing trainee training, and I think that really helped me. But it also helped me to understand that this problem is bigger than us, people need to be connected. This is not the only place where this is happening. Through Picture the Homeless, I met like folks on the West Coast and around the country who were experiencing that, and I think that was huge because the foundations of those connections came through Picture the Homeless. So when I talk about Western Regional Advocacy Project, [WRAP] Paul Boden, you know Paul—I consider Paul a good friend now. We've done a lot of work together. We interact. We get on the phone, and talk about this stuff, and chop it up together, and connect each other to other people. So, those relationships are strong.<sup>168</sup>

Forming collective analysis and plans of resistance from the perspectives and skills of the individuals who comprise that collective doesn't always result in agreement about goals or the tactics needed to achieve them. William Burnett captured some of the complex dynamics present in the formation of collective resistance:

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<sup>167</sup> Marcus Moore, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Nov. 13, 2017.

<sup>168</sup> Rob Robinson, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, May 8, 2018.

Remember that folks, especially the street homeless folks, but also folks in shelter, they're miserable. The city keeps promising that they've got solutions and they're going to do something about this. Like Bloomberg's Ten Year Plan, [pauses] listen; folks don't want to wait ten years for housing! Folks wanted it now! There was this sense in the campaign, for the folks who were involved with the housing campaign that "We don't want to wait". I think there were folks, if I recall correctly from our conversations in the housing committee, there were folks who felt those sleep outs were not enough! I was still being radicalized but we had some pretty radical folks in there. So there were folks who thought that sleep outs weren't enough and maybe not. But I think we communicated our message, and we did it without causing a riot [smiles], [pauses]. There were also some folks who were hesitant to participate, especially folks who were in shelters, they didn't want to lose their bed by sleeping out. So we had to be honest about accepting that.<sup>169</sup>

Collective resistance doesn't negate individuality; it is an expression of an individuality that seeks to achieve social change. Collective resistance arises from the recognition that we cannot change systems of oppression as individuals. Rob Robinson described how he first understood the importance of collective resistance:

But it was interesting coming there for the first meeting, and everybody from my little group was focused on going to Albany and then it was like, Well let's talk about the problem. It was probably, for me, the first time that I really understood you build power becoming together. You can go as a small, little group, but what would you accomplish? Let's go with an organization that might have already figured out a process, understand how it is. We can go to Albany all we want, but if nobody opens the door, what good is it? We just spent some money to go up there, and nothing happens, right?<sup>170</sup>

Collective resistance requires that we learn from one another to broaden our thinking beyond our individual circumstances. William shared how his analysis of his own individual issues evolved once he began working collectively with other homeless people:

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<sup>169</sup> William Burnett, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Nov. 16, 2017.

<sup>170</sup> Rob Robinson, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, May 8, 2018.

I was part of the housing committee because that was the real issue that I was concerned with. I was working at the time and so there was no reason for me to be homeless other than the fact that I didn't have enough money to pay rent and so I was really upset about the fact that we've allowed the city to become so expensive and not recognize that people working for lower incomes still need a place to live. So my big issue was wanting, wanting to find a way to change housing policy in New York so that housing is available to everyone. It really took me a while, I know Picture the Homeless's thing is that we need housing for the poorest of the poor and I agree with that, but that wasn't my position when I first started with Picture the Homeless. I'm thinking, "I'm working, why can't I afford housing?"<sup>171</sup>

John Jones (2002 - 2012) is a former PTH civil rights campaign leader who was the volunteer PTH receptionist on a full time basis for several years while street homeless. He refused to enter the shelter system and instead, slept in Central Park. Because the NYPD selectively enforced the park's curfew, targeting homeless New Yorkers, supporting John through collective action also advanced the goals of PTH's civil rights campaign while it built solidarity among the group. In this example, several PTH members and staff got arrested with John in an act of civil disobedience. In a video produced by PTH's civil rights campaign, John stated that "We all got together and we banded together and created an action against the police officers because we wanted to show members of the public that this park is for the public."<sup>172</sup>

Sam J. Miller described what motivated him to risk arrest during that action:

I remember, also in 2004 in November, when we did the sleep out that night, the civil disobedience in Central Park, and when you and Jean and John are like, we're going to do this. You want to do this? And feeling like even though I was

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<sup>171</sup> William Burnett, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Nov. 16, 2017.

<sup>172</sup> John Jones, Kicking Ass All Over This City: Homeless Civil Rights Warriors, the Picture the Homeless Civil Rights Campaign; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYaNgz1pwIc>.

scared to put myself in an arrestable position I had thought about it a lot. In my work with Jews Against the Occupation there was an occasional civil disobedience that I had never participated in a directly arrestable way because I was really scared. But because I had love for you guys, and I had love for John who was dealing with this stuff like being arrested in the park all the time, I was like, yeah sure, why not?<sup>173</sup>

Building internal group solidarity helped make strategy discussions such as those described by William, easier, creating space for deep listening and learning. William entered PTH concerned about how the housing market was impacting him personally. When he joined PTH his activism around housing and homelessness expanded into the use of collective resistance through direct action. I asked him about his experience with a series of sleep outs that the housing campaign held and what they meant for him and for PTH. He cited the themes of representation, education and collective resistance in the passage below:

I remember we did sleep-out in sleeping bags in the rain [smiles], did our march in the rain, [still smiling], it wasn't always raining, but *usually* in the rain. I think we planned that out, and actually it works visually. People see homeless people sleeping in the rain, it's a good I guess, marketing device [laughs]. But no, we didn't do that on purpose. It just always amazes me that it was [laughs] always raining when we were sleeping out. There was a sense, it was like this opportunity, it's like in the military they say that your strongest friends are the ones that you're in the foxhole with. I think that happened at Picture the Homeless too. When we're out in these actions, and we're spending the night, especially in the rain! [voice rises] and we're interacting with each other. We're not just protesting, we're talking to each other, sometimes there's the camp out part where we sit down and we pull out the canteen of cocoa and we're talking with each other and we're getting to know each other and there's some personal bonding going on. There's always that human interaction that I like to bring out. I think that it was one of the most important elements of Picture the Homeless organizing is that we did bond tightly. I don't think every organization has that level of bonding that we had. I think that's important, that experience was important because that bonding makes us stronger. I've heard of organizations

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<sup>173</sup> Sam J. Miller, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Dec. 2, 2017.

where they do the community organizing and eventually get to the point when toxic elements come in they tear the organization apart because people don't trust each other. I think with us, you know, as with any organizations toxic elements want to step in and raise their ugly heads, but because we bonded the way we did, we were able to stand firm, not against the person [voices rises with an emphasis on the word person] but against the toxicity that was being introduced against the organization. I feel like I sidetracked our conversation with that, but I feel that part was important.<sup>174</sup>

The interpersonal relationships formed through mutual aid as well as collective resistance at PTH allowed for members to increase their capacity for individual resistance that in turn, fueled the expression of collective resistance through PTH. Marcus cited me as a source of inspiration to begin to consider squatting, or homesteading as he prefers to call it, after he joined the PTH housing campaign. He described how PTH housing organizer Frank Morales and member Genghis Khalil Muhammed encouraged him to begin homesteading after he became disillusioned with the process of obtaining housing vouchers in the shelter. Marcus detailed the importance of relationships built at PTH and their impact on individual survival, resistance and collective resistance:

I have to mention a member by the name of Genghis. Genghis and I struggle a lot, because we both believe in homesteading. He kind of pushed me to step out on faith and take the chance and the risk. We talked to another source that we had, another location waiting for us, but it didn't work out that way. So I had to try to learn how to live with this guy. Yes, we're from the same organization, but I had to try to—the age difference was different, too, because he could be like my uncle or father. He's a small guy. I'm this big, tall guy. Some nights dealing with him, I just want to punch on him. But I knew that I couldn't do that, because I would feel bad, and who does that? Our relationship struggled, but we got better at it.

We were learning how to deal with each other in the struggle, because at Picture the Homeless, the gates close down at a certain time, and so you kind of have to pick and choose teams. Who's going with who, who's chilling with who, or who's going or riding solo, or going to do their own thing. Genghis and I we were like

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<sup>174</sup> William Burnett, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Nov.16, 2017.

partners to the degree where we were looking out for each other at night. At that time, I still had a job. I still had somewhere to go to kill a good portion of the time. But once I got off, it was really on. He would say some things, and I was like, no, I can't let you get away with that. I'll come back and I'll say my thing. He'll sit over there, then he'll sit over there, then he'll fall asleep. Couldn't leave him sleeping like that. So I had to wake him up and tell him, maybe move it over this way. Before you know it, it was time to go back to Picture the Homeless and figure out how we're going to get this work done. I would say that Genghis was a person who we got better throughout our struggles at Picture the Homeless.<sup>175</sup>

Narrators refer to the importance of their inter-personal relationships with one another as driving their political participation, as well as the historic significance of the work. Narrators connected their ability to take risks and engage in escalating acts of collective resistance to the encouragement, support and sometimes pressure from other members and staff. William Burnett described why he became involved in PTH's Potters Field campaign:

We had the development of the Potters Field campaign. I was shamed or guilt tripped into that one. Remember one of our co-founders had recently passed away. We found his body, we knew he was on Potters field but couldn't get onto it and everything. A couple, a few of the folks who were at Picture the Homeless before I was -- and they were coming out of the civil rights campaign who knew our co-founder more personally. I had met him but hadn't had an opportunity to really get to know him. These others have -- they were trying to pressure me into being part of that campaign. One of their arguments for pressuring me is that this is a religious argument. "You're Catholic. You should be part of this." The other guy was Muslim, I don't know what the third guy was, but they were making a religious argument; I was making a religious argument. "Sorry", I said, "I'm busy fighting for living people. The dead people are [pauses] whatever their disposition, that's their disposition." But eventually I was guilt tripped.<sup>176</sup>

Nikita Price described how the example of another PTH member Turhan White, inspired him to deepen his commitment to collective resistance through collective action:

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<sup>175</sup> Marcus Moore, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 11, 2018.

<sup>176</sup> William Burnett, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Nov. 16, 2018.

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.” [laughing] 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..... Yeah, yeah. 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.” And, 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.<sup>177</sup>

Rob Robinson provided an example of how collective resistance generated respect for individual members and the organization as a whole. He attributed the series of building and vacant lot takeovers by PTH in 2009 to the education of PTH's members and then linked that to educating the public at large:

I think it was a time of empowerment. That was huge for the organization. That was huge for individuals. I think you can confront the police in a way where you can be respected. I think that was a good lesson to be learned, right? But people have to be organized around it, and know that everybody has a role, stick to your role, right. When adrenaline gets flowing in those direct actions, sometimes you can get some outliers that act up. But I think if an organization sits down and goes over a routine over and over, people understand their roles and where they're supposed to be. So, I think, there's lessons to learn that way.<sup>178</sup>

Individual homeless folks resist the society and the systems that marginalize and criminalize their existence. The organizational structure and organizing practice of PTH privileged the individual power of homeless members as fundamental to building collective power. PTH nurtured opportunities for the development of interpersonal

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<sup>177</sup> Nikita Price, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Dec. 2, 2017.

<sup>178</sup> Rob Robinson, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, May 8, 2018.



relationships so crucial to the establishment of trust and solidarity needed for risk taking. Stepping outside of meeting spaces to carry out actions in public spaces where homeless folk's rights are routinely violated required courage and faith. Risks to the individual were mitigated by the presence of the collective. Building sufficient power to change the root causes of the issues PTH members identified was only achievable through collective resistance. Hopefulness and the sense of community and collective purpose is what engaged the narrators interviewed for this project to dedicate themselves to PTH, and to one another.

### **Leadership**

Leadership was defined at PTH through the expression and practice of leadership qualities, not only the amount of time that members participated in PTH. Members who took on roles and were effective, who were accountable to the group and shared the mission of the organization, who positioned themselves as learners and as teachers by supporting the leadership of other members, came to be respected as leaders. Jean Rice is a longtime leader at PTH but he didn't join PTH to be a leader. He described attending his first meeting after being invited by his cousin Prince, because his livelihood was under attack:

At the end of the night we would meet in our shared living quarters. For like [pauses] a month, every Wednesday night, he'd say, Man, when I get to W. 4th St. and I meet this guy named Anthony Williams and he's telling me about this organization, called Picture the Homeless. So I say, yeah. Well, he wants us to come to a meeting? Why should I do that? At the same period, ironically, Giuliani had started this Quality of Life offense. Where if you appeared to be undomiciled you were imperiled....Picture the Homeless was fighting against quality of life offenses that criminalized normal behavior that domiciled could do. Like urinating in their house. Like drinking a beer. And through the criminalization of the homeless community and implementation of these quality of life offenses

these acts were deemed antisocial and criminalized. That was one point. 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 [pauses] was in the red at the time. They attributed the blame to the cost of the recycle Better Bottle Bill. So Bloomberg said, get rid of it! ... Then I heard Prince. Because again, in addition to Picture the Homeless being opposed to the Quality of Life that criminalized homelessness they also was opposed to Bloomberg getting rid of the better bottle bill. That got my attention because that was my pocket, that was my money! [laughs] Then I went to the meeting.<sup>179</sup>

Jean explained why he became involved with PTH after his first meeting. As previously described, several narrators attributed their first getting involved or deepening their commitment to PTH to two factors. One, when an external crisis occurred – such as in Jean’s where his livelihood was threatened - but also concurrently, when they were directly invited to do something by a PTH member or staff:

So I'd had some studying American constitutional law, etc. Because I knew about the 14th Amendment, and ba ba ba, Lynn and Emily [pauses] and Anthony just drafted me! Like, you need me! I got drafted. [smiles] But I loved it because, seriously, it gave me the opportunity to use knowledge that I thought I would never be able to use in a positive way. I was able to use that knowledge to contribute to a progressive social and equal justice and I'm still doing that.<sup>180</sup>

William also highlighted the importance of interpersonal relationships in building leadership at PTH:

What ended up happening, what moved me to be part of the Potters Field campaign is, again having studied for the Priesthood and everything; I was looking at some raw, authentic expressions of emotion coming from these people and the fact that they didn't have closure over the loss of our co-founder Lewis Haggins. While I myself didn't really feel that because I didn't really get an opportunity to get to know Lewis, other than having met him once, I saw it in them. I thought it would be wrong for me not to get involved in that campaign. I

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<sup>179</sup> Jean Rice, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Oct. 6, 2017.

<sup>180</sup> Jean Rice, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Oct. 13, 2017.

wasn't so much an activist, but I was giving a pastoral response in getting involved.<sup>181</sup>

The process by which many members became leaders at PTH was based on interpersonal relationships. Deep listening during informal and formal conversations were opportunities for members and staff to get to know one another, to identify leadership skills in one another, or values or knowledge that they were willing to share with the group. The faith traditions shared by several members of the Potters Field campaign is one example of this process. The logistics of being homeless and a leader in PTH are daunting even as they are healing. Appreciating the effort to navigate homelessness as well as the demands of leadership allows us to see the long time leaders of PTH as the s/heros they truly are. Nikita described some of what it means for a homeless mother to take on leadership to end homelessness and at the same time, survive it:

If you're a single mother, going between HRA and DHS and ACS,<sup>182</sup> and all of these different heads, and then finding the time to sit down and give *Picture the Homeless* a moment or some of your time, to really expose the system. You know it's hard to get a person, a single mother with three kids and a closed HRA case, a looming ACS case and the ability not to fucking talk to people in your shelter because they mean you no good. It's hard to get them to say *okay, I'm going to come and give Picture the Homeless some time, and I'm going to work at changing the system.* But that's what we have to do to get people to step up and become leaders and change.<sup>183</sup>

Nikita Price explained that leadership may be fluid. The narrators for Phase I of this oral history project are all long time PTH leaders and staff. Most members have not stayed

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<sup>181</sup> William Burnett, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Nov. 16, 2017.

<sup>182</sup> HRA stands for Human Resources Administration, DHS stands for the Department of Homeless Services and ACS stands for the Agency for Children's Services, all are New York City agencies.

<sup>183</sup> Nikita Price, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Dec. 2, 2017.

for as long a period or have been so deeply involved. Nikita asserted that it is the organizer's responsibility to identify and nurture the strength of each person "for the short period of time" in which they may engage with PTH:

I think one of the challenges with homeless folk is that we're no different than anybody else. We just want the fucking pain to stop so that we can get on with our life. Not everybody is built to be an organizer. Not everybody is built to be a leader. Not everybody is built to be a member. But, for the short period of time in which I can, if you can work with me, I'll do what I can do. So just like there were strengths in me that were identified, you have to identify that in folks also. It might be short lived. And if so, so be it. At least, nurture that and bring that on, so that it really gets the message out.<sup>184</sup>

Identifying strengths and leadership skills occurs through being welcoming, deep listening, dialogue, education, and collective resistance. Resolving the tension between the almost insurmountable challenges of navigating homelessness and the demands of leadership within PTH, Nikita Price described how direct action as a form of collective resistance functions to move members into leadership roles. In the excerpt below he described how the housing campaign's wheatpasting of hundreds of vacant buildings in Harlem impacted his own leadership within PTH:

Our office was in East Harlem and at the time there were all these abandoned buildings. The thing that, I was made aware of by you Lynn, and Picture the Homeless, was the fact that we were passing by all these fucking stores, [pauses] the stores were open every day and people were shopping as if everything was fine and then it was like, *but look up!* And when you look up on the second floor on up, everything was fucking abandoned. [laughing] It was boarded up [laughs harder] I'm like *boy!* And 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? I don't know who came up with it. You might have come up with it, but it was like, why don't

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<sup>184</sup> Nikita Price, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Dec. 2, 2017.

we let the public know because I don't think the public is looking up either. Let them know about all this abandoned property.”<sup>185</sup>

Nikita learned about the prevalence of vacant property, but it was through the wheatpasting action that he as a member of PTH was able to “bring the attention” and connection to the numbers of people in shelters and the existence of vacant property. Collective resistance is one factor which engendered homeless leadership and in some cases longevity within the organization. Williams’s distinction between PTH’s methodology and other organizations definition of leadership points to the complex process of supporting homeless folks to engage in the collective analysis of the issues they faced: identifying solutions and fighting for those through collective resistance. William below described PTH’s organizing process of homeless folks “figuring out what the problem is and how we’re going to solve it”:

I think the biggest lesson for me is one about being authentic about what you’re calling leader, because we talk about, “we’re developing leaders,” and every organization that organizes say they’re developing leaders, and I see some organizations that organize, calling people leaders who are nothing more than mouths, or people with strong opinions, or people who can speak, but they’re effectively bodies that just communicate. They’re not actually part of the process of figuring out what the problem is and how we’re going to solve it.<sup>186</sup>

He then cited the Potters Field campaign as an example of members moving staff to create a new campaign not only determining what an issue is and how to solve it within an existing campaign:

And there’s a lesson and example where the organizers didn’t even decide to take on a campaign. The people that organizers are calling leaders made that decision, and brought other leaders in, and compelled the staff in. So that’s a little more

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<sup>185</sup> Nikita Price, Interview by Lynn Lewis, Dec. 2, 2017.

<sup>186</sup> William Burnett, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 19, 2018.

authentic leadership. So we're going to call people leaders? Let it come from the leaders. And I think that's an important lesson, because I do see social justice groups out there with people calling themselves organizers, when all they are is people's strong personalities that bring in bodies, with complaints, so the people who are being called leaders aren't really authentically leading.<sup>187</sup>

How do we balance stigma, trauma and the challenges of homelessness with promoting what William refers to as authentic leadership when it's possible that leaders may "fail" or simply leave an organization? Throughout my 17 year history with PTH we received hundreds of requests for an interview or a speaker to attend an event. Invariably, they would comment afterwards how pleased, or even surprised they were, at how compelling the speaker was. Sometimes, they would even say something along the lines of the members of PTH were somehow special homeless people, they were different from regular homeless folks. To that I would have two, seemingly contradictory, responses. First, is that of course PTH members are special. When a community is impacted by a problem, it is always a subset of that community that decides to work with other community members "to do something". In that sense, all of us who engage in community work are special. Homeless people as a group are no different than any other group in that regard. Therefore, the members of PTH are indeed special; they represent that civic minded subset found in any community. It is the stigma projected onto homeless people that makes them seem particularly "special" for an audience. Homeless community members committed to improving their communities isn't limited to PTH

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<sup>187</sup> William Burnett, Interview by Lynn Lewis, Jan. 19, 2018.

members. The homeless narrators quoted by Daniel Kerr<sup>188</sup> in the early 1990's have very a similar analysis as the PTH narrators in terms of the systemic causes of homelessness. While I don't wish to draw facile comparisons, an excerpt quoted by Kerr concludes with the narrator stating "the thing I would want to go ask them are what are they doing for themselves to try and make things better for themselves and for other people."<sup>189</sup> It is both the process of asserting leadership and the results that are meaningful for the narrators interviewed for this oral history project:

So when people are saying, "Well at least people have shelters." Picture the Homeless was able to go and tell you, yeah you have shelters but these are the conditions in the shelters. The EAU was closed before I came to Picture the Homeless. When people were saying, yeah well, homeless people can come here and then they go into the shelters and the EAU is nice and clean. You folks had already sent people in with cameras to dispel that myth. And that was big to get the EAU closed. That was before my time. I always liked the fact that Picture the Homeless always pushed back. This is the reality of the bullshit that you're trying to jam down people's throats. I think during that time, we didn't have a big voice but we were consistent and we were not going to back down.<sup>190</sup>

Jean Rice cited the systemic change resulting from PTH's leadership as most meaningful to him because he is a part of PTH, inferring the individual connection to social transformation that is achieved through collective resistance:

Oh man. It's several, but if I consolidate them, 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 effected multitudes of homeless people. For instance, defending the Better Bottle Bill, and getting it expanded to include

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<sup>188</sup> Daniel Kerr, "We Know What the Problem Is: Using Oral History to Develop a Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness from the Bottom Up," *Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003): 34.

<sup>189</sup> Kerr, "We Know What the Problem Is," 34.

<sup>190</sup> Nikita Price, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Dec. 2, 2017.

plastic water bottles. And when I walk down the street people that don't even know me, they don't even know Picture the Homeless, they're lined up at these reverse vending machines, that I could when they weren't available. They are getting revenue without confrontation, without being dehumanized. That's that gives me great satisfaction. And when we won 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. I got that concept from my training in public administration. That impacts the common good. And the other side of that is, Biblically, there is Scripture that said, that which you do for the least among you, consider you did it unto me, and I will reward you tenfold. So my public administration credo, the common good. My Christian credo, the Brotherhood of Man. I put them together and I come up with Jean, stay with Picture the Homeless. [we both laugh]<sup>191</sup>

One way to balance stigma, navigating homelessness and building authentic leadership is through dismantling internalized oppression and allowing ourselves to see the leadership skills in others. We heard in the origin story that Lewis saw Anthony's leadership qualities, and he persisted on engaging him to stand up for his rights, and homeless folks rights in general. Anthony describes his perception of Lewis as he got to know him:

I was able to see him, not as a drunk that I met in a detox, but as somebody that, for whatever reason, had power, knew how to use power, and knew how to get things done. I could never have done that. I mean, I could've just heard on a radio about Paris Drake and it just went by me, just like when the cops beat up the homeless in the shelter. It bothered me, but I don't have any power. How do I bring attention to this? I never did it before. I don't know how to go and talk to newspapers, and go to the *Voice*, and go to WBAI, and go to WBLS, and he knew all these people.<sup>192</sup>

Anthony did evolve into the homeless rights leader that Lewis saw at their first encounter. He returned to Baltimore, Maryland, where he was born and is a politically active there. His time at PTH was cut short by the same issues that placed him in the

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<sup>191</sup> Jean Rice, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Oct. 6, 2017.

<sup>192</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.



detox where he first met Lewis. This in no way negates the impact that Anthony had as the co-founder of PTH. PTH evolved into a ground breaking homeless organizing group, remaining true its co-founders roots, and has inspired the formation and practice of other organizing groups:

I care about the organization, I care about the people, but I allowed my own self to be destructive to the organization, and with that, I hurt a lot of people, including you, deeply. But I was around, I was able to be to hold on long enough to, like Lewis—Lewis held on long as he could. Because if we didn't have you, then it wouldn't be what it really was meant to be, because we need to stay true to what our cause was, and we need to stay true to the homeless folks. It's tough. It's tough. Leaders can be failures.<sup>193</sup>

This oral history project has provided Anthony and I with the opportunity to heal old wounds resulting from his departure from PTH in 2003. The pressures of forming a grass roots organization in the New York City social justice landscape to organize homeless folks when most said it couldn't be done, presented tremendous challenges. Added to that were the challenges presented by our different personal backgrounds and privilege. Finally, our different political backgrounds and reasons for engaging in this work together created almost insurmountable hurdles. I will leave it up to Anthony to tell his own story, and am perhaps still guilty of continuing to perpetuate silences and omissions. What is important here is the acknowledgement that leadership ebbs, and may flow back into the organization if the space is left for leaders to return. The practice of being welcoming included welcoming the return of Anthony's leadership after he left – as well as the participation and leadership of many other members who have left and returned to

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<sup>193</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.

PTH. When members were welcomed into PTH it was understood that their leadership could co-exist with personal issues that may actually contradict leadership:

We held on. I mean, I held on. But you held on even more. And I was still able to come back and hold on because you left room that I could still hold onto without feeling that I didn't have a place to hold on to.....There's people that are put in your path that are purposely put in your path to fulfill a certain mission. I'm not going to a religious things about this, Lynn. But there are people that are put in our paths for good reason. Because this is almost like a dream that I had a very, very long time ago that came true. And I don't know why. But people are put in your path. Lou was put in my path. You were put in our path. And we all stayed in that path for the time we were meant to stay in that role and in that path. You have succeeded eighteen – you have taken this eighteen years of work. I cannot – there's no way I can't credit you for that. And there's no way I could express more than anybody to you that it's just so – you were so valuable and you're still so valuable to me. And I'll never forget any of the good and the bad. I will never forget how important you were to this movement that you wanted to start....I remember you telling me “This is what I've been looking for.”<sup>194</sup>

During the period before Anthony left PTH in 2003 and for many years afterwards, there was tension in our relationship. The welcoming back wasn't always easy for either of us. The inherited memory of the official origin story reinforced Anthony's deserved heroic status among PTH members but obscured my role – silencing and omitting many lessons about organizing, including crucial ones about power and privilege. Our silence as to the circumstances surrounding his leaving left a vacuum that was filled by assumptions, including that I was a white woman who “got rid of Anthony.” The pain of his leaving PTH created the conditions for him to allow these assumptions to go unchallenged for many years. Perhaps he felt that way on some level. Correcting that narrative would have required him to disclose conduct that he wasn't ready to disclose and that I didn't have the right to disclose. Anthony and Lewis's story are bound together, and mine is to

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<sup>194</sup> Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 22, 2018.

theirs. I left it up to Anthony to tell his story although I also shared in it and it is partially mine. In a sense, I am welcoming Anthony back into the PTH story in a new role, as a key narrator in this oral history project. Our personal lives have shifted. He has established his own political leadership in Baltimore based on lessons learned at PTH. The opportunity to participate in the writing of PTH's history inspired his commitment to set the record straight as well as to heal those old wounds between us.

Anthony's assessment of himself as a leader is harsh. While Nikita's analysis finds value in people exerting leadership even for a short time, Anthony implied that he was a failed leader. Because PTH's organizing practice was based on the strength of interpersonal relationships which made collective resistance and homeless leadership possible, when those relationships or when members and leaders "fail" as Anthony says, or simply leave, the disappointment for those left behind can be devastating. Rob Robinson reflected on what he perceived as a lack of leadership among PTH members during an occupation of a vacant lot in 2009. This was an action organized by the PTH housing campaign during a period when PTH escalated their use of civil disobedience to draw attention to the vast amount of vacant buildings and lots through NYC. PTH subsequently conducted the city wide participatory action research project, Banking on Vacancy, previously referred to in this thesis. During the action described below, ten people were arrested, including several PTH members and staff, and political allies including two Episcopal Priests:<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> The two Episcopal priests were Rev. Earl Kooperkamp from St. Mary's Church in Harlem and Frank Morales, the PTH housing organizer at the time, and an ordained Episcopal priest.

I still hold a little bit of animosity to some of the members who backed away. I understand there was a risk out there, but I just—I think in those moments, people have to—they have to stay together, right. You may have to give yourself up. We proved in the past that nothing is going to happen to us. That was probably one of lessons learned there. But I think overall, it said to me, one, you can elevate the respect of this organization by doing this type of work. You can do it in a way that you look good in the end even though the police arrested you. We had two Episcopal priests in collars, which was huge....There's was a dynamic that we put together on the street that day between both those actions that garnered us a lot of respect in the city. That' the only way I could say it. I think at places you wouldn't expect a grassroots organization to be respected, particularly a homeless organization, we got some pretty high respect from both those actions. And I think members got empowered by that and started to think a little bit differently about a lot of things. And so for me in particular, obviously, I thought a lot about it more and I said, "This is a way." I mean for me it was just the whole police negotiating thing and being able to hold them at bay.<sup>196</sup>

Leadership is imperfect and often inconsistent. The political leadership of homeless folks is powerful given the challenging conditions under which homeless people live. Those conditions mean that there are times when leaders do not keep their commitments and often personal challenges get in the way. This can cause harm to the group as a whole and to individual members. Yet, it is also impossible not to imagine that some homeless folks will stand up for their rights. PTH was the vehicle through which homeless New Yorkers could assert their leadership and build their capacity to work with other homeless folks to win systemic change. PTH exerted political leadership in the social justice movement through the self-representation and leadership of its homeless members.

#### **IV. Methodology: Participatory Oral History Research**

Oral history is the research methodology that most closely resembles the mission and organizing practice of PTH. I chose oral history because I wanted the research structure

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<sup>196</sup> Rob Robinson, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, May 8, 2018.

of The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project to privilege the homeless narrators' knowledge and analysis like our organizing methods do. Integrating elements of community organizing and participatory action research in the project design, implementation and analysis phases of this project expanded the boundaries of oral history research. I call this oral history methodology Participatory Oral History Research (POHR). Community organizing is a process that engages people who are directly affected by systems of oppression to identify problems that they want to solve. Through engaging in a dialogic process of naming the root causes of their oppression, members move to collectively develop organizing campaigns which seek to win systemic change through taking action and building political power. Participatory action research (PAR) is an approach that equalizes the roles of community members and researchers, recognizing the power and authority of each in the research process. The research has a political purpose and the primary beneficiaries are the community members engaged in the research itself. POHR privileges the authority of the narrators in ways consistent with oral history research during the interview process and extends their authority into each phase of the project. This project provides an opportunity to amplify the work of listening to and learning from homeless folks, so central to PTH's mission.

This methodological section describes the structure and strategies of this project, including the successes and challenges of supporting the participation of the initial cohort of narrators in the analysis phase. For me personally, this section is an exercise in reflection and an opportunity to identify adjustments to improve my practice in Phases II and III of this project. I hope to place my reflections in dialogue with those of other oral

historians, as well as community organizers, about the potential of this model to advance social justice work.

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project is a multi-year POHR project with three distinct phases. Phase I, which this thesis concludes, focused on interviews with an initial cohort of PTH members and staff, each of whom have been with PTH for a minimum of ten years. Phase I also explores elements of POHR, including the establishment of an advisory board, described later in this section of the thesis. For Phase II, I plan to interview an additional 40 PTH members, leaders, current and former staff, board members and political allies. I will implement new strategies in my application of the POHR approach and document their effectiveness. Additionally in phase II, I will begin cataloging and digitizing the 17 year old archive and make these publicly available for the first time. I anticipate the archiving will extend into phase III and am still exploring the best platform for that archive, envisioning a website that incorporates the interviews and the archive. In phase II I will also begin to create popular education materials from the interviews. In phase III, I expect to write a book with several of the narrators. I am open to other possibilities and adjustments in my timeline as the project advances. As the founder and principle researcher of this Project and the founding Executive Director of PTH, I am uniquely positioned to explore POHR's value to the field and am indebted to the work of many oral historians who inspired me to explore my own emerging practice.

### **Why Qualitative Content Analysis**

I used Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA)<sup>197</sup> to analyze the interviews because it most closely serves the purpose of this POHR project. Both QCA and community organizing rely upon the identification of latent and explicit themes within individual encounters/interviews and across encounters/interviews. Burghardt, paraphrasing Carney (1972), says that Qualitative Content Analysis “is particularly valuable because it gathers bits of data that, taken alone, might be too insignificant to prove or disprove a theory, but added together most often point toward a valid premise.”<sup>198</sup> In acknowledgement of the uniqueness and the importance of this research my goal is to make the full audio and transcript available for researchers and activists so they may conduct their own research utilizing the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS) software.<sup>199</sup> OHMS is an open source tool to make the audio and transcripts available and searchable. My hope is to invite others to dialogue with me and the project itself using QCA or other analytics.

It is difficult to delineate where, and from whom, the research questions originated. The initial categories of inquiry and related themes analyzed in section two of this thesis did not emerge in a vacuum. They were created organically through the work, over many years, through the contributions of many. Here I refer to seventeen years of dialogue among PTH members and staff but also with homeless folks who didn't join PTH but with whom we engaged in conversation during outreach or conducting

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<sup>197</sup> Burghardt, Linda. “Research Methodology Toolkit: A Step-By-Step Model for Mining Oral History Interviews.” Publication of the Proceedings of the Hawaii International Conference on Education, Honolulu, Hawaii, Jan., 2013.

<sup>198</sup> Burghardt, 2013, paraphrasing Carney (1972)

<sup>199</sup> Doug Boyd's many articles on OHMS were extremely but I also want to acknowledge his generosity in communicating with me in the Spring of 2018 as I began utilizing OHMS for this project.

participatory action research as part of a PTH organizing campaign. Additionally, these themes mirror the focus of other homeless organizing groups in the U.S. and internationally.<sup>200</sup> These themes fueled and were the result of collective homeless analysis and resistance. Visiting these themes during the oral history interviews brings the organization and its practices into the dialogue between the narrators and myself, and by extension with one another. I share Daniel Kerr's interest in "the possibility that oral history could promote dialogue on the streets among the homeless."<sup>201</sup> There are parallels between Kerr's work and the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project, as well as some differences. The dialogue on the streets among the homeless that Kerr hoped to promote was already happening at PTH. By interrogating what PTH meant for its homeless members and documenting its practices, oral history may be another tool towards supporting homeless collective resistance. Table 1 outlines my research structure:

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<sup>200</sup> Freedom from police harassment in public spaces and the right to housing are both focus areas of every homeless organizing group that I have encountered throughout the U.S. and internationally; see the Western Regional Advocacy Project founded by Paul Boden.



**Table 1. Research Structure**

<b>Step and Timing</b>	<b>Elements</b>
<p>I. The Interview</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Narrator Selection</li> <li>2. Method of Contact</li> <li>3. Identifying Location of Interview</li> <li>4. Preparing Location ambiance</li> <li>5. Reflecting on narrators participation in PTH and formulating open ended questions</li> <li>6. Checking in with narrator, catching up on life</li> <li>7. Signing of Consent and Review of Project Concept, review of next steps</li> <li>8. The Interview, including narrator listening to their own recorded voice and a portion of the interview</li> <li>9. Field Notes</li> <li>10. Metadata</li> </ol>
<p>II. Draft Project Design and Finalize Project Blueprint</p> <p>I completed my first draft in September at the same time that I conducted my first interview. It went through several iterations and ultimately became my final Blueprint in the Spring of 2018</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify initial goals of this project and it's structure</li> <li>2. Select the time period of the research</li> <li>3. Begin interviews and contrast experience of the interviews with the draft project design</li> <li>4. Identify themes and categories of inquiry</li> <li>5. Make adjustments to categories of inquiry as informed by preliminary findings</li> </ol>
<p>III. Initial Listening, Indexing, Transcribing, Editing</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Listen to interview without writing notes</li> <li>2. Index interview and begin with lengthy description of passage, editing down to more concise version</li> <li>3. Transcribe complete interview</li> <li>4. After I transcribed the first 14 interviews I began utilizing a transcription service</li> <li>5. Apply consistent editing decisions to preserve voice and meaning</li> <li>6. Sending transcript via email or in person to narrator for their review and approval</li> <li>7. Make corrections as needed</li> </ol>
<p>IV. Identification of Themes</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Determine unit of Analysis</li> <li>2. Create list of themes for each interview</li> <li>3. Create master list of themes across interviews</li> <li>4. Create document to track Categories of Inquiry, themes and sub themes</li> <li>5. Cut and pasting of units of analysis, logging themes contained therein, into spreadsheets for each Category of Inquiry</li> </ol>
<p>V. Shared Analysis: Conversations, Listening Sessions and Oral History Open House</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prior to second interview, a review of themes and areas for follow up with narrators</li> <li>2. Play audio from the first interview on sound system so narrators can hear theirs and also that of other narrators</li> <li>3. Make audio available for narrators to listen to on Soundcloud – their own but also that of the other narrators</li> <li>4. Hold listening sessions in my apartment for narrators</li> </ol>

	5. Create an Oral History Open House series every Monday in my apartment for consistency and to maximize attendance and participation
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### Step 1: The Interviews

**Narrator Selection:** Phase I of this project began with homeless members of PTH who had made a significant commitment to the organization, defined by the duration and the frequency and depth of their participation.<sup>202</sup> Each of the initial cohort of ten narrators has each been involved with PTH for a minimum of ten years. There is an element of narrator self-selection as well. Members of this initial cohort were among those PTH members and staff who had expressed interest in writing a book as far back as 2004. I had shared with them my plans to attend the OHMA program at Columbia in order to develop the skills to conduct this oral history. Each of the initial cohort remained in touch with me after I left PTH. They reached out, asking me when we were going to “write our book” about PTH - via text, phone calls or Facebook messenger. The motivation for PTH members to write “this book” is in response to the silencing and misrepresentation of homeless people in the media and the countless examples of social movements for which there is little available historic research conducted by the people who built them. Yet, when I contacted the narrators to schedule the interviews, some of them expressed surprise that I wanted to interview them. Some said that they didn’t think they were that important to the history of PTH, or that they didn’t know what to talk about. Other

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<sup>202</sup> While I did not employ a formal matrix to measure depth and frequency, I relied upon indicators beyond meeting attendance to include members who carried out several functions within the organization. Examples of these functions are security during actions, public speaking, representing PTH in conferences, facilitating meetings, etc.

narrators jumped at the chance. I told the narrators that this would be our oral history project, not only mine. It felt like community organizing.

Even through they are angry that homeless folks are generally misrepresented in mainstream media it doesn't automatically follow that they as individuals feel that they can represent themselves or PTH publicly. It is often necessary to ask individuals to speak because *their* individual voice and analysis is important. It is essential to make every attempt to correct for the ways in which power and privilege appear in all aspects of our lives, including oral history relationships:

In oral history however, the process of legitimation is more complex. Typical beginnings, such as "I have nothing to say," or even "What do you want me to say," may be coy maneuverings, but they may also indicate that the narrator feels entitled to speak only because of a mandate from the interviewer: I only speak because you ask me to (and often, I will say what you want to hear).<sup>203</sup>

I didn't yet know the language of co-construction in oral history, but had learned to exercise those relationship muscles through community organizing. The level of commitment to PTH and our long term relationship defined the narrators' commitment to this oral history project and helped them to overcome the initial reticence expressed by some. The number of interviews per narrator conducted during Phase I was determined by the willingness and availability of each narrator to participate. It may be unusual for the oral historian to share "the same past"<sup>204</sup> with a set of narrators or to share membership in a group that is the subject of the oral history research. There are benefits

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<sup>203</sup> Alessandro Portelli, "Oral History as Genre" in *The battle of Valle Giulia : oral history and the art of dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>204</sup> Anna Green. "Individual Remembering and 'Collective Memory': Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates", *Oral History*, 32, Number 2, "Memory and Society" (Autumn, 2004), 41.

and challenges presented by sharing history. Some benefits include access to narrators and the ability to hear latent content that someone outside of the group might miss. As Portelli argues:

The form of the interview depends on the extent to which the interviewer belongs to the reality under investigation: narrators will assume that a “native” historian already knows the facts, and will furnish explanations, theories, and judgements instead.<sup>205</sup>

My first and second interviews with Jean Rice provide examples. Jean often speaks to history and his responses generally address constitutional and legal issues. I believe that he also doesn't include specific details because in our relationship, I am the native historian to whom Portelli refers. Indeed, when I asked him to review his transcripts he repeatedly told me that I “was his best editor.” It took months before I coerced him into reviewing them and taking that shared authority on. Because it was important for Jean that his interview be included in the OHMA end of year Exhibit, I told him that they couldn't be included unless he approved his transcript and even then I had to make him a catfish dinner in order for him to come to my house and sit down and review them. POHR is a process, in which narratives evolve over time. When I asked Jean to paint a picture of a canner's meeting in our next session a week later so that the listener/reader could understand how we organized and who was involved, his responses were rich in detail and he included other PTH members who were present in that organizing:

So, we held another meeting and we designated part of the meeting,<sup>206</sup> to economic justice. We formed a semi- committee called the Economic Justice

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<sup>205</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “Oral History as Genre” in *The battle of Valle Giulia : oral history and the art of dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 11.

<sup>206</sup> PTH's practice of establishing new campaigns was based on a deeply and widely felt need among the membership as well as a commitment by at least a few members to work

Committee. In that setting, I was privileged to meet Brother Charlie Heck, Gregory, Red, Charles from St. Mary's church. God was bringing all of this together through this movement! These powerful brothers! Charles at St. Mary's, one of Kooperkamp's most devout disciples. [laughs] Oh, what a dynamic guy! [smiles] But, from interacting with them, we communicated to the State Attorney General, [laughs] then Elliot Spitzer.<sup>207</sup>

Beyond omitting or avoiding details, another unintended consequence of “sharing the same past” with narrators might include narrators censoring themselves out of consideration for my feelings about topics about which we disagreed or which were controversial. Interrogating those dynamics requires that I consider what impact my relationships to PTH and each of the narrators have on this research and what conclusions we may draw from it. It also suggests that other interviewees may be helpful for Phase II and III of this project.

The initial cohort of narrators all joined the organization as homeless members except for Sam J. Miller, who has been a staff person for fourteen years, Rob Robinson who had heard of PTH when he was homeless but joined just after he had obtained housing, and me. I had previously been homeless but was not when I met PTH's co-founders in 2000. PTH depended on members to take on multiple roles within the

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on it. In this case, I was the civil rights organizer and there was a convergence between police harassment of homeless folks and canners who were often homeless and working in public space. We designated a portion of the civil rights meeting to Economic Justice which was primarily canning, panhandling and day labor until we had enough resources to create an independent campaign.

<sup>207</sup>Jean Rice, Interview by Lynn Lewis, The Picture the Homeless Oral History project, Oct. 13, 2017.

organization, and all but one of the initial cohort has played multiple structural<sup>208</sup> roles within PTH as Table 2 shows:

**Table 2. Narrator Roles Within PTH**

Narrator	Year Joined PTH	Roles Held	Number of interviews conducted for Phase I
Arvernetta Henry	2009	Housing Campaign Leader	1
Jean Rice	2002	Civil Rights Campaign Leader and Founding Board Member	4
DeBoRah Dickerson	2005	Housing Campaign Leader	1
Marcus Moore	2008	Civil Rights and Housing Campaign Leader, Board Member	2
William Burnett	2004	Housing Campaign Leader, former staffer, Board Member	2
Sam J. Miller	2004	Housing Organizer, now Communications Director	1
Nikita Price	2006	Member, Civil Rights Organizer	1
Rogers	2004	Member Civil Rights Campaign, former staffer	1
Anthony Williams	1999	Co-Founder, former co-director	3
Lynn Lewis	2000	Former Co-Director, Former Executive Director, Former Civil Rights Organizer	1
Rob Robinson	2007	Former Housing Campaign Leader, former Board Member, political ally	1

**Method of Contact:** I did not write formal letters requesting an interview because some of the narrators do not have a reliable means of receiving postal mail nor are all are proficient at, or have regular access to, email. I used existing channels of communication to stay in touch, schedule the interviews and the follow up listening and oral history open house sessions. In one case, for instance, I sent messages to one narrator who panhandles near Grand Central Station via another narrator who picks up cans and bottles nearby.

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<sup>208</sup> I differentiate between structural and task roles this way. Structural roles are formal positions held within the decision-making structure of PTH such as member, leader, staff or board member. Task roles are formal and informal and examples include volunteering to make press calls for an action or facilitating a meeting.

**Identifying and Preparing the Interview Location and Ambiance:** All but four of the interviews were conducted in my home, in East Harlem. The remaining were conducted in the PTH office on a Saturday afternoon, another in the room of one of my narrators who lives in a supportive housing program in the South Bronx and two in Baltimore – first at a coffee shop and then the next day at the narrator’s apartment. Where we conduct interviews conveys meaning. I chose my home as the primary location because it is quiet and private and the PTH office is neither. Each narrator had been in my apartment several times. I created a relaxed and welcoming environment to communicate how important the narrators are to me and to this project and cooked something that I knew each narrator would enjoy. It may be more consistent with oral history research practice for the historian to visit the narrator’s home. Inviting narrators into the interviewer’s home allows the interviewer to establish or to build upon their relationship with the narrators based on the practice of being welcoming, echoing one of the themes explored in Section II. This is captured by Jean Rice:

Fall has finally got here. My sister made me some of her coffee so the chill from outside is gone now. And I'm enjoying this wonderful ambiance that I always cherish when I come to my sister's house. It's amazing how much work she does and how she keeps her environment so organized and well maintained. It always reminds me of the stuff I've got to do when I go home. [laughs]<sup>209</sup>

Jean Rice he refers to me as his sister in the interviews and his comments and laughter reveal the warmth of our relationship. They also reflect the importance of creating a welcoming environment. Welcoming someone into your home denotes trust. When the interviewer communicates trust to the narrator, it may be reciprocated, impacting the

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<sup>209</sup>Jean Rice, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Nov. 10, 2017.

interview itself. The narrators get to know the interviewer in a deeper way offsetting some of the “one-way” nature of questioning during the interview. Sharing a meal also allows for both parties engage in an intimate activity of daily life, together<sup>210</sup> and it is can be an important tool for communicating the non-hierarchical and relational dynamics of POHR. The interviews conducted in the homes of two of the narrators added another element of meaning precisely because of their location. Both narrators have had multiple and lengthy periods of homelessness and our relationship is rooted in the struggle for the right to housing. Anthony Williams told me that I was the first person that he’d invited to his apartment. When he asked me “did you ever think that you would see me like this?”<sup>211</sup> I answered that “I had always wished that I would.” It was a powerful moment that infused the emotional honesty of the interview.

### **Balancing life history, individual and organizational questions**

Prior to each interview, I reflected on what I knew of each narrator, what role they played at PTH, and my relationship with them. Over food, we shared what was happening in our lives. Narrators volunteered updates on PTH but our conversations also included sharing of family news or discussing current events. I was deeply touched that each narrator asked me how school was going and more than one narrator said they hoped their interviews helped me get good grades. We reviewed and signed a legal consent form and went over the interview process and next steps. I stressed to each that they didn’t have to

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<sup>210</sup>Winona Wheeler, “Reflections on the Social Relations of Indigenous Oral Histories,” in *Walking a Tightrope: Aboriginal People and Their Representations*, ed. David T. McNab (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurer University Press, 2005), 199.

<sup>211</sup>Anthony Williams, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 3, 2018.



answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable. I used the metaphor of a quilt to explain to each narrator how important his or her individual life experience and analysis is to an understanding of PTH as a whole. I learned that it was the narrator's stories and analysis, woven together as a composite, that would truly reveal the meaning of PTH even as I hadn't quite learned how to best weave them together. I set aside thinking about how to organize the archive during Phase I because I wanted to immerse myself in the interviews. I began to see oral history as even more akin to community organizing than I had previously understood. We began each interview with life history questions. These questions gave me an opportunity to get to know the narrators in ways that I hadn't while at PTH. Beginning with life history questions also grounded each interview in the narrator's experience and knowledge prior to joining PTH. I was interested in future audiences getting to know each narrator as individuals and as members of multiple communities. I did not focus on how each narrator became homeless and was careful to not include direct questions about events that each had revealed to me in confidence in the past. Over time I had come to learn a lot of personal information about each of the narrators, and they of me. This didn't result from formal interviews. It emerged over the course of spending time together just as happens during the development of any relationships. Some personal information included extremely painful experiences that I had been asked to keep confidential. I refrained from bringing up those events, not because I see the narrators as fragile but out of respect for their privacy about events that they had already asked me not to share with others. Open ended questions offered the narrators ample opportunity to share what they chose to. I was also mindful of how

mainstream media fetishizes individual homeless people, reflecting the ideology that individual dysfunction causes homelessness:

Avoiding direct life history questions provided a means for each of the narrators to be more flexible in their presentation of their experiences and avoid being in a position where they felt they had to provide a confessional. One man, Levi Israel, specifically stated that he would like to see a world where we do not have to probe into the lives of the oppressed. Moving away from personalized life history questions and asking what the interviewee believes to be the causes of homelessness explicitly brings the interviewee into the process of analysis.<sup>212</sup>

The narrators welcomed the time they and I took to introduce themselves to the world and used the interview to express individual opinions about the PTH narrative that they previously hadn't. The **length of each interview** session ranged from one to two and a half hours. Each agreed to be interviewed again. It became clear that additional sessions were required to allow the narrator's stories to unfold organically. I listened to what was important to them without trying to rush them towards a particular topic or event. Having access and a prior relationship with each afforded me this luxury. However, our relationship has shifted. I am no longer the Executive Director, with the authority the title confers. PTH attempted to mitigate the power and privilege that comes with such titles, as well as race, class, and other identities in the hope of creating a non-hierarchical organizational culture that was homeless-led. We sought to achieve this by recognizing power and privilege and creating organizational structures and practices to explore and to off-set all forms of power and privilege. I recalled the many occasions that PTH members felt disrespected by journalists and researchers who interviewed them and either

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<sup>212</sup> Daniel Kerr, "We Know What the Problem Is: Using Oral History to Develop a Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness from the Bottom Up," *Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003): 34.

mischaracterized their words, or who disappeared and wrote papers, never to be heard from again. One narrator burst into tears when I told her that she would retain copyright, saying that she'd always wanted to write a book about her life story. Another laughed when I told him he would retain copyright and said "I guess you learned something about homeless people at PTH."<sup>213</sup> I emphasize that they will review their transcripts prior to its publication and have the opportunity to approve their use, or to disallow it.

**My field notes** after each interview were revealing about the narrator, the interview process, how I was feeling about the project and my relationship with each. The following excerpt is from field notes written after my first interview with William Burnett. I critique myself for "correcting" him in the chronology of events around the vacant property count. It was during this interview and my reflection on it that I came to more intentionally center myself as an oral historian in relationship to the narrators. My understanding of the importance of the meaning of events to the narrators as well as the significance of inherited memory and its relationship to collective resistance was becoming clearer:

Towards the end of William's interview there are two moments where I really shift my role from oral historian to some combination of co-conspirator, organizer, friend, comrade. There are three moments I want to write about but in one of them I thankfully stay quieter and kind of stay in my oral historian mode. One is with the vacant property count because he said that we hadn't done it and we had, but it was before his time. So I interject without thinking "oh we had already done that" and he says "well no not yet" and I'm like "yes we did, we did East Harlem. There was a little minor back-and-forth and then I thought to myself "shut up". The second moment is when he's talking about our campaigns and saying "they didn't have goals."... and that's not true especially not true for civil rights. Housing was a new campaign. I think it was really interesting and

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<sup>213</sup> Marcus Moore, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Nov. 16, 2017.

reminded me a little bit of Arvernetta and the Homeless Organizing Academy. William was very instrumental in the housing campaign and building the housing campaign and Arvernetta was very instrumental in evolving the Homeless Organizing Academy. That they both claim that they had a meaningful role I think is really beautiful because it's true. It's really interesting how maybe we as human beings remember things that we did and that we had a role in. I think that the ownership in the process is very important and what keeps keeps people engaged and keeps people active and keeps people loving the work. They see themselves in it. The third moment was when we were talking about the Potters Field campaign towards the end of the interview. We're finishing each other sentences about how people were talking about it and about why it was important, that it's the "mass grave in the prison of the dead" and we're channeling Charlie and we're laughing and smiling and so it's almost like like we're just recollecting together as opposed to me as a oral historian just listening to what he recollects.<sup>214</sup>

The power of interpersonal relationships that shaped PTH has been described in the section on meaning but these relationships also carry over to and inform this project. Two of the narrators withdrew their consent after their interviews, only to later request that their interviews be included. I refer to them as Narrator X and Y. In one case it was the result of the narrator being angry with PTH after the interview and in the other; it was the result of me hurting the narrator's feelings after the interview. Social media was involved in both cases. I acknowledge their right to retract their interviews up until they are archived however I don't want to lose their voices or the work that we both put into the interviews. Narrator X became angry at PTH about something that had nothing to do with our interview and as has happened in the past; they "quit" PTH temporarily. Eight days after the interview I received an email with "cancel my story" in the subject line, with no explanation. I had already transcribed it, and it was amazing in its detail of their early life and experiences in the shelter system which contrasted their experience with PTH. They played a critical role in many pivotal actions and I was devastated. I knew

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<sup>214</sup> Field notes by author, interview with William Burnett, Nov. 17, 2017.

that Narrator X had quit PTH in the past and that it was likely that they would take some time off and re-join PTH, but I couldn't assume that either would regrant permission to include their interview in this project. Through posting about the project on social media, and allowing for the passage of time, I was able to re-inspire Narrator X about the project. Narrator X began commenting on the photos of other narrators being interviewed and I responded by telling them how important their interview was. Narrator X emailed me permission to include their interview two months later. Narrator Y became enraged at me after I commented on a photo of me that they posted on Facebook, referring to me as the "former CEO of PTH". My post was basically an anti-capitalist rant about never having been a CEO and hating hierarchies and it hurt their feelings. I received a text from them the next day that I should have had a direct conversation with them and Narrator Y was right. I certainly didn't mean to offend Narrator Y, who was honoring me by that title, even though I hated it. Again, it was other narrators discussing their interviews with one another as well as seeing posts about the project on social media that moved Narrator Y to text me, authorizing me to use their interview after two months.

This incident deepened my understanding that, for at least some of the narrators, this project is a part of PTH. What may happen now within the organization could impact their participation in a project about the *history* of PTH. The fact that I know them through my old position at PTH makes this even messier. I do have permission to utilize the complete archive but this is not a formal project of PTH, although I hope that it benefits the work of PTH. These incidents also forced me to think through the narrator selection process. If I ask members to be interviewed knowing they have a history of

taking offense to the point where they have quit PTH this poses a danger that they may “quit” this project. Narrators may get angry at PTH and rescind their participation. However, I do not want to marginalize powerful narrators because I know their history includes disagreeing with and even quitting the organization.

### **Step 2: Project Design to Blueprint**

The process of designing the project and creating the blueprint happened concurrently with the interviews for Phase I. I refer to this process as Step 2 because it is an entirely different function from the interviews themselves. I began the interviews within one month of beginning the OHMA program at Columbia and over two semesters there I was able to identify the project’s goals and emerging categories of inquiry with crucial support from the faculty. I benefitted tremendously from being a student in the OHMA program and engaging with theory as I was beginning the actual practice of oral history research. The time period covered by this oral history research project is from November, 1999 until January 1, 2017: from the founding of PTH through its first 17 years. I chose this time period because Anthony Williams, the surviving co-founder was available for interviews and is deeply invested in documenting the history of the organization. The founding of the organization by two homeless men is an essential aspect of PTH’s political identity. Anthony Williams had to be included. PTH has archival materials documenting this entire period. January, 2017 is when I left the organization as Executive Director. I chose this as the end date because I didn’t know if PTH’s organizing methodology would change under new leadership. I made adjustments to the

categories of inquiry as informed by preliminary findings with guidance provided by my instructors, including a scan of other oral history research project blueprints.

### **Step 3: The Initial Listening, Indexing, Transcribing and Editing**

I listened once to each interview within a day or two, without taking notes or doing anything else that might distract me. Immersed, I could picture them speaking and heard things I missed during the actual interview. I listened again, indexing each interview, making notations at frequent intervals. I made lists of key words, proper names and themes and inputted them onto a Metadata Spreadsheet. The interviews demonstrated the connection between narrators. Their experience and analysis, the evidence of the power of inherited and collective memory and shared meaning is demonstrated by the consistency of the overarching themes across interviews.<sup>215</sup> This process also allowed me to standardize the terms that I was using, particularly in terms of identifying and assigning meaning to latent content. The indexing and identification of key words and themes allow for searching the interviews but they also create filters for others to encounter the interviews. I was keenly aware of these and other dangers of framing or changing the narrator's meaning with my own analysis, even as I felt compelled to make sense of these stories and this history.<sup>216</sup> Indexing presented challenges in terms of representation because I highlighted information based on what I think is important, or which I interpret that the narrator thinks is important, in order to summarize that segment

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<sup>215</sup> Tom Wengraf, "Uncovering the General from Within the Particular," in *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science: Comparative Issues and Examples* eds P. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat, and T. Wengraf (New York: Routledge, 2002), 149.

<sup>216</sup> Borland, Katherine, "That's Not What I Said: Interpretative Conflict in Oral History Narrative Research," in *The Oral History Reader*, Third Edition, eds. R. Perks and A. Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2016).

of the interview. Indexing also presents opportunities for shared authority in the analysis phase of POHR.

It was important to quickly hear and to transcribe them while the interview was still fresh in my mind as well as to return them to the narrators while it was still fresh in theirs. I determined it was essential to the relationship with the narrators, but also to honor their contribution to the Project and to PTH, that their interviews be carefully indexed and transcribed in their entirety and presented to them for their approval and edits if indicated. I emailed or handed them printed versions of their transcripts for their review. Below is the text of an email to William Burnett, narrator and advisory board member with editing instructions and an overall orientation to the editing process:

Dear William,

Thanks for taking the time to edit your transcript. This editing round is strictly to clean up the "sort of", "you know", "like" superfluous type of things, and also places where you think aloud and therefore say things like "that, that, that" or "and, and, and". There might still be some of those which I kept to show emphasis.

This editing round is to have a written transcript to sync with the audio so I can't rewrite sentences to make them sound better. But I think it's brilliant as is. If someday we do go with a book, we can do more rewriting if that's important. I also italicized places where you quoted folks, or yourself. Some of the proper names are not spelled correctly, but I figured you could help me out on those!

One thing that I am still learning is when to create a "new paragraph", and am not sure if I need to always do this when a new theme is introduced. Either way, your editing doesn't affect that. If there are things that are left out, flag those and we'll cover that in the next interview.

Editing Instructions:

Don't delete!

- Use strike through
- Use the comment boxes for anything that you want to discuss or flag.

It would be wonderful if you could do this by January 10th!



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I heard the rhythm of their voices as I read the transcripts or as I read the quotes that I pulled from them. By recording and transcribing these interviews and making them available online in a manner where I “get out of the way” of the potential empathy created between the narrator and the audience, my hope is that the audience will begin to *picture* the homeless differently, as members of intersecting communities; and not othered as merely “the homeless.” This positions the narrators to teach the audience not only about their humanity but about their collective struggle for social justice.

**Step 4: Categories of Inquiry, themes within and across interviews and units of analysis** Categories of inquiry are conceptual buckets that represent large ideas. The

Categories of Inquiry for the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project are:

1. The Meaning of Picture the Homeless
2. Organizing
3. Resistance
4. Education
5. Leadership
6. Race
7. Justice
8. Poverty
9. The System
10. Intersubjectivity

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project mirrors the process of community organizing by listening for themes that emerge from each narrator’s interview and by identifying themes across interviews with multiple narrators through both latent and explicit content. Issue identification is a core function of community organizing. The process is very similar to identifying themes as an oral historian. Identifying issues and themes for both disciplines is dialogic and may happen before, during or after the

interview. By dialogic I mean that to the extent we can analyze and uncover meaning together, as organizer and community member or as oral historian and narrator, deepens our shared understanding. This is why the process of analyzing meaning that results in identifying issues and themes is most effectively achieved through the sharing of authority in the analysis phase of research. Below is the rest of the text of an email sent to narrator and advisory board member William Burnett. I asked him to review his transcripts and to make edits. Later in the email I invite him into the analysis of the transcripts by providing him with questions from the first interview that either he or I had flagged for follow-up to think about prior to his second interview. I included the timecode and directly quoted from the transcript in my email to him, so he could reference the entire transcript for additional context and reflection:

**Questions for us to discuss next time:**

[00:52:35.15] William Burnett: I had already seen it in the sense of, usually when, not even homeless but just poor, [pauses] and you have nowhere to turn and you really need some help, it's usually another poor person who'll be the one to respond. So there was that sense of empathy but there was also this sense of resourcefulness among the members, so that if one person didn't have a resource and another person did, and so it really gave a strong sense of a, of an authentic [pauses] community. You know where other folks talk about community I was watching people live it out. In a space, New York City, you didn't expect people to have that community spirit. Here are the poorest of the poor, [pause] were exhibiting that community spirit as I was watching that unfold. It was really touching to watch, and again, I wasn't a part of it yet, I was just observing it.

[00:53:34.26] Lynn Lewis: Could you tell me an example of when you saw that in action?

[00:53:38.25] William Burnett: Maybe we can do that in the future, as I reflect on it?

**II.**

[01:25:41.04] Lynn Lewis: Well, at a subsequent session I want to really dig deep into the Potters Field campaign in terms of how we organized that campaign because unlike other campaigns we didn't have to have a demonstration. We didn't have to sleep in the street; we leveraged power in a different way.

[01:26:02.26] William Burnett: Yeah.

[01:26:03.19] Lynn Lewis: I'm going to set that to the side a little bit.

### III.

[01:34:01.08] Lynn Lewis: You've referenced a couple of times this process of radicalization. What are some of the things that you would say contributed to your radicalization, and what is that radicalization, what does that mean?

[01:34:20.20] William Burnett: Can we save that for a whole separate interview?

[01:34:22.24] Lynn Lewis: Yes.

[01:34:22.27] William Burnett: Because number one, I'd like to think on that question, and number two, I think that conversation could be an interview by itself.

[01:34:29.13] Lynn Lewis: Yeah, and I think it's a crucial one because on the one hand, if [pauses] the organization were just comprised of campaigns, comprised of members, is developing organically, the radicalization where does it come from? Does it come from the actions? The interactions? Where does it come from? It's not imposed, right?

[01:34:55.26] William Burnett: No, it's not.

[01:34:56.17] Lynn Lewis: What are some of the things, I think it could be very helpful to try and identify what are some of those things, yeah.

[01:35:03.27] William Burnett: I'm thinking it would be a whole conversation by itself, so we should save that. Table that and make a note that we're going to talk about that.<sup>217</sup>

xoxoxoxoxox

Lynn

I chose individual words, phrases and even passages as my **unit of analysis**. In the following example, Rogers, reveals what PTH meant to him through both latent and explicit content.

It is important to me to understand that if I work to serve God, and others work with me to serve God, that we're on the same side. And that means that sometimes the assault on them, if they are being arrested, they're being assaulted, they're being attacked, they're being vilified, then I may have to face the same assault and vilification. That's part of what I'm commanded to do. Not be a bystander, but to participate in the fight, ultimately, for justice. And I am awakened to that in the late '90s. And at the same time, ultimately, a whole lot of other circumstances led to me being homeless. And the group that I felt was fighting for justice, speaking for—on behalf of the homeless, and doing the things that I saw or heard as God's commands, that was the Picture the Homeless people. And that's—it's like, okay, if these people are doing the same thing that I'm

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<sup>217</sup> Excerpt from an email sent by author to William Burnett on Dec.26, 2017

doing, then maybe I should be doing it with them, as opposed to being a lone wolf someplace.<sup>218</sup>

Rogers emphasized that joining PTH was consistent with his religious and political beliefs. Joining PTH as a member provided Rogers with the opportunity to participate in collective resistance once he became homeless. Through latent content – “maybe I should be doing it with them” we hear the theme of collective resistance. Explicit content regarding the meaning of PTH is expressed in the passage “the group that I felt was fighting for justice, speaking for – on behalf of the homeless, and doing the things that I saw or heard as God’s commands, that was the Picture the Homeless people.” I include tone of voice, body language or something signaling emotion as indicators of latent or explicit content:

The tone and volume range and the rhythm of popular speech carry implicit meaning and social connotations which are not reproducible in writing...The same statement may have quite contradictory meanings, according to the speaker’s intonation, which cannot be represented objectively in the transcript, but only approximately described in the transcriber’s own words.<sup>219</sup>

During the course of the interview, the narrator communicated latent and explicit content through words as well as body language. The interviewer’s interpretation of the meaning of their words and/or body language may generate additional questions, thereby deepening the dialogue. Steven High points out that “When our interviewees are transported back to another time, or another place, their body language sometimes

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<sup>218</sup> Rogers, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 18, 2018.

<sup>219</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in *The Oral History Reader*, Third Edition, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2015), 65.

changes to what it would have been in that cultural and historical context.”<sup>220</sup> During Nikita Price’s first interview, he described his neighborhood:

At the time I was staying in Harlem. Thank God it was the end of the crack era. Yeah. I was like up around the Polo Grounds, 152nd and Eighth Avenue, 149th Street. I lived in all those areas up there. [pauses] Yeah. But then again, like I said, I’ve lived in places where you know, there was all kind of desolation around you. So you know, you adapt. I’ve been good with that. I’ve been able to get in and adapt to whatever my environment was. So, yeah.<sup>221</sup>

Nikita looked away when he said the word “desolation,” as if he were seeing something. I didn’t assume what his body language meant, but it felt to me that it signaled a significant memory pregnant with meaning for him. I wanted us to explore that together and asked him if he was picturing something when he said the word “desolation”:

Yeah, I remember all of those buildings that were boarded up and abandoned and [pauses] like I said, crack had really taken hold of New York City. The reason why I look up all the time is because whenever I go back to Harlem now, all those buildings have been refurbished, and the [pauses] look of Harlem has changed. When I was living there, it was [pauses] 98 percent black. I remember telling white people when they were [laughs] on the train at 125th Street “hey are you sure you’re supposed to be on the train at this time?”<sup>222</sup>

Latent content is evident by the narrator’s use of different words to express the same concept. This is where decoding language is useful. Nikita described what gentrification looks like without using the word. He described Harlem as previously being “98 percent black” and laughing, said that in the 1990’s he asked white people on the train at 125<sup>th</sup> St “if they were supposed to be on the train at this time.” Poverty was described as working

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<sup>220</sup> Steven High, “Interviewing Survivors,” in *Oral History at the Crossroads Sharing Life Stories of Survival, and Displacement* (Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2014), 39.

<sup>221</sup> Nikita Price, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Dec. 2, 2017.

<sup>222</sup> Nikita Price, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Dec. 2, 2017.

two jobs and not being able to afford housing. The same words may hold multiple meanings requiring additional analysis. Short passages and even one sentence or phrase, may contain latent as well as explicit content referring to more than one theme. In Section II of this thesis, I illustrated how the themes raised by narrators are connected. To cite an example, Anthony Williams described how PTH's mission statement was written by Lewis Haggins. This short passage contains multiple meanings as evidenced by latent and explicit content. Lewis used the writing of the mission statement as an organizing *and* an educational opportunity for Anthony, as well as a public education tool. Both organizing and education are two categories of inquiry for this project. Public education is a theme contained within the broader category of education. As an organizing function, inviting Anthony to participate in the writing of the mission statement helped to build Anthony's leadership and investment in PTH. It's educational function was to teach him what a mission statement was and how to write one. The third function was to create a document to organize other homeless folks and to educate the public at large. Affirming the identity of PTH as opposed to discrimination of any form, including race, color or creed points to another category of inquiry, race. For the categories of organizing and education, the content it is latent, and for the category of race and it is explicit. Table 3 illustrates this by bolding the unit of analysis under each of three categories of inquiry:

**Table 3. Example of Units of Analysis Representing Latent and Explicit Content Within the Same Quote**

Category of Inquiry: Organizing	Category of Inquiry: Education	Category of Inquiry: Race
He was <b>explaining to me the wording and how to put the wording together, and he put the wording together</b> , and he says, “No race, no color, no creed”	He was <b>explaining</b> to me the wording and <b>how to put</b> the wording together, and he put the wording together, and he says, “No race, no color, no creed”	He was explaining to me the wording and how to put the wording together, and he put the wording together, and he says, “No <b>race</b> , no color, no creed”

Anticipating a large volume of transcript to analyze, and because my units of analysis may be as small as one word, I created a chart to track the content that I assigned to each category of inquiry. I began placing themes and even sub themes “within” them and then placed units of analysis within each theme: highlighted latent and explicit content as in the example above. Each entry includes the narrators name, theme or sub theme, session date, and time code allowing me to return to it for further analysis and to determine the frequency of reference for each theme, sub theme and category of inquiry.

#### **Step 5: Shared Analysis: Listening Sessions and Oral History Open House**

The establishment of a formal advisory board for this project structurally assigned power to narrators from the initial cohort. Its purpose is to hold me and one another accountable in the analysis phase as well as in the representation of the material. My relationships with each of the narrators and their relationships with one another have been forged through collective resistance and deepened through this oral history project.

The advisory board for this Project is comprised of eight narrators. Except for Anthony Williams who lives in Baltimore, and Arvernetta Henry who was out of town, each board member attended the OHMA end-of-year exhibit. The exhibit offered them the opportunity to understand the scope and potential of this work, to see themselves as a

part of it and to witness the interest of a broad audience. Narrators have shared with me that they have been listening to one another's interviews, which are available on Soundcloud and linked to the PTH Oral History Project website that I created.<sup>223</sup> There are other POHR-related tasks beyond data analysis where advisory board members formally, and other narrators informally, played and will play an important role. These include reviewing interview questions, annotating their own transcripts, suggesting interview locations, outreaching to and communicating with other narrators, organizing project events, and identifying areas of additional research. Collaborations with narrators through an advisory board expand the potential for identification latent meaning if the narrators participate in the analysis of their own or another's interview.

Structuring shared analysis into POHR has required experimentation. I have learned that it will take more than sporadic attempts at including the advisory board in the analysis phase and that a more formal setting than my apartment may be required. I invited each of the initial cohort of narrators to join the advisory board and each said yes although not all of them have participated in collective listening or open house sessions where we analyze transcripts. I am convinced that the function of the advisory board is unclear to the narrators and indeed, it isn't completely defined in my mind either. The narrators have very specific skills, including the ability to identify latent content through language because of the knowledge produced in the specific context of homelessness. Phrases such as "The System," or even their tone of voice indicating concerns about their shelter or the way they say the word "no" or "yes", reveal latent content. Nikita Price, in

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<sup>223</sup> <https://www.picturethehomelessoralhistoryproject.com>



using the term “the system”, referred to the homeless service system, as well as public assistance and other institutions that regulate homeless and poor people’s lives. The unit of analysis is bolded:

You show them that yeah, you have the same worth as anyone else. You have the same intelligence than a lot of cases. Your present situation does not define who you are. It defines **the system** and what you're caught up in right now.<sup>224</sup>

Shared authority<sup>225</sup> in the analysis phase of the project requires that I share my newly acquired knowledge of oral history research, as well as my thoughts on POHR and QCA, so that narrators can also reflect and engage as fully as possible as advisory board members. Again, how to do this remains somewhat unclear. Should I create a tip sheet or workshop? Indexing is an example of concrete “oral history” skills, as is the practice of asking of open-ended questions and identifying categories of inquiry, themes, and key words. Learning these functions is essential for advisory board members to deeply engage in the process of analysis – to what extent and through what process remains to be determined in Phase II. Kerr describes the importance of accountability between the researcher and the homeless narrator and the benefits of the homeless narrator’s participation in the analysis phase of research:

Presently there is no accountability in the relationship between the state and the homeless subject or between the academic and the homeless subject...Such an approach necessitates more than just having the homeless as an audience or as spectators, but also having them as active participants in the formation of a collective analysis. James Jones’s research on the Tuskegee syphilis experiment

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<sup>224</sup> Nikita Price, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Dec.2, 2017.

<sup>225</sup> Amy Starecheski, “Review of A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History by Michael Frisch,” in *The Oral History Review* 2017 Vol 44, No. 2 pp. 372-390.

makes it clear that researchers cannot ethically study misery in a detached scientific fashion.<sup>226</sup>

Shared analysis requires the creation of structured dialogic spaces for the narrators to speak with one another from a position of shared authority.<sup>227</sup> In order to truly share authority it is first necessary to define the roles among all parties and identify what skill sets each bring. The term “shared authority” is attractive to anyone interested in democratic practices who wish to challenge traditional structures of power and privilege. But it also must be acknowledged in both community organizing as well as oral history, that the roles of organizer, oral historian, narrator, and leader are different, even if they overlap, and these differences are based in part on what skill sets each role requires. I don’t mean to assert that each of us must be “locked in” to a specific function or social location for the rest of our lives, but I do assert that in order to share authority we need to understand what each of us brings to the project in which we aspire to share authority. Then we need to commit to sharing our knowledge in order to build each’s capacity to evolve and in that manner, truly begin to “share authority.” In Amy Starecheski’s review of Michael Frisch’s seminal work, she writes about the tension between the historian occupying an elitest role vs. the social history movement which challenged historian’s monopoly on the power to interpret the past:

Frisch’s idea of a ‘shared authority’ represents an attempt to find a path outside of these two positions, neither writing off the historian’s skills as necessarily elitist

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<sup>226</sup> Daniel Kerr, “We Know What the Problem Is: Using Oral History to Develop a Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness from the Bottom Up,” *Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003): 30.

<sup>227</sup> Kerr, “We Know What the Problem Is: Using Oral History to Develop a Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness from the Bottom Up,” 30.

or reactionary nor reifying community-produced history as the sole fount of true knowledge and authority.<sup>228</sup>

One strategy to find this alternate path forward is to embrace the differences in skill sets and social location of each party engaged in our research projects and map out how to share skills. In this way the research process is as instructive as is the research product. Kerr explores the concept of reciprocal ethnography, drawing from Elaine Lawless's<sup>229</sup> research model which stresses the importance of building a research structure that includes spaces for the collective discussion of research and development of analysis with her research subjects.<sup>230</sup>

I structured dialogic spaces for the advisory board by holding listening parties and a series of Oral History Open House sessions. Of the two planned listening parties with the advisory board we have to date convened one, on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Prior to the listening party, I imagined that we could listen to one another's audio clips, review transcripts and discuss the themes identified in each interview as well as the master theme list that encompasses all of the interviews for their input. That initial agenda was too ambitious for a two hour session. I decided to hold off on reviewing the printed transcripts and identifying themes for future sessions. We wouldn't have had time to listen to audio and discuss what we heard as well as read transcripts and analyze them for

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<sup>228</sup> Starecheski, "Review of A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History by Michael Frisch," in *The Oral History Review* 44, no. 2 (2017): 376.

<sup>229</sup> Elaine J. Lawless, *Holy Women, Wholly Women: Sharing Ministries of Wholeness through Life Stories and Reciprocal Ethnography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

<sup>230</sup> Daniel Kerr, "We Know What the Problem Is: Using Oral History to Develop a Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness from the Bottom Up," *Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003): 37.

themes. What we did accomplish during the first listening session was sharing a meal, catching up with one another and grounding ourselves in this stage of the work. One narrator phoned to complain that he was not informed about the listening party, and everyone joined in the conversation and teased him about never answering his phone. Others arrived late. I had created audio clips from each narrator's interview so that we could listen to them together and continue to develop a collective appreciation for the power of each narrator's voice and perspective. The listening party was an effective way to gain momentum for this project. What we did cover was meaningful. Borrowing from *Ultra-red*, I acknowledge the importance of:

...sound-based methodologies for collective reflection and analysis of lived experience. These sound investigations employ instructions, or protocols for collective listening that guide participants through listening together to audio recordings from everyday life places, events, and speech. This experience of listening together serves as a catalyst for sharing, discussing and analyzing what people hear in the recordings themselves and in the ways others listen.<sup>231</sup>

I didn't provide an introduction prior to playing each audio piece so as not to influence their analysis. Three of the four narrators sat and listened with their eyes closed, and one sat looking at the floor. They were all, as was I, visibly moved at hearing their own and each other's voices, and tell stories that each of us had participated in or had "inherited". After each piece, I asked them two questions: what did you hear and how did it make you feel.<sup>232</sup> Narrators shared that they "heard hospitality,"<sup>233</sup> which is "a continuation of how

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<sup>231</sup> <http://oralhistory.columbia.edu/calendar/people/november-2-history-echoes-part-2-sound-trans-freedom>

<sup>232</sup> I was deeply inspired by Rebert Sember, a founder of Ultra Red, whose presentation during the OHMA Workshop series demonstrated Ultra Red's methodology of sound investigation.

we were raised.”<sup>234</sup> Other words that the advisory board members heard were “welcoming”, “egalitarian” and “camaraderie”. What narrators heard was also reflected in the themes that I had identified. I shared a short mixtape I had made as a homework assignment for my fieldwork class with snippets from several interviews that speak to what PTH means. Responses to that included “it made people feel like PTH is a safe place”, and that people were “accepted for who they are.”<sup>235</sup> I also played a brief piece I had made of Anthony describing how PTH got its name. I had felt ambivalent about editing in an introduction but it needed context. I didn’t want my voice to be too present. The advisory board members agreed that we needed a short introduction to provide context for listeners. They concurred that doing so didn’t detract from centering the voice of the narrator. We discussed having advisory board members generating content and recording the introductory pieces, so that the voice isn’t only mine. It was then that DeBoRah Dickerson affirmed that we need to know what happened next, who came after Anthony and Lewis, and how PTH grew after its founding. All of the advisory board members emphasized the importance of these short educational pieces so that PTH members, staff and others know PTH’s history.

Our final discussion was about the types of things they would like me to make audio clips about, what topics I should cover in subsequent interviews, and who else they think I should interview. I didn’t record this session because I felt ambivalent about whether advisory board members would feel self-conscious. I also felt overwhelmed

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<sup>233</sup> DeBoRah Dickerson, *Notes from listening party*, in possession of the author, June 8, 2018.

<sup>234</sup> DeBoRah Dickerson, June 8, 2018.

<sup>235</sup> Marcus Moore, *Notes from listening party*, in possession of the author, June 8, 2018

managing the recording equipment while playing the audio because I still feel inadequate with the equipment. I regret not doing so and believe that it actually would have communicated the importance of their role in the listening session to document their thoughts and analysis of the material as it happened. I shared with them that we would have other sessions but that some would be focused on reading transcripts and discussing their content. I thought about the listening session and how to best accomplish what I had envisioned would be an analysis of themes within the transcripts and what type of event would make those types of conversations possible. To a certain extent we are making the road as we are walking, together. As I move through each phase I acknowledge that being flexible means continuously engaging with the advisory board in order to respect the integrity of the participatory approach of this oral history project.

I then held a series of oral history open house sessions to replicate the consistency of PTH's organizing campaign meetings. These occurred over three Mondays from 4 to 8pm in August, 2018, in my apartment. I wanted to re-create a practice of collective analysis and realized that one or two listening parties would not allow us to go deeply enough into the interviews in order to co-construct a truly participatory oral history project. To allow people to build their daily routine around collective work, the community organizing methodology of PTH included holding campaign meetings and political education classes the same time and day of the week. It made sense to me that if we began to schedule our collective analysis sessions on the same days and times it would enhance attendance.

The oral history open house sessions were revelatory at times, and at other times felt like a support group that didn't contribute to this project beyond strengthening our relationships. The combination of relationship building and advisory board "work" very much resembled PTH. As described earlier, relationship building is an essential part of, and not separate from, the organizing and the oral history work. Members discussed their lives and their thoughts on the transcripts almost interchangeably. Snacks were offered but not a full meal to give us time to review transcripts. Each attendee chose the transcript that they wanted to read and was given a highlighter and asked to highlight anything that they think is important. The life history segments of the interviews elicited a lot of surprises, and comments ranged from William's surprise at "how old" Nikita Price is, to DeBoRah leading a discussion on immigrant rights after reading Roger's transcript. Marcus noted that community organizing could benefit from participants knowing more about one another. When I asked him how we reach people that aren't teachable and support them to become teachable, he replied "Maybe we can have a listening class or session. Learn how to listen first. Maybe that can be helpful. I think good leaders become not only good followers, but good listeners at the same time."<sup>236</sup> Marcus was particularly energized as he read the transcript of Anthony Williams's interview that described how he met Lewis Haggins and the founding of PTH. His notes on the transcript highlight that "no one is perfect" and Marcus shared during our discussion that it is important for PTH members to know more about the co-founders of

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<sup>236</sup> Marcus Moore, Interview by Lynn Lewis, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, Jan. 11, 2018.

the organization. As we discussed how best to present these lessons, he grew excited at the possibility of converting some of these stories into performance pieces.

The full advisory board did not attend the open house sessions. People cited other commitments or illness, preventing them from attending. advisory board members with whom it is a challenge to communicate did not integrate these sessions into their schedules and reminding them via phone or email wasn't possible. In order to fully engage the advisory board in the analysis phase of this work, it is essential to continue to identify ways to structure sessions to collectively do this work. Narrators reach out to me to discuss the project on an individual basis and I am considering ways to integrate our current methods of communication into their participation as advisory board members. The marinating effect of including the advisory board in these various project activities has been their thinking deeply about the project outside of our formal meetings. Marcus Moore, an advisory board member, called me nearly two months after the listening party, and said that he's been thinking about my request for their ideas about what else should we cover in this oral history project. He's been away at a conference in Atlanta and said that not many people know about PTH's victory in winning the inclusion of housing status in the Community Safety Act<sup>237</sup>, or our involvement in the Stop and Frisk<sup>238</sup> class action lawsuit. He said this history is important for people to know and that "you have

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<sup>237</sup> The Community Safety Act was a legislative package of two Bills passed by the New York City Council in 2014. Both pieces of landmark legislation were priorities of the PTH civil rights campaign, and one established the first local law in the U.S. prohibiting policing profiling based on housing status.

<sup>238</sup> Stop and Frisk was a widespread practice by the NYPD that was found unconstitutional in 2014 as the result of a class action law suit. PTH also worked on legal support for this victory.



transitioned but Nikita and I and other folks are still here.”<sup>239</sup> Marcus reminisced about our presentation at the Howard Zinn Book Fair in San Francisco and how in that “sea of books” there wasn’t one book about homelessness which for him affirmed how important our oral history project is. Structuring space for a shared authority among the researcher and the narrators not only enriches the data, but has implications for amplifying the impact of the research itself. Figuring this out is one of my most pressing questions for Phase II and III of this project.

The integration of participatory practices within the oral history research project’s structure led to a deeper analysis of the interviews. The lessons of this thesis however point to the need for even deeper engagement with the advisory board that will include many more sessions dedicated to content analysis – individually and collectively. The engagement with advisory board members to date has provided additional analysis of the interviews themselves and it has established a “culture” of shared analysis. This step is important in establishing the authority of the narrators in this process. Similar to lessons learned about community organizing and representation, it isn’t automatic for narrators to see themselves in the role of “historian” or to take on the functions necessary to actually share authority. The narrators interviewed for Phase I of this project have contributed to this project on many levels. Their interviews are rich in insight and hold the collective memory of PTH. They have also taught me about the possibilities and challenges of POHR research, and for that I am deeply grateful. For Phases II and III I look forward to

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<sup>239</sup> Marcus Moore, Author’s recollection of phone conversation with Marcus Moore, July 27, 2018.

experimenting with what shared authority can mean for the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project.

### **Conclusion**

The homeless narrators of this project are best equipped to inspire other homeless people to organize, to assert their human dignity, and to fight for their rights by identifying and winning solutions to homelessness because they have successfully done so. The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project utilizes oral history research to investigate why homeless New Yorkers chose to devote their time to this homeless-led grass roots organization, how participation in a homeless-led organization impacted their lives, what elements of the PTH organizing methodology and culture supported their involvement and leadership, and what changes occurred as a result of their collective resistance. The purpose of this project is to make available the research findings in order to create the possibility for replication of this successful model as well as to provide PTH with documentation of its own history. Preliminary findings reveal that the themes common to most of the interviews are embedded within the origin story as well as the mission statement. One conclusion that I draw from this is that PTH's organizing methodology remained true to the vision of its co-founders.

This thesis concludes Phase I of this project. The preliminary findings offer important lessons about the relationship between inherited memory and collective resistance. This thesis explores the impact of the PTH origin story through inherited and collective memory. It is a political construct that has effectively moved homeless New Yorkers to join PTH and to deepen their commitment and leadership to the organization.

It created a counter narrative that assigned dignity and power to homeless New Yorkers. The more nuanced history of PTH's founding has never been publicly shared, and emerges from the interviews with co-founder Anthony Williams. Exploring the connection between inherited and collective memory and collective resistance requires that we examine the ways in which the PTH origin story has fueled collective resistance – perhaps because of its omissions and silences. Yet we must also consider that we explore how those omissions and silences impair our ability to understand the process of PTH's founding and how it developed if one of our goals is its replication and social movement building. Phase I of this oral history project has taught me the importance of honoring and balancing meaning across multiple truths. For PTH to serve as a model for homeless led organizing these omissions and silences must be weighed and their disclosure carefully considered.

This research matters because homelessness is at an all-time high in New York City, and nationally. Indeed, housing exclusion and homelessness is a global phenomenon. Spending on the homeless service system in New York City continues to escalate and in 2018, the New York City budget for homeless services exceeded \$1Billion. The primary audience for this project is homeless and poor people, because it is homeless and very poor people who have the most to gain from changing the perception of homelessness and homeless people. As has been noted by Kerr, “Defining the homeless as a primary audience would be a significant act in and of itself, and an acknowledgement of the inability of the present political process to deal with the

phenomenon of homelessness.”<sup>240</sup> A secondary audience is that sector which includes public policy researchers and organizations, academics and elected officials who are stakeholders with the political power to make the changes that homeless folks demand.

This oral history project seeks to support the justice work of homeless folks. Because stories humanize individuals who are members of marginalized groups, their stories inspire empathy for the individual narrator but may fall short of generating an understanding in the listener about the systemic conditions which give rise to injustice. This oral history project aims at much more than inspiring empathy. There are limits to empathy. Because PTH has a social justice oriented mission, it was never enough to generate empathy for one person when tens of thousands more were in their same situation. Empathy recognizes the humanity of another and stirs our emotions but doesn't require us to take action to end the root causes that produce the pain that moves us to feel empathy. Charity is dangerous when it only alleviates temporary suffering without challenging its root causes because it becomes part of what accommodates systems of oppression. At the end of the day, empathy and charity alone allow the system that produces inequality to continue. It is one thing to feel empathy for homeless people but it is another thing to listen to them, to learn from them and to take political leadership from them. This project provides an opportunity to amplify the work of listening and learning from homeless folks, so central to PTH's mission. PTH aims for empathy that

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<sup>240</sup> Daniel Kerr, “We Know What the Problem Is: Using Oral History to Develop a Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness from the Bottom Up,” *Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003): 30.

results in justice work that is based in respect for the leadership of homeless folks by actively supporting the change that they are fighting for.

Oral history and community organizing share many elements. While both disciplines share a social justice purpose, community organizing demands collective action that leads to social change. The success of community organizing in the U.S. is often narrowly measured by whether a demand was “won.” The community building necessary to mount effective resistance is difficult to quantify. Oral history isn’t evaluated on winning demands. Oral history’s success may be measured by whether and how, it achieved its goals, by its innovation, or by adherence to research protocols, or its presentation and reception by an audience. The impact on social change is difficult to measure, even if that is a goal of the oral history project. I do believe however, that oral history can help us uncover how community organizing achieved social change through the stories of those who participated in that change. In this sense, oral history is an essential complement of community organizing. The memories of the narrators for this phase of the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project clearly demonstrate the centrality of their relationships with PTH’s co-founders through inherited memory and with one another to their own capacity to engage in collective resistance. I am hopeful that this participatory oral history research approach will inform and animate the fields of community organizing and oral history research, strengthening both and leading to even more powerful movements for social justice.

## **VI. Epilogue**

There are many types of blessings that I have received over the past year. These blessings allowed me to focus on Phase I of this project, including writing this thesis. First, I thank my daughter Rocio Rayo, whose faith in me makes me a better person. She patiently created the initial website, which was far beyond my skill sets and supported me in many other ways. I also thank Donald Anthonyson for listening to me talk endlessly about this project and working through lessons about organizing and revolution with me as I begin this journey of incorporating oral history research and community organizing. Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz, Lynn Roberts, James Tracy, Michael Premo and Rachel Falcone each provided much needed moral support in my application process to the OHMA program at Columbia. Mary Marshall Clark, the Director of the Columbia Center for Oral History Research and Amy Starecheski, were then co-directors of the OHMA program. They were both were both incredibly supportive of this project from day one. Additionally, their support of me personally gave me the confidence that I needed to return to school and begin this new chapter in my life. I could not have accomplished any of this without their support, insight and knowledge as well as their fierce commitment to excellence and integrity in the practice of Oral History. Amy Starecheski and Bill McAllister were my thesis advisors and their thoughtful edits and suggestions made this thesis so much better than it would have been otherwise. The Columbia Center on Oral History Research (CCOHR), housed at the Interdisciplinary Center for Innovative Theory and Empirics (INCITE), provided me with crucial support as well.

Additionally, the rent does have to get paid. I thank The Sparkplug Foundation and the Davis-Putter Fellowship for providing me with financial support so that I had the time to analyze and work with the vast and amazing material that resulted from these oral history interviews. Last, but never least, the narrators whose interviews and analysis informed this thesis and who have given me their time and their consent to use their interviews for this project, are among my s/heroes and I am forever in their debt. I look forward to working with them in Phases II and III of this project.

## VII. Appendix A: Narrator Biographies

**Anthony Williams** is the co-founder of Picture the Homeless. Raised in foster care and group homes in Baltimore, Anthony knows the homeless system inside and out. He also knows the strength and resourcefulness of homeless folks and the homeless experience. He is a survivor and a leader, a powerful public speaker, an experienced homesteader, organizer and playwright. The adaptation of his journals into the play, *The King of Howard St.*, offers insight into a group of homeless folks living in a squat in Baltimore, Maryland and was performed to sold out audiences in Baltimore in May and June of 2017. Anthony is currently a leader for homeless rights in his native Baltimore, Maryland, where he continues to organize to improve homeless services and to ensure that the civil and human rights of homeless folks are respected. He is particularly passionate about honoring the dignity and resilience of street homeless folks. He is a member of the human rights organization United Workers and employed as the sexton at the First Unitarian Church in Baltimore.

**Arvernetta Henry** is a retired New York City school teacher. Ms. Henry as many call her, is a life long New Yorker. She was born in Harlem and raised in a public housing development in the Bronx with her parents and brothers. She is a life long member of Abyssinia Baptist Church in Harlem. Through Abyssinia she met several key civil rights leaders growing up, including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Arvernetta has been in the NYC shelter system for eight years. She has participated in numerous housing and civil rights actions and can be seen in endless photos stalwartly carrying the Picture the Homeless banner or fiercely “dropping it” over balconies in Albany or Grand Central Station. Arvernetta also played a critical role in the expansion of the Homeless Organizing Academy (HOA), and has been a catalyst for the emerging Community Land Trust movement in New York City. She was a founding participant in the New York City Community Land Initiative’s E Harlem/El Barrio Community Land Trust workgroup was instrumental in the development of a Community Land Trust board game, Trustville. She is a mother and a grandmother and a leader of PTH’s housing campaign. Many of us at Picture the Homeless have been grateful for her home made pancakes.

**DeBoRah Dickerson** is a lifelong Brooklynite and a proud member of the activist community and tradition of Crown Heights where she honed her organizing skills. She was raised by a single mother along with her two brothers. Both of her parents were Southerners and she spent part of her childhood in North Carolina and Florida with her extended family. As a teenager, she became involved in a Democratic Club in which capacity she worked with Shirley Chisholm and Betty Shabazz. She cites Shirley



Chisholm as having a tremendous influence on her as a young woman and her mother as her greatest inspiration. DeBoRah is an accomplished singer, and has recorded with several gospel groups. She is an ordained community minister and loves interpretative dance and to drum. During episodes of homelessness in the New York City shelter system, she organized other homeless women around shelter conditions and staff treatment of shelter residents and was instrumental in forming three Client Advisory Boards, as well as an interfaith support group for people experiencing homelessness. In her capacity as a leader of the PTH Housing Campaign, she has spoken on the radio, at press conferences, in meetings with elected officials, and has seen her work on legislative and policy lead to changes that positively impact all New Yorkers, including those without homes. She has also led the struggle in New York City as a member of the Consumer Committee of the New York City Continuum of Care to hold the City accountable for criminalizing homeless New Yorkers. She has travelled throughout the U.S. and internationally to fight for the rights of homeless and poor people.

**Jean Rice** is originally from Anderson, South Carolina and joined his mother in Harlem at age seven as part of the Great Migration in the 1940's. Jean attended Norwalk Community College in Norwalk Connecticut, studying Criminal Justice administration where he was on the Dean's List and was president of the Black Student Union. He is an avid reader and prolific writer, constitutional scholar and student of history. Jean experienced many bouts of homelessness as an adult, and famously slept in a cardboard box in front of Grand Central Station during the period immediately preceding him coming to PTH at the invitation of his cousin Prince. He supplements his income by picking up cans for recycling and public solicitation (aka panhandling but don't let Jean catch you saying that). He is the longest running member of PTH and a founding Board member. Jean represents PTH within the Poverty Initiative program at Union Theological Seminary and has travelled extensively in the U.S. and internationally, fighting for the rights of homeless folks. He is a father, grandfather and great grandfather and his extended family includes relatives still living in Brooklyn and Queens.

**Lynn Lewis** was born in Baltimore and raised on an island in the Chesapeake Bay by her grandparents. Lynn moved to the Lower East Side in New York City at the age of 21 and learned organizing basics there. She was a single mother and briefly spent time in the shelter system until friends extended their couch to her and her daughter. Wanting to understand transformational organizing more deeply, she lived in Nicaragua during the Sandinista Revolution in a rural village and married there. She returned to the U.S. with her family and became involved in homeless services and advocacy where she saw the need for organizing as a strategy to build political power for homeless folks. She and Anthony Williams were co-directors of PTH, and she is the founding Executive Director

and former civil rights organizer there. Lynn has worked in the social justice movement for 36 years in a range of capacities in organizations and initiatives led by poor people. She is a founding board member of the E Harlem/El Barrio Community Land Trust and a board member of the Cooper Square Community Land Trust. She is bilingual in English and Spanish and is a consultant to social justice community organizing groups and is completing her MA in Oral History at Columbia University. Lynn is the mother of two grown children and is a grandmother.

**Marcus Moore** was born in Brooklyn, New York and raised in Brooklyn and Bergen County, New Jersey. In addition to his mother and his many sisters, he has a large, extended family, including many that still live in his beloved Brooklyn. Marcus avails himself of every opportunity to build his skills and is particularly proud of the level of self-sufficiency he has attained as a homesteader. He has travelled throughout the U.S. to conferences on housing, race and civil rights, and is an effective public speaker. He is also an accomplished satirist and poet, and performs under the name The Homeless Poet. He was one of the leaders of the Picture the Homeless Housing Campaign who developed popular education materials and a board game, Trustville, to educate people about Community Land Trusts. He is also a Know Your Rights trainer, leading workshops in soup kitchens and shelters for homeless folks to understand their rights with the police. Marcus joined the Picture the Homeless Board of Directors in 2017.

**Nikita Price** was raised in Rochester, New York, by his mother along with several siblings and attended Catholic schools. Prior to becoming homeless, he had a long career in the restaurant industry working as a waiter, and has lived in New Orleans and Boston as well. He loves jazz and was excited in the 1990's to live in Harlem and walk the same blocks as some of his favorite jazz musicians. He loves to read, is an excellent cook and has a wicked sense of humor. Nikita originally joined Picture the Homeless in 2006 while staying in a family shelter for the first time with his teenage daughter. At that time, another homeless father who was a member of Picture the Homeless encouraged Nikita to join Picture the Homeless. Nikita became a member and then quickly became a leader of the Shelter Campaign and was one of the first graduates of the Organizer Trainee program at Picture the Homeless. Soon after completing that program, he was hired as a full time organizer and has been the Civil Rights Organizer at Picture the Homeless since 2014. He is a member of the Steering Committee of Communities united for Police Reform. Nikita is a single father of two elementary aged girls and an adult daughter.

**Rob Robinson** was born in Brooklyn and raised on Long Island. Rob lived with his parents and siblings and began working with his father at an early age in the restaurant

business. He graduated from the University of Maryland where he attended on a football scholarship. He enjoyed a successful career in management until his position at the payroll company ADP was terminated and he became street homeless in Miami, Florida for two years. His homeless experience politicized him. Joining PTH he became a leader of the housing campaign and joined the board of directors. Rob is a respected social justice leader has played critical roles in several city wide national and international formations including Take Back the Land, is on the Steering Committee of the Left Forum and consults with groups around the world in his capacity as a staff volunteer with the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, NESRI.

**Rogers** was an immigrant child and was raised in East Elmhurst Queens with his parents and brothers and extended immigrant Caribbean community. He spent a year in the Camp LaGuardia men's shelter in upstate New York and lived on the New York City streets. He has published several articles and worked for Ma Bell for ten years. He has worked as an NYPD staff analyst, and at the Queens Public Library as a supervisor and researcher. He has also been on staff at Picture the Homeless as a voting rights coordinator. He is an entrepreneur, founding his own company Black Ink Enterprises. He attended Catholic Schools and later New York University. He is an accomplished orator, and has taught public speaking. He also has a lovely singing voice, and has graced the Picture the Homeless Longest Night of the Year Memorial on many occasions with his rendition of Be Not Afraid. He's been a regular guest on the Gilchrest Experience cable TV show. He has been a member of the National Action Network since 1996 and is a founding member of the Council of Black Catholics (Brooklyn/Queens). A devout Catholic, he has taught Sunday School for over 30 years and led Kwanzaa celebrations throughout New York City but primarily in Harlem for several. Rogers has superlative language skills, and speaks some French and Spanish, and is an avid reader. He has two grown children.

**Sam J. Miller:** Was born and raised in Hudson, New York. In his life outside of work he is happily married and an award-winning science fiction writer. His debut novel *The Art of Starving*, was one of NPR's Best Books of the Year. His latest book, *Blackfish City* was released in the Spring of 2018. Sam joined the staff at Picture the Homeless in 2004, as the housing organizer. He subsequently became the lead organizer and is currently the Communications Director at Picture the Homeless. His proudest Picture the Homeless moments include getting arrested in a midnight protest in Central Park, and coordinating the writing of a major report that was required reading in urban planning courses at Columbia University—and was banned in New York State prisons.

**William Burnett:** William was born and raised in Indiana. He is a Roman Catholic and lifelong activist and organizer. He studied philosophy and theology at Wadhams Hall Seminary-College and as a Seminarian had the opportunity to meet Pope John Paul during his visit to New York City. William is a military veteran and while in the military he was granted conscientious objector based on his conviction that the U.S. was engaged in an unjust war in Somalia. William helped to lead PTH's Potter's Field Campaign to victory on a number of key demands regarding the handling and interment of the indigent dead in New York City, and regarding the right of homeless and poor people left behind to have closure in the loss of those close to them first as a member but then as paid staff, serving as the Faith Community Outreach Coordinator. William and joined the PTH Board of Directors in 2010. He currently works as the administrator of information technology at Interfaith Assembly on Homelessness and Housing.

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