Redemption Rises on the Midnight Streets

Like Ulysses, these homeless wanderers are exiled on endless journeys through a landscape of deprivation and despair. It is the Odyssey on the streets of Oakland.

by Terry Messman

While filming the long, winding wanderings of homeless recyclers through the streets of Oakland, Amir Soltani and Chihiro Wimbush, co-directors of Dogtown Redemption, began to wonder when the redemption named in the documentary’s title would take place.

The redemption at the heart of the film is not the mere act of redeeming bottles and cans at Alliance Metals in West Oakland. It is the redemption of lives and souls. The redemption of humanity crushed and battered and buried in the earth.

While the film provides a fascinating exploration of the politics of gentrification and homelessness, and defends the human rights of recyclers targeted for removal by duplicitous city officials acting on behalf of an intolerant public, an issue of far deeper significance soon takes over the very heart and soul of the film — the redemptive love and friendship that rises on the midnight streets of West Oakland.

Dogtown Redemption is shot through with unexpected moments of transcending grace, ranging from shattered break-downs to electrifying moments of joy. It is a film that asks unanswerable questions about the very meaning of existence, and reflects on both the saving grace of love and the bitter injustice of death.

That may seem like an exalted claim to make for a down-to-earth film about homeless recyclers who rummage through discarded trash. It is not.

Rahdi Taylor of the Sundance Institute offers an assessment of Dogtown Redemption that hits the point exactly: “There is love in every frame. The kind of unconditional love of family; the love that accepts you exactly as you are and exactly as you’re not, and loves you anyway.”

This is cinema in the shape of the human heart. At some indefinable point, right before our eyes, this film skips the rails, and a documentary about recycling transcends all the politicized issues at stake, and becomes a glimpse into the heart of the human condition.

The journeys of Landon Goodwin, Jason Witt and Hayok Kay are carried out on garbage-strewn streets, yet they have the sweep of The Odyssey on the streets of Oakland. Like Ulysses, these wanderers left their homes for years on end and are exiled on endless voyages through a landscape of deprivation and despair.

Their lives are alternately broken apart by despair and redeemed by love. In the seven years covered by this film, they will be maligned by an intolerant public and by unjust city officials. All three will be beaten brutally on the streets — by different assailants, yet by the same criminal indifference of society to their plight.

Before the film ends, each of the three wanderers and some of their closest friends will pass through the valley of the shadow of death. Some will live to see another day. Others will never be seen again, except in...
The Generosity and Good Works of Recyclers Struggling on the Streets of Oakland

It is clear that the people at the recycling center occupy a special place in his heart. He has witnessed a “generosity there that I don’t see anywhere else.”

Story and photos by Lydia Gans

Most of our economy is involved in production and sales, but there is a sector of the economy devoted to disposing of the things we no longer need or want, material that has lost its value and has become trash. Trash has a negative connotation in our society, and by association, people who work with trash, who collect trash, are somehow considered inferior.

Why would those people go trundling through the neighborhoods on bikes or on foot, rummaging through trash cans, when the waste disposal company’s trucks come regularly to haul it all away? As a matter of fact, those trash cans are likely to contain not just genuine trash to be taken to the landfill, but materials that can be recycled. It is the recyclable material that is so very important to retrieve; and that is the work of the recyclers, the men and women who come through the neighborhoods performing an environmentally essential task.

It can be hard work to spend hours every day pulling recyclable materials out of trash cans or dumpsters, then loading it onto carts or bicycles to take to a recycling center. They also pick up recyclable items that are too large to fit in the garbage cans and are left on the curb. This is a benefit for the residents who would otherwise have to pay for the waste company to come and pick them up.

For years, recyclers have been hauling mountains of recyclable plastics, metals, glass and paper to Alliance Recycling at 34th and Peralta streets in Oakland.

It is hard and messy work, but a look at the goals of Alliance Recycling will convince the reader of the importance and the value of what they’re doing. “Our neighborhood recyclers collectively salvage over 15,000 tons of materials each year that would otherwise go to landfills,” according to Alliance Recycling. An estimated 85 percent of recycling is collected by independent recyclers, while only 15 percent comes from curbside collections.

After the neighborhood recyclers drag these massive amounts of waste products to Alliance Recycling, there is still a great deal more work to do. The recyclers now have to laboriously sort the materials, dump out the liquids or solid wastes, and then bag and place the cans, bottles, paper products and plastics in barrels or bins that are individually labeled.

There are seven different kinds of plastics, aluminum cans, tin cans, different kinds of glass, paper and certain wood products. Everything must be put in the correct bin to be counted or weighed. The recyclers are paid the California Redemption Value (CRV) for certain plastic, metal and glass items, and are given locally set values for other materials.

It’s not a lucrative way to make a living. It might take a garbage bag full of plastic bottles to pay for a loaf of bread and cheese. Many recyclers are homeless or living on the very edge. But they can control their own lives and decide when and where to work. And there is no boss.

They know, whether they articulate it or not, that what they do is of value to society, and even more importantly, it is of value to the environment, the earth and the life it supports. And at Alliance Recycling, they in turn are regarded as valued clients and treated with respect.

Michael Jones is 24 years old. He has been recycling since he was 12. He likes to recycle and it’s a way to earn money to meet his needs. But the satisfaction that he gets is more than that. Jones tries to explain the meaning of his work.

“There’s more than just you in this world,” he says. “There’s more than just us humans in the world that get affected by not recycling or throwing trash on the ground. There’s more than just us that get affected. This place right here (the recycling center) is one of the places where an environmentally friendly person can recycle and help the environment.”

Lena Hughes, an attractive and energetic young woman, started recycling just three years ago. It took some time to learn how to become a good recycler. She has had to learn to recognize what materials are recyclable, to sort and bag them and put them in the right bins when she gets to Alliance Recycling. She has had to learn the routes of the city garbage trucks so she can plan her days and routes for recycling.

Now, like all the other recyclers in West Oakland, she has to face the imminent closure of the center. This will undoubtedly mean a longer way to travel and new procedures to learn. She expressed disappointment that there has been no outcry about the closure. “They should have some of the recyclers go and protest — like they did before,” she declares.

Darrell Hopkins is known as Sleepy among the recyclers. He has been coming to the recycling center for more than 10 years “to survive,” he says. He sees no other way to survive but to recycle, and to help other people sort out their material.

Recycling is a benefit for the residents who would otherwise have to pay for the waste company to come and pick them up. Darrell Hopkins is known as Sleepy among the recyclers. He has been coming to the recycling center for more than 10 years “to survive,” he says. He sees no other way to survive but to recycle, and to help other people sort out their material.

Darrell Hopkins, retiring from years of recycling, and Joe Liesner, a Food Not Bombs member who brings food to the recyclers, have become good friends.

Darlene Bailey, a longtime Oakland recycler, is taking home bags for packaging the material she will put in the bins at the recycling center.

“I’ve been so impressed at how hard people work to get their recycling done. The thing that impresses me most — and I don’t think I’ll ever get over it — is the older women that go out. You can just see the wear and tear that’s put on them.”

— Joe Liesner, Food Not Bombs

Lydia Gans, photo

Darrell Hopkins is known as Sleepy among the recyclers. He has been coming to the recycling center for more than 10 years “to survive,” he says. He sees no other way to survive but to recycle, and to help other people sort out their material.

Darrell Hopkins is 55 now. He was recycling for a long time, until it became too strenuous for him. Now he receives some disability income, but he still comes every day to the recycling center to help out with something. “I always help somebody,” he says.

Darrell Bailey also has been forced to cut down on her work load. She is a small woman, no longer young. For about 10 years she was recycling five days a week, but now she can only manage to work two days. When Alliance closes, she will be forced to find a recycling center in a different location, even if it means traveling greater distances. “I’m going to have to,” she says, because she needs the money.

See Generosity and Good Works page 13
A Song for Miss Kay: “Darling, Stand by Me”

She had a very hard life. A lot of abuse was dished out to her by society. There’s no reason for someone to get hurt like Miss Kay was hurt — ever.

— Jason Witt, a friend of Hayok Kay

by Terry Messman

I n a powerful scene in the film Dogtown Redemption, Hayok Kay is losing a map to find Lot 104, grave seven, in Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland. She feels lost in the midst of all the gravestones, in more ways than one. Her lifetime lover and best friend Fred Gripping III, has died and is now buried somewhere in the large cemetery. Miss Kay and Fred Gripping were a homeless couple who lived in a car together, and when she lost both her love and her vehicle, she is reduced to sleeping on the streets of Emeryville — even after she is hospitalized with cancer and dumped out to face the end of her life.

Searching for the kindred soul who shared her life, walking past countless grave markers, Miss Kay said, “I was wondering why it’s taking him so long you know, and I tried to call the hospital. They didn’t answer the fucking phone. He had liver failure and kidney failure and then the next day he went to sleep and then he woke up.”

She starts weeping. “You’re here!” she says, and keeps crying. She finally finds his tiny grave marker, all that is left of him, the gravestone sooty black, as if to comfort it. Finally she lays down on top of his grave, prostrate with grief, and it seems as if she will never rise again.

She says: “Without Fred it’s not the same anymore. I don’t need this life. I hate it.”

Few films tell the truth about life and death so piercingly and with such remarkable, sensitive authenticity.

A Song for Miss Kay

Every December, St. Mary’s Center in Oakland holds a memorial service for homeless people who have died over the past year. Along with prayers and songs, people are invited to bring flowers and call out the names of loved ones who have died. Miss Kay is shown in the film at the memorial, remembering the man she shared her life with. When the memorial ends, there is a very quiet moment that probably went unnoticed and unheard by those attending the service at the time.

In a trembling and broken voice, Miss Kay sings the Ben E. King soul anthem, “Stand by Me.”

Standing off by herself, alone with her thoughts, she begins to sing in a very soft voice: “Darling, darling, stand by me...”

It is like watching a time-lapse, unfold to see the passage of Miss Kay from her youthful days as the pretty and high-spirited drummer of the punk-rock polka band Polkacide, to her final days as a homeless recluse stranded and alone on the streets of the East Bay.

The film tells the truth of her final days, as Miss Kay is systematically broken down by grief and trauma, torn apart by the hardships of life on the street, and shattered by the loss of her best friend.

Finally, the homeless woman is struck from cancer, hospitalized, dumped from the hospital back out on the streets, and ends up sleeping at the CVS pharmacy in Emeryville where she suffers a savage assault that ends her life.

We have come to know Miss Kay by that point in the film. So when we are confronted with her brutal murder, it is very hard to bear. The humanity of the film is heartbreaking.

Caring and Generous

Hayok Kay was well-liked and respected in her community of homeless recyclers in Oakland. She was also a troubled soul who had become grief-stricken over the deaths of her father and her longtime lover. Her health was failing and she had turned to drinking heavily.

Yet her many friends on the street found her to be sweet and caring and very generous. Amir Soltani, co-director of Dogtown Redemption, was so moved by her spirit and her heart that he continually tried to protect her and preserve her life, ultimately in vain.

“There was something about Miss Kay that was like an empress,” Amir said.

“She was a very, very generous woman towards the other recyclers. It was a very endearing quality of hers. She cared about them. She genuinely cared about people. She was always kind and more than willing to help.”

There was that generosity of spirit that was really moving. I felt her in my heart.

“In a way, she was the most innocent of the people that we followed, the most innocent and vulnerable. It was frightening how vulnerable she was.”

Her quality of innocence and her generosity towards others made the filmmaker feel protective. He began taking her to doctor’s appointments, and visiting her in the hospital. “She got sick a whole bunch of times while we were filming her, and you couldn’t let go of her,” he said. “You just couldn’t let go of her. It was a combination of her dignity and her resilience.”

Because of a growing concern over the toll taken on her by homelessness, Amir Soltani and Zachary Stockley, the associate producer of the film, brought her to the winter shelter at St. Mary’s Center.

“My wife Ellen Danchik met Miss Kay on November 30, 2012, and did the initial intake when she applied to enter St. Mary’s winter shelter. Miss Kay was always accompanied by Amir and Zachary whenever they brought her to St. Mary’s or her pick up to take her to medical appointments.”

When Ellen told me how loving and caring and helpful they always were to Miss Kay, I grew to respect Amir and Zach. I especially appreciated that they refused to abide by the neutral, hands-off approach of objective journalism and instead became personally involved in helping and advocating for Miss Kay.

Ellen said, “When I saw the way Amir treated Miss Kay, I would have thought she was part of his family. He treated her like she was his aunt. If I didn’t know better, I would have thought they were related.”

“He always kept very closely in touch with her. He would take phone calls from her at any time, and constantly checked in with her, like you would with a relative. He kept up with her life and always knew when her next doctor’s appointment was. It was impressive to me that Miss Kay had such nice friends helping her.”

Like Amir, Ellen was immediately drawn to Miss Kay. “I liked her a lot,” she said. “She seemed really cool, like an old hippie, and I felt a kindred spirit with her. I knew that she was a musician and she talked about so many different kinds of work, and she lived in so many places. She was born in Korea and had lived in Japan, and later became a musician in the Bay Area. She seemed like such an adventurous, free spirit.”

Ellen had many Miss Kay’s friends and supporters, Ellen also felt protective.

“She was homeless and I always want to help people get off the streets and into our shelter,” Ellen said. “Especially homeless seniors and women, because they are more vulnerable. It’s very dangerous for women to be homeless on the streets.

Women can be attacked or beaten or raped and raped attacks are very small women and especially vulnerable.”

The news of Miss Kay’s brutal assault left Ellen shaken. “I was really sad that it had happened to her and I felt really bad that she never found housing,” Ellen said.

“It just made me feel horrible that it had happened and it shows how vulnerable homeless women are on the streets. It was so close to us. It happened at CVS, less than a mile away from St. Mary’s.”

“She was a talented musician and she was a loving person. Even if she sometimes flipped out and got mad and yelled, she was still a very loving person.”

Jason also knew Fred Gripping well, and he had great respect for the lives they led and their artistic creativity.

Fred, her boyfriend, was a friend of mine,” said Jason. “He was a good guy and he was an artist too. He was a good painter. If someone is able to do art while they’re on the street, that’s a very hard thing to do. That in itself is very much something we should all respect — and also the fact that they were together and that they stayed together through it all.”

Jason’s own struggles with homelessness and illness enabled him to understand the challenges Miss Kay faced.

“She had a very hard life — a really, really hard life. A lot of abuse was dished out to her by society.

“There’s no reason for someone to get hurt like Miss Kay was hurt — ever. This is a woman with cancer, pushing that shopping cart just to provide food for herself, still living on the streets. It seems like there should have been something better for her. It was really hard to hear the news that she had a collision with the streets.

For Amir, who had spent seven years filming Kay and the small community of recyclers in Oakland, it was a terrible loss.

“It was absolutely devastating,” he said. “It was the one thing I dreaded the most. Every time you’d leave her on the street, you never knew if you’d re-encounter with her. We had stopped filming, basically. Then we learned Miss Kay had pancreatitis, and we discovered she had cancer, and started taking her to her cancer treatments.”

At that time, Miss Kay was sleeping in front of the CVS pharmacy in Emeryville.

The doctors had done a biopsy that confirmed cancer and needed to do more tests, so Amir went to find her at the pharmacy to tell her to drink water.

See A Song for Miss Kay page 11
MEET HAYOK KAY

She is the 4-foot-10-inch fireball pushing a shopping cart down the streets. She has been homeless for too many years to count. She is barely surviving. She loves and loses. In the end, she is the broken body in a Highland Hospital bed.

by Lee Romney

She is the Korean toddler whose stepmother and birth mother quarreled on an airport tarmac over who will take her. Neither want her. The scar stays with her until her death.

She is the striking teenager in a lime green duster and Madame Grei perfume, sneaking out at night to make the Tokyo club scene. Tiny. Wild. Troubled. With scars on her stomach from self-harm.

She is the striking teenager in a lime green duster and Madame Grei perfume, sneaking out at night to make the Tokyo club scene. Tiny. Wild. Troubled. With scars on her stomach from self-harm.

So when both girls were seeking admission to a prominent Catholic school. Flowers made friends. With a major in Asian studies and interest in martial arts, Abronski hoped to travel to Japan for further studies. But Kay wasn’t interested.

She is the San Francisco punk rock drummer with a red tule petticoat on her head. Her long time love leaves her. She breaks. An outsider, she slips deeper into the world of outsiders.

She has been homeless for too many years to count. She is barely surviving. She loves and loses. We see her, but we do not really see her.

She is the broken body in a Highland Hospital bed. Beaten in her sleeping bag at 2:28 a.m. last July outside the Emeryville CVS on San Pablo Avenue where she regularly bedded down. Shattered facial bones. Bleeding in her brain. A ventilator tube down her throat. A punctured lung. Cancer, too. She is 61.

She is the San Francisco punk rock drummer with a red tule petticoat on her head. Her long time love leaves her. She breaks. An outsider, she slips deeper into the world of outsiders.

Hayok Kay weeps at the grave of Fred Griffling, her longtime companion. The homeless couple had lived in Griffin’s vehicle.

Soon, Kay met Abronski, a musician who had left Harvard University to move west. By the mid-1970s, Abronski “decided that my brain was roting, and Hayok wasn’t that happy either.” So he lined up scholarships and returned to Boston to finish his degree. Kay waited and made friends. With a major in Asian studies and interest in martial arts, Abronski had hoped to travel to Japan for further studies. But Kay wasn’t interested.

She sacrificed for him. Abronski said, so he did the same for her. They returned to San Francisco in 1979 to work the family business. He bought her a starter drum kit. And soon they launched “Polkacide,” a punk rock polka band that was meant to be a one-night wonder but turned into a hit on the 1980s West Coast punk scene.

Kay was not a technically adept drummer, but “she had rock solid rhythm,” Abronski said, and an unparalleled sense of style. The band members numbered more than a dozen. Abronski played saxophone (he still plays with the band), and wore leather lederhosen — at times with sausage links protruding from his shorts.

Kay wore wildly colored scarves and adorned her head with petticoats. A ciga...
Full of Lost Souls and Redeemed Humanity

Through the camera’s eye, I observed grief and laughter, violence and love, addiction and redemption. I saw the recyclers at their best and worst, with all that makes us human.

by Chihiro Wimbush

The process of making a documentary film is an epic and arduous journey and Dogtown Redemption was no exception. I spent more than five years filming recyclers on the streets of West Oakland at all hours, from the early morning to late at night.

Each recycler had his or her own rhythm. Landon would scar the heaviest days of school. Hayon would roam the trash bins in Emeryville malls as they filled and refilled all day. Roslyn would awaken in the pre-dawn chill; Jason would toil all night and through the next day, rolling his loaded shopping cart—listing like a Spanish galleon laden with gold, miles and miles from home.

They worked hard, laboring relentlessly through blazing heat and freezing rain to gather the bottles and cans from the recycling bins and heaping trash cans, and bring them to the recycling center. All this to earn a few dollars that might be good enough to get by till the next day, when this routine started all over again.

Filming began in 2008. Bush was in his final days, Obama was the new voice of hope, and the economic system was teetering on the brink of collapse. As the film finally emerges eight years later, the world is still in a state of imbalance, the bankers are still in business, the gap between rich and poor ever widening.

When I first visited the recycling center, what I remember is the sensual assault: the explosions of glass and cans being sorted in recycling bins, the stink of the trash, the filth everywhere — on the sticky floors, on the grimy bins, even on the people.

My first reaction was to leave this uncomfortable place that seemed to be its own special dark and reeking purgatory full of lost souls, endlessly sorting and weighing the throwaways of other people’s lives on the scales.

But the process of making a documentary film is a heart-opening process. You must share of yourself before you can access other people’s lives. And when that trust is gained, you try and be a compassionate witness to their lives as they unfold, through the highs and lows, capturing their unique but universally connected human experience. Through the camera’s eye, I observed grief and laughter, violence and love, addiction and redemption. I saw these recyclers at their best and worst, with all that makes us human, and ultimately the film will have succeeded if you, the viewer, sees this humanity too and it helps erase the invisible barrier we, as individuals and as a society, erect between us and “them.”

There’s relief and sadness and joy that the film process is complete. I’m glad the recyclers now have the chance to be seen for the complex and beautiful human beings they are at last. And I still dream about those quiet late nights in the streets of Oakland, alone with the camera, filming a recycler digging in a garbage bin for a castaway treasure to redeem.

Chihiro Wimbush is co-director and director of photography for Dogtown Redemption.

Love in Every Frame
Celebrating the Sacred Acts of Life

The most notable cinematic tool used in Dogtown Redemption is love — the kind of unconditional love that accepts you exactly as you are.

by Rahdi Taylor

My mother, who lives down the block from me, always seemed to me to live in two worlds at once. Wholly sane, competent and rational, she nonetheless is one of those individuals who even from a young age could walk and talk among the dead almost as freely as she can among the living.

In truth, it took me a long time to realize that when she said she had spoken to Aunt so-and-so the night before, it wasn’t the one-way type of conversation that I might have in passing with an ancestor, but a conversation. A visit.

So I’ve always been compelled by the way we treat those who are closest to the other side of life, and those who bear witness to the transition. Who is it that said something to the effect that you can tell everything about a civilization by the way its members care for the young and raise their children, by the way they celebrate loving relationships, and by the way they call out and bury their dead?

In Dogtown Redemption, the film’s three primary subjects, as well as the filmmakers themselves, bear witness to the journey of being human, and celebrate the sacred acts of life with nothing short of love.

Amir Soltani and Chihiro Wimbush’s documentary film about homeless recyclers in West Oakland paints a tender portrait of souls who may from a distance look lost, until a closer up, intimate look reveals individuals who in many ways demonstrate some of the best in the measure of a man. Love and integrity contour much of the personal actions of Jason, Langdon and Miss Kay.

Jason is embraced as a dedicated, if troubled, working man caring for his partner and loving his child the best way he can.

Langdon overcomes adversity and fights for a second chance at happiness and romantic love as a true and caring partner, and extends the promise of this redemption to his neighbors on the street.

And Miss Kay walks through life half in the shadows of death as she struggles with demons and ailments, and fights to grieve with dignity for her lost loves.

In a society that blames poverty on the poor and assumes those without cash are without values, Dogtown Redemption shines a light on the resilience, resourcefulness, complexity, interdependence, persistence, vision, caring, humanity and purpose that is found in Jason, Langdon and Miss Kay — often in greater measure than can be found in those much more fortunate.

In the film industry, we often celebrate the creative tools of the trade used by filmmakers to craft their work. We give awards and prizes at film festivals and awards shows for everything from acting like someone else, for amazing use of archival footage, for being particularly cinematic, for creative use of animation, special effects and motion graphics.

Soltani and Wimbush have used thoughtful craft in directing and producing this character-driven documentary film. The most notable tool they seem to have used in their craft? Love.

There is love in every frame. The kind of unconditional love of family; the love that accepts you exactly as you are and exactly as you’re not, and loves you any way. The kind of love that can’t solve your problems but can bear witness to you and your life, and knows that no matter what, as long as you’re here, it’s a life worth living.

The kind of love that knows that a homeless person isn’t only homeless; that person may also love to sing, or plant flowers, or be an animal lover. That person may be an environmentalist, or a fitness fanatic, or may just be really, really funny.

Dogtown Redemption understands all this, and tells a story that invites us to pull in closer, and sit for a spell. Somewhere, somewhere, there just might be festival award laurels specially made to recognize tenderness, humanity, and care in both films and in civilization. At that festival, for its thoughtful witness to private lives in sacred moments, Dogtown Redemption would probably take home the Jury Prize.

Rahdi Taylor is the Film Fund Director at the Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program. She works worldwide to find, cultivate and finance documentary films of contemporary relevance. Films supported have included Carcel Land, Dirty Wars, Rich Hill, The Square, Chuck Norris vs. Communism, and CITIZENFOUR.

"Love in every frame." Near the end of her life, Miss Kay dances with Al Smith.
Amir Soltani: The Dogtown Redeemer

As Amir helped the recycler, he learned that his name was Jefferson and he was a retired longshoreman who had suffered a heart attack.

by Janny Castillo

At St. Mary’s Center Annual Gala on April 2, Amir Soltani was honored for his unyielding dedication to his film, Dogtown Redemption, an honest look into the lives of three homeless West Oakland recyclers. Those who watch the documentary will be moved, challenged and forever changed.

St. Mary’s Center Executive Director Carol Johnson introduced Amir with the following words. "Amir is a London-born human rights advocate who looked out one day from his brother’s West Oakland apartment and saw what all too many of us fail to see — the human faces and precious lives that often go unseen in the very midst of the poverty and hopelessness in our city."

Talking to Amir, the creator and co-director of Dogtown Redemption, no one can sense a calm, loving soul filled with gratitude for the experience of walking his documentary from idea to film. During a 2012 interview with boonchea.com, co-founder of boonacheapresents, Amir described the day his life changed when he looked out that West Oakland window.

"I would see, day after day, people pushing these shopping carts. Finally, one day I was looking out, and an older gentleman was pushing his cart down the street, and half his body was paralyzed." Amir decided right then to stop looking at the world through a window and step through the window into it. This was the moment that changed the trajectory of his life. As Amir helped the man with his bottles and cans, he learned that the recycler’s name was Jefferson and he was a retired longshoreman who had suffered a heart attack. Jefferson told Amir that recycling was his way of supplementing his income. That day, he followed Jefferson to Alliance Metals, as much a character in the film as the recyclers that move through its doors daily. Amir described the impact of that moment.

"The doors open and you go in, and I think, is this America?! Not necessarily in a bad sense... Half the people in Alliance Metals should have been dead, medically dead, legally dead, emotionally dead, and criminally dead, but there was life. It was the most lively, energetic, creative place you can imagine!"

He tried to express the shift that occurred when he saw the recycling center for the first time. "I saw America’s character, human dignity, strength, compassion and resilience." Amir also shared that Jefferson had died several months before the taping of the interview.

There began a seven-year journey that produced Dogtown Redemption — and a friendship with a little Asian broken beauty that filled his life with compassion and loss. A deeply moving scene in the film is when West Oakland recycler Haysk Kay lies weeping on top of the grave of her closest friend, Fred Griffing III.

Amir’s friendship with Miss Kay is the behind-the-scenes story of the film.

A robust transit system for recyclable goods was a visionary goal at the dawn of environmental leaders ever had in mind. In the end, the economic opportunities that yard — just the physically punishing, day-to-day work of people pushing slow, heavily rolling burdens on the bump city streets and a small voucher in dollars and cents to show for all that toil.

We are made to think it is a profitable business for someone. The owner of the recycling yard — portrayed as a reasonable human being and a family man — bears the financial risk when the prices of materials change and global demand for recyclables shifts. But we also reckon with the reality that owners of businesses capture the spoils of others' efforts.

The network of shopping carts is operated by "drivers" making only a subsistence wage, living hand-to-mouth with no health benefits, no sick leave or vacation, in constant competition with one another in what is a scavenging economy which takes all comers. We are bound by two perceptions — one, concerning the shameful necessities of this business; the other, a haunting thought that there may be no other way to make recycling work.

In the end, the economic opportunities the street’s scavengers enjoy are a poor excuse for a social assistance program. We bear the moral responsibility for finding a way to give them at the same time we pray they can escape from it.

Larry A. Rosenthal is an adjunct faculty in Public Policy, UC Berkeley, and Board President, Berkeley Food & Housing Project.

Desperate Lives of Scavengers on a Harsh Streetscape

by Larry A. Rosenthal

Dogtown Redemption is a visit to a streetscape many of us see but rarely inhabit, a narrative filled with tragic heroes, and with tales of personal connections. The film presents a gritty urban reality just blocks away from where many of us live.

In our homes with their locking doors, we mindlessly throw recyclables into their appropriate receptacles. And then we collectively close our eyes and never follow where those throwaways go, and the lives they come to affect.

Viewing this fine documentary is medicine truly needed. We must constantly rethink how we come together to respond to social needs. In that sense, Dogtown Redemption serves as a harsh indictment; it bears the financial risk when the prices of materials change and global demand for recyclables shifts. But we also reckon with the reality that owners of businesses capture the spoils of others’ efforts.

The movie brings in focus what many of us find hard to witness. And it rivets our attention, its story bouncing into our own open hearts.

In the policy world, and in the nonprof- it system providing services to the home- less, we too often fail victims to burnout, to the hypothetical treatment of popula- tions rather than real immersion in the lives of individuals, to the abstraction of jobs and budgets as work in the face of poverty gets “professionalized.”

Like a siren call prescribed from on high, Dogtown Redemption grabs us, makes our work real, and connects us to the desperation we must profoundly con- front, with renewed vigor and dedication.

The life trajectories of Miss Kay, Jason and Landon, the film’s three main subjects, characterize a human drama, but an eco- nomic one as well. So often our policy cul- tures fall victim to our own best intentions. A robust transit system for recyclable goods was a visionary goal at the dawn of the environmental movement. Limiting the cost of that system, to maximize the conservation of resources and reduce the landfill-insult to our planet, was a univer- sal objective.

Dogtown Redemption brings us face to face with what the success of that objective truly entails. It is not what our envi- ronmental leaders ever had in mind.

The rough and tumble of a recycling lifestyle isn’t for everyone. In Dogtown Redemption, we see the tender balance of folks dedicated to their independence — striking hard against their challenges to find self-sufficiency, but also trapped in a world of narrowed choices.

What on the surface looks like a pri- vate business becomes a kind of welfare office. There are no hidden treasures in that yard — just the physically punishing, day-to-day work of people pushing slow, heavily rolling burdens on the bump city streets and a small voucher in dollars and cents to show for all that toil.

We are made to think it is a profitable business for someone. The owner of the recycling yard — portrayed as a reasonable human being and a family man — bears the financial risk when the prices of materials change and global demand for recyclables shifts. But we also reckon with the reality that owners of businesses capture the spoils of others’ efforts.

The network of shopping carts is operated by "drivers" making only a subsistence wage, living hand-to-mouth with no health benefits, no sick leave or vacation, in constant competition with one another in what is a scavenging economy which takes all comers. We are bound by two perceptions — one, concerning the shameful necessities of this business; the other, a haunting thought that there may be no other way to make recycling work.

In the end, the economic opportunities the street’s scavengers enjoy are a poor excuse for a social assistance program. We bear the moral responsibility for finding a way to give them at the same time we pray they can escape from it.

Larry A. Rosenthal is an adjunct faculty in Public Policy, UC Berkeley, and Board President, Berkeley Food & Housing Project.
Prejudice against street recyclers may follow recycling businesses forced to move to new locations. Rena Rickles suggests "putting on a new pair of glasses to really see the humanity."

Story and photos by Carol Denney

Superheroes or purveyors of neighborhood blight? Heroic environmental stewards or thieves and junkies? There’s room to meet in the middle, given the misconceptions about recycling as a business and recyclers as a group.

Most would agree that the potential demise of one recycling business won’t resolve all of Oakland’s litter and crime issues. And the State of California is required by law to reduce the amount of waste headed for landfills, a mandate which is not going away.

The City of Oakland reached an agreement with Alliance Recycling after conflicts bubbled over with some of its neighbors whose complaints about blight and crime may or may not have had any connection to the business itself. The recycling center will close its doors on the 3400 block of Peralta Street in August 2016 by a settlement’s decree — or face daily $1,000 fines.

The successful 30-plus-year-old business bought by Jay Anast in 1992 was recently sold to two new owners, Joe Zadik and Lance Finkel, whose plans for Lakeside Recycling, located near Jack London Square, displays intriguing sculptures of recycled material, including a decidedly female pirate presiding over the entrance.

Lakeside Recycling has been in business since 1936 — 80 years this year without a demise of recycled material, including a decidedly female pirate presiding over the entrance.

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The Myth of Sisyphus on the Streets of Oakland

Jason Witt shows the art of recycling and the art of the samurai sword. His hands have been toughened into recycled steel, yet he faces life-threatening illnesses.

by Terry Messman

L
ike the myth of Sisyphus come alive on the streets of Oakland, Jason Witt carries out the Herculean task of pushing and pulling mountainous carts stacked with thousands of bottles and cans on winding, 15-mile routes to recycling centers in West Oakland.

His daily life is a long, uphill haul, and just as Sisyphus was fated to push a gigantic boulder up the hill, and was then forced to push it over and over again each time the boulder rolled back down, Jason must push his heavy cart all day. And when the morning sun rises, he must find the strength to get into it again.

He has been toughened by years of hard labor in rough neighborhoods. Every day is an uphill struggle to survive as he pulls a cart loaded with an estimated 800 pounds of glass, 50 pounds of cans, about 200 pounds of plastic, on a 15-mile route that he compares to a truck route.

"I pull more steadily to the recycling center than anyone can," Jason says, as he hauls carts loaded with precariously balanced recyclable materials that seem far too heavy for his age or size to handle.

Amir Soltani, co-director of Dogtown Redemption, who filmed Jason on the streets of Oakland for several years, also invokes the mythology, calling Jason a "Titan" of recyclers.

After phoning Jason’s father for detailed directions to his son’s concealed homeless encampment in West Oakland, I arrived at the primitive lean-to near the I-680 freeway only to find a scruffy note that Jason had posted on an abandoned vehicle telling me he had hit the streets with his shopping cart and was on his way to Nimitz and 14th and Kirkham Street in West Oakland.

When I entered the recycling center, Jason was inside, rapidly crunching cans, emptying bottles and sorting recyclables into different bins, his ragged, tattered emptying bottles and sorting recyclables into different bins, his ragged, tattered clothing darkly soiled from the hours he has spent collecting recyclable waste from trash cans. He appeared fatigued and battle-wear.

Pausing from his work long enough to offer a quick handshake, Jason began giving an intense running commentary on the life of a recycler while he laboriously sorted through huge bags of cans and bot-

tles, paper, and glass.

As usual, his handshake was, it was a crushing grip.

Jason has suffered serious illnesses and street assaults for years. He once hobbled him in the hospital, but the streets have toughened and strengthened him, and forged his hands into recycled steel.

His haggard and exhausted street survivor in grimey, tattered clothes, but garnered now in martial arts attire and samurai sword.

Coming only a few hours after I first met the worn-down laborer rummaging through mounds of cast-off waste, it was a remark-
able metamorphosis. It was startling to see the depth of his sudden transformation from a grim-looking, 42-year-old street survivor into an excited and proud young man on his way to dojo.

Yet it was a transformation marked by some anxiety, for on our drive to his Concord dojo, he told me nervously that several of the martial arts students came from high walks of life, and he was wor-
ried about being worthy of their accep-
tance. It mattered very deeply to him, and he took great care to cleanse his appear-
ance, scrubbing away the dirt, and shed-
ing his ragged clothing.

I realized how much work he had done to carefully pack his martial arts uniform and all his swords that morning, and how he must have worried all day about finding the time — and the restroom — to clean up and change so as to fit in with his peers at the dojo. Jason’s low-roofed shanty had no sink to scrub away the grime of the trash bins, no closet for his clothes.

After a grueling day of walking miles while hauling a heavily burdened cart, how difficult it must have been to find the mental and physical energy to practice the night’s intense martial arts and sworn moves. I could not imagine how he had accomplished that — even more so in light of his severe health problems.

The transformation was more than a matter of clothing. It was a transformation of spirit. The martial arts have helped restore Jason’s sense of self-worth, given him renewed discipline and purpose, and built up his physical strength. Perhaps the most important benefit of all has been the friendship and brotherhood he has found.

Near the end of Dogtown Redemption, we watch a close-up of Jason’s face as his hands, stoic features unexpectedly brighten and become joyous when he is warmly embraced by his martial arts teacher and his brothers at the Concord dojo.

It is a deeply moving moment. Jason’s toughened visage — the face that his mother Marjorie Witt described as "sky-blue eyes now sunken behind the gaunt mask of his hardened face" — softens in response to the love and brotherhood and acceptance he receives from his brothers at the Contra Costa Budokan. His sky-blue eyes well up with tears of gratitude.

Jason describes the martial arts as "a way to get peace into his life. Nothing’s ever really made me feel like this. It might’ve already saved my life.”

At the end of the film, his fellow stu-
dents surround Jason and say, "He is our brother now. He is part of our family. He is our brother and we’ve got his back. Remember that, Jason.”

Jason said, “I’m choosing to be around people who are actually doing something with their lives. This feels like a family.”

It is a moment of amazing grace, con-
sidering the depths of estrangement and loneliness that homeless people undergo and the hard blows that make up the life of a street recycler.

Film director Amir Soltani calls Jason "the Titan of recycling" — and a genius.

After spending seven years filming endless stories of many recyclers working in West Oakland, the director of Dogtown Redemption said in an interview, "No one carries as much recyclables to the recyling center as Jason did. When I saw his shopping cart, it just arrests you because of the amount of material that he carried, and also the artfulness of it.”

Not many would describe the work of street scavenge as an artistic accomplish-

"To attach 50 or 60 or 70 bags to one recycling cart is a very difficult and deli-
cate process," Amir said. "Jason uses things like clothes hangers to create layers upon layers that he can hang the bags on. He’s very sensitive to the balance of the cart, and that’s a real art form.

"It takes a lot of intelligence to navi-
gate the streets with a shopping cart piled so high. It’s a little bit like navigating a boat that you’ve packed to the very top."

The difficult, constantly changing con-
ditions on the streets of Oakland can be likened to turbulent waters at sea.

"It’s a real art when cars are zipping by and honking at you and the police are chasing you, and a pohcape can cause a disaster," Amir said. "And there are poachers who would follow Jason at times and steal his recyclables. It’s like trade routes, and you have to protect your resources. You have to protect your trade secrets and not leave a trail behind."

The overloaded cart is so precarious that a minor dip in the road can spill disas-
ster. Jason said, "I’ve got all this weight on there, and if you pull on the wrong side, the whole thing’s gonna flip over because of the road."

“Every day I’ve got it all worked out what I’m gonna do, where I’m gonna go and who I’m gonna avoid because there’s other recyclers that try to figure out my routes and stuff so I’ve gotta keep my route secret because there are a whole lot of other recyclers trying to do the same thing.”

It is often a lonely and comfortless exis-
tence. After long days spent pushing heavy carts through neighborhoods where his work is not honored and his presence is not always welcomed, Jason hunkers down at night in his flimsy, self-built squatter’s camp next to the I-680 freeway.

Through sheer will power, Jason has refused to let the street beat him. He has been able to persevere for so many years only because he has found the strength it takes to earn a living on the tough streets.
Sisyphus in Oakland

from page 8

of Dogtown with no help from anyone else — despite suffering serious ailments and diseases that might have long since taken the heart out of an ordinary man.

Jason has learned the hard way that he must rely only on himself. In the film, he says that neither his mom or dad, or the church, or anyone else in the world is going to help him. He must rely on himself, and can only survive another day by claiming his pay from the streets.

“...the strength to pull that impossible load down the streets of Oakland. He looks stubbornly strong, as if this lone man has the strength to pull that impossible load forever, never needing help, never expecting anything else out of life.

All day long, Jason seemed so strong to me, and at night, as he prepared to enter his dog, he seemed even stronger.

But he is not strong. He is ill. He is still able to pull that heavy cart, but someday he will no longer be that strong.

Ever since the day I interviewed him, I keep thinking of Jason and Heather and Ninja the warrior-dog and the life they live in their little camp near the freeway.

EPILOGUE

Sometimes, in the course of 30 years of homeless activism and advocacy journalism on the issues of poverty and homelessness, one sees too much.

I wish the Oakland city officials who want to close Alliance Recycling, and who criminalize homeless people and demolish their encampments, could see all I have seen.

I wish they could understand that the lives of Landon Goodwin and Miss Kay and Jason Witt and Heather Holloway are as sacred and valuable and beautiful and humanity. It was always the case.

And will mourn them when they are gone.

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from page 8

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I wish they could understand that the lives of Landon Goodwin and Miss Hayok Kay and Jason Witt and Heather Holloway are as sacred and valuable and meaningful as any lives on the planet.

I wish they could have visited Jason in his hospital bed, or Landon after he was beaten on the street, or Miss Kay after she was beaten and hospitalized.

I wish they could understand that all of these homeless recyclers have loved ones and family and friends who care about them, worry about them, and love them.

And will mourn them when they are gone.
Treating Homeless Recyclers Like Human Beings

Our recyclers do us all a great service and the City should afford them the same protections and services we provide for our migrant workers. There are complications in both issues but we can never go wrong treating people with dignity and humanity.

by Daniel McMullan

I knew by the time the carts passed me, that it was time to get the crew up, sweep down the porch and make myself scarce, along with my messy retina.

Years later, when I lived indoors, those very same people would pass by my place and pick up the stuff I left out for them. I grew a small tank or bottle, and one of the kids threw in the trash. We would say “Thanks!” from people I have known. I was always friendly, and said “Man, whatever their motivation, there were a lot of them and I had plenty of admiration and respect for them.

I forgot to put the cans out! I jumped up and pulled on some sweats and grabbed my crutches and banged out the door. I was making an awful racket and was dragged, drugged, drugged, the last container down the driveway, when a recycler called over as if he needed a hand.

“Hey Danny!” from people I have known.
Art by Teslim Ikharo

**A Source of Income to Oakland’s Most Downtrodden**

by Teslim Ikharo

I t’s interesting to think that Oakland’s first mayor, Horace Carpenter, is commonly referred to as a “squealer” for illegally sold small plots of West Oakland land in the early 1850s. He lived communally with family members, including his sister Alice, the namesake of Alice Street in Oakland. His aim, many say, was to strike rich during this region’s gold rush. His legal training was short lived when he persuaded the newly formed California state legislature to incorporate Oakland as a town. He then used his skills to persuade the town’s trustees to pass an ordinance that gave him exclusive control of Oakland’s waterfront. He vigorously represented the city of Oakland in all its dealings and business, a major beneficiary, becoming a major landowner himself.

This small piece of West Oakland history is interesting in light of recent trends related to low-income and homeless populations in the city. Those experiencing homelessness are viewed as squatters, occupying lands they don’t own. Unlike the elite status reached early by settlers in the area, those experiencing homelessness have to work to collect the modern-day gold of the streets — recyclable materials including metals, glass, plastic bottles and aluminum cans — hoping to earn an honest living. Some have made out as well as Mr. Carpenter, however. Most are being pushed out by forces that are out of their control.

As explained in Amir Soltani and Chihiro Wimbush’s documentary, *Dogtown Redemption*, West Oakland’s Alliance Recycling has provided a source of income to the area’s most downtrodden and hopeless. Many of those going to redeem their recyclables for cash have experienced solved traumas from earlier life experiences. The families of these individuals have often been perpetrators, not protectors, causing deep wounds that are often filled with alcohol, drugs, and prostitution.

Could I blame them? Yes. Do it? No. As Director of Business Enterprise for Oakland Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency (BOSS), one of my roles is to develop social enterprises and jobs for our clients who are dealing with addiction, homelessness, or an individuality. As a result this death is not our concern. We might see what we had previously taken for granted with new insight, or feel for the first time just how hard it must be to be sick, hungry, or in mourning, or struggling with addiction, or whatever it might be, if you’re pushing an overloaded cart filled with others’ cast-off trash through the city streets. We survive at a less-than-subistence level.

In the end, the deeper purpose of a film like *Dogtown Redemption* is to challenge all of us to see the humanity of others, regardless of who they are, how they live, or what someone else has told us to believe about them.

And it all starts with the seemingly simple, though increasingly uncommon and therefore radical act of asking questions.

This is the work of filmmakers who approach the world with curiosity and an openness of mind, and who ask more questions than they have reached conclusions.

With Amir and Chihiro, it was clear that when they first encountered the homelessness and poverty in West Oakland, their impulse was not to shy away, or rush to judgment, or take it for granted, as so many of us might; but instead to see it with fresh eyes and ask why it is this way here, with so much wealth and opportunity in the Bay Area? How can it be this way?

And to be clear, the question is not just about the recyclers, but about all of us. This is an opportunity for Oakland, and any other documentary film or filmmaker, but by even just considering the questions with an openness of mind and then thinking differently about people like Miss Kay, Laydon, and Jason and what they have to do to survive, we might get that much closer to an answer.

John Lightfoot manages the California Documentary Project at California Humanities, a grant program for film, radio and media.

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**Film Reveals the Humanity of People on the Street**

by John Lightfoot

The first time I read the funding proposal for *Sam on the Streets*, I was skeptical. West Oakland recyclers Miss Kay, Landon, and Jason, I knew that the project was unique. As with the best documentary films, it promised to take us on a deep journey of understanding.

As Alliance Recycling plans to shut down later in August due to neighborhood opposition, their mission to transform the facility is transformed from one that recycles into one that cares about the lives and families of those who work there.

In the end, the deeper purpose of a film like *Sam on the Streets* is to challenge us to see the humanity of others, regardless of who they are, how they live, or what someone else has told us to believe about them.

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**Song for Miss Kay**

from page 3

She wasn’t there.

“I thought to myself that again and again and couldn’t find her,” he said. “They told me she had been assaulted and then I found her in Highland Hospital. Her face was purple. I knew she had been assaulted and then I found her in Highland Hospital. It was so bad.”

She died of that assault, kicked to death by a man named Christopher Flores as she was lying in her sleeping bag. Hospital staff told me she had been assaulted and even killed on the streets, but in most media reports, they are little more than crime statistics.

The great achievement of Amir Soltani and Chihiro Wimbush is that their film has given us such a sensitive understanding of Miss Kay in all her humanity and individuality. This is the result of just another accident statistic. It happens to someone we know and care about, so we are made aware of the terrible injustice of allowing people to languish in poverty and die on the streets of this nation.

In the case of Miss Kay, neither the hospitals nor the nonprofit service providers we encountered could offer her succcess in her final days. It is as if the whole society abandoned her onto the streets even when she was sick unto death. A tiny senior citizen was completely wakened by cancer, was murdered in our midst.

Amir said, “I think of those like the questions really becomes: Who killed her? Who killed her? It’s not just the act of violence that killed someone. It’s the whole context that also kills them. Standing of important, timely issues affecting our communities and state. The deeper purpose of documentary, however, is that with the right combination of storyteller and subject, the potential is there to set in motion a transformative chain of events that begins with the realization of individual perspective, sometimes dramatically.

We might see what we had previously taken for granted with new insight, or feel for the first time just how hard it must be to be sick, hungry, or in mourning, or struggling with addiction, or whatever it might be, if you’re pushing an overloaded cart filled with others’ cast-off trash through the city streets. We survive at a less-than-subistence level.

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And it all starts with the seemingly simple, though increasingly uncommon and therefore radical act of asking questions.

“Jason Witt had known Miss Kay for years. And like her, he also knows full well how intolerant our society has become towards homeless people. Instead of looking at her as a problem, he said, “and trying to figure out how we could make her a different person, we should have figured out how we could have made a difference for her so that she was happier during the day.”

How would we do that? I asked.

“Maybe the laws need to change,” he said. “Maybe sanctions against the homeless need to be lifted. Maybe districts in the city need to open their arms to people on the streets. We need to change.”

As a journalist, Amir Soltani became aware of the way homeless people and recyclers are marginalized and stereotyped by the public, city officials and the media.

“I don’t think that the way that poor people like Miss Kay are portrayed by other writers is necessarily objective,” he said. “When someone is called a scavenger or a pest or a criminal, an addict or homeless, I know what words can do. All these words, they block our ability to see people as they are and for who they are.

And if you want to see people as they are, you need to walk the walk with them.”

Near the end of the film, Miss Kay is reduced to sleeping on the streets of Emeryville. She is in near despair as she looks at the loss of her loved ones.

She asks a heartbreaking question. “I think it’s ‘cause my daddy’s dead, Fred’s dead and I don’t have a family and children and I think that’s what’s destroying me. What have I done to deserve this?”

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Redemption Rises on Midnight Streets

from page 1

memory.

Moments of love and redemption take place on the streets.

We witness the joy felt by Jason Witt, a battle-hardened survivor of the streets who has been forged into recycled steel and who received a samurai sword. He greatly moved by the outpouring of love and affection from his teacher and brothers at the Contra Costa Badshak where he learned the art of the black samurai sword. In an unforgettable close-up, the face that seemed to be made of unbending iron softens and the steely eyes overflow with tears to his word to him and speak to him. He was a healer. He was a healer even while sick, always, and loved by the people.

Yet, the finest image of redemption takes place in the life of Landon Goodwin, a homeless recycler. Amir Soltaní describes as “the minister of the recyclers.” Landon calls forth the courage and heart to uplift himself from a life of poverty and become a帮忙 and homeless people in Oakland. It is a song for Miss Kay, and it somehow becomes a song for all of us, a song for the love that one gets to know that well.

At the end of the film, it’s impossible not to think of the summer evening when Landon walking down the aisle with his bride Suzanne Anderson. It can’t always happen in life, but it feels so right when Landon rose and inhabited his dream. There were people that one gets to know that well.

After having spent so many years film- ing Landon’s tough life as a homeless recycler, what did Amir and Chihiro feel on the day they filmed his wedding? “It was like a Cinderella story,” said Amir. “It doesn’t get better than that.” He rose and inhabited his dream. There were people that one gets to know that well.

In our interview, Landon attempted to explain why the bonds of love and friend- ship forged among people on the streets can grow so strong. It’s something beyond “hearts and flowers.” It’s a matter of shielding one another in the face of a hos- tile society.

When people have material things, they feel that they don’t need anybody anymore,” Landon said. “I was deep loved and respected by people.”

When the filmmakers décidé to name their film “Dogtown Redemption,” Amir said, “I kept thinking, ‘Where is the redemption going to come from?’ And ultimately, it came from Landon.”

The director filmed Landon for several years after having met him at a recycling center in Oakland. It is a song for Miss Kay, and it somehow becomes a song for all of us, a song for the love that one gets to know that well.

Unfortunately, Miss Kay is not the only one who has died or been injured that night,” Landon said. “I knew a few people who became homeless people. They didn’t have any care and they didn’t have anyone who loved them. They didn’t have anyone who was going to help them. This is the moment when everything began to turn around in his life. It seems symbolic that his road to healing began in a hospital after a savage assault on the streets.

In the film, Landon looks at that symbol- ism. “Nothing grows from a seed unless it is watered,” Landon said. “Do you know why I want to help people? I see people who are hungry, who are homeless, who are hungry, who are hungry, who are hungry, who are hungry.

Landon said that from the moment he met Suzanne, “I didn’t take my eyes off her in less than five months we were married.”

“Where did the redemption come from? Ultimately, it came from Landon.”

Moments of love and redemption take place on the streets.

In Hollywood. These moments of miracu- lous transformation happen in life, but it feels so right when Landon walking down the aisle with his bride Suzanne Anderson. It can’t always happen in life, but it feels so right when Landon rose and inhabited his dream. There were people that one gets to know that well.

In our interview, Landon attempted to explain why the bonds of love and friend- ship forged among people on the streets can grow so strong. It’s something beyond “hearts and flowers.” It’s a matter of shielding one another in the face of a hos- tile society.

When people have material things, they feel that they don’t need anybody anymore,” Landon said. “I was deep loved and respected by people.”

When the filmmakers décided to name their film “Dogtown Redemption,” Amir said, “I kept thinking, ‘Where is the redemption going to come from?’ And ultimately, it came from Landon.”

The director filmed Landon for several years after having met him at a recycling center in Oakland. It is a song for Miss Kay, and it somehow becomes a song for all of us, a song for the love that one gets to know that well.

Unfortunately, Miss Kay is not the only one who has died or been injured that night,” Landon said. “I knew a few people who became homeless people. They didn’t have any care and they didn’t have anyone who loved them. They didn’t have anyone who was going to help them. This is the moment when everything began to turn around in his life. It seems symbolic that his road to healing began in a hospital after a savage assault on the streets.

In the film, Landon looks at that symbol- ism. “Nothing grows from a seed unless it is watered,” Landon said. “Do you know why I want to help people? I see people who are hungry, who are homeless, who are hungry, who are hungry, who are hungry, who are hungry.

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Every Thursday, Joe Liesner and Food Not Bombs volunteers serve a warm meal to the recyclers.

“Street Spirit is not just a newspaper. It is an inclusive model for telling, selling and distributing stories from the community,” Liesner says. "It’s always about sharing food with the recyclers.” He describes seeing “generosity there that I don’t see anywhere else.”

“Laverne will tell me she needs some oil because her feet are sore. Or Shirley will tell me her husband ran away and I’ll share it with them.’” He describes seeing “generosity there that I don’t see anywhere else.”

"There's no lying about it,“ he says, “that some people will use drugs and alcohol to get through the pains and the stress of living on the street doing this hard work. But most of the people are really wonderful. And it's interesting because the one guy that I can think of, Smiley, he was always very generous and even mean some times. We've gotten to know each other and he's gotten to enjoy the food so much that he doesn't bother to mean about it anymore.”

Alliance Recycling is closing in August. The recyclers will have to go somewhere else with their materials because the income is essential for them. It will be difficult to find another facility as conveniently located and with a management that has the policy of treating its clients with the generosity and respect that Alliance has shown over the many years of its operation.

As for Joe Liesner, he is sure to stay connected and to find ways to share a meal with his recycling friends.
The disproportionate impact of gentrification on communities of color, as home prices and rents skyrocket, is undeniable. The disproportionate impact of gentrification on communities of color, as home prices and rents skyrocket, is undeniable. The youngest people in the Bay Area are disproportionately people of color, whether they are homeless or simply struggling to make ends meet. The disproportionate impact of gentrification on communities of color, as home prices and rents skyrocket, is undeniable. The disproportionate impact of gentrification on communities of color, as home prices and rents skyrocket, is undeniable.

Alliance Recycling in West Oakland faces closure this summer.

Older adults, and their families. Rickles estimates that at least 300 people a year are housed through the BACS program. If we had more of those we could really make a difference.

"The intentions of the majority of people are good — it’s just turning it into mean- ingful action," Rickles says, noting the will- ingness of a local developer to help with recycling, saying "the need for the center has passed." But the State of California’s recycling website offers its own frank perspective on the availability of recycling opportunities in various neighborhoods, an availability the state is obligated to maintain by law. San Francisco’s recycling opportunities are con- centrated in the city’s wealthiest neighborhoods, all in West Oakland, as far from the hills of Piedmont as one can get. Between areas are dis- proportional opportunities, for example, formerly industrial, and rapidly gentrifying San Francisco Chronicle columnist Chip Johnson once spoke in support of the state’s recycling program, it was a kind of recycling, for example, the need for the center has passed.

But curbside recycling, such as is pro- vided in Berkeley and San Francisco, only diverts a small fraction of recyclable waste generated in the Bay Area. And the availability of recycling opportunities in various neighborhoods, an availability the state is obligated to maintain by law. San Francisco’s recycling opportunities are concentrated in the city’s wealthiest neighborhoods, all in West Oakland, as far from the hills of Piedmont as one can get. Between areas are dispro- rioritizing recycling efforts and community-serving, income-producing cooperatives based in each community that turn garbage into gold. One of Finkel’s colleagues, Sam Cohen for Alliance at that location,” states Rickles. "The only hope is finding an alternative location. The city has dug in so deeply... it’s going to take a very long time to build that trust." But curbside recycling, such as is pro-vided in Berkeley and San Francisco, only diverts a small fraction of recyclable waste generated in the Bay Area. And the availability of recycling opportunities in various neighborhoods, an availability the state is obligated to maintain by law. San Francisco’s recycling opportunities are concentrated in the city’s wealthiest neighborhoods, all in West Oakland, as far from the hills of Piedmont as one can get. Between areas are dispro-
Meet Miss Kay
from page 4

rette dangled permanently from her lips. Footage in the documentary, provided by Abronski, shows a radiant Kay waving her dramatics.

But she struggled, always. “She had such a deep-seated fear of abandonment and a feeling of being unwanted and unloved,” said Abronski. “I don’t think she was able to come to terms with that her entire life.”

Kay, he said, was loving and warm on the inside, tough and uncompromising on the outside. Her lack of tolerance for following rules, “was just amazing.”

“She was like that guy standing in front of the tank in Tiananmen Square,” he said. “‘Fucking you. I stand here.’ And that’s how she was.”

In the late 1980s, Abronski ended the relationship. He felt too entangled, too smothered. It nearly ruined them both. Abronski quit the band and turned to heroin for two years. He managed to “swim back.” Kay didn’t. She began using speed. She hallucinated that BART ticket machines and newspaper articles were talking to her about the relationship. She clanged pots and pans together at band practice and was edged out.

“So, Abronski said, “that if she didn’t have someone to catch her, she wouldn’t get up.”

Emeryville Police Officer Jason Kromsky, who finally caught him at an East Bay quay not long after. Soon, she began dating Fred Griffin III, whom she had met on the punk music scene. A painter from a family of artists with a degree from Sonoma State University, Griffin as a child was a natural history buff “with the patience of a saint” who doted on his menagerie of snakes and other reptiles, said his sister, Catherine Griffin-Morse.

But Griffin-Morse said, when he entered his teen years, he struggled, enduring hospitalizations for what was likely bipolar disorder, exacerbated by drug use.

An Abiding Love
Griffin and Kay shared an abiding love, but she was difficult and explosive, Griffin-Morse said. The pair used speed together. They had met on the punk music scene. A painter from a family of artists with a degree from Sonoma State University, Griffin as a child was a natural history buff “with the patience of a saint” who doted on his menagerie of snakes and other reptiles, said his sister, Catherine Griffin-Morse.

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Strewn with grief, Miss Kay lies on the grave of her much-loved companion Fred Griffin, after his unexpected death.

“Her never to leave her because he protected her and he was worried about her,” his sister said. Griffin had dreams, to go live at an art colony, for one, but he always said “I can’t leave Hayok,” she recalled.

Not long after Soltani and Wimbush met Kay and Griffin, Griffin was hospitalized with a fast-moving infection after suffering acute stomach pains. He died within days.

Weeping on His Grave
Kay dissolved. An early scene in the documentary shows her weeping on his simple grave at Mountain View Cemetery. She was alone on the streets, with no protection. She staked out a spot behind the Emeryville Office Depot, conveniently close to Alliance.

Kay had experienced her own string of hospitalizations — psychiatric holds along with multiple stays for bouts of paranoia triggered by her alcoholism. Stints at shelters ended badly, when she violated rules or was booted for self-harm.

Then, in early 2013, Kay met Al Smith, a new love who doted on her. Flowers’ theory. His theory: Flores tripped over Kay’s bundled frame. He said he considered artists.” She was horrified by her
taboo. It took Kay a year to come to terms with that her entire life.”

Her immune system is compromised by Hepatitis C and heart valve damage from endocarditis, resulting in frequent hospital visits. These are the most difficult times. Each time he is hospitalized, we visit and wonder: will this be the last time?

When he is well enough by the standards of our government’s policies, he is forced to leave the hospital without a follow-up plan. With nowhere to go but the streets, he struggles until the next time — sometimes days later, sometimes months later. We wait for the next phone call.

I watch as my husband’s health declines. He chooses to stay connected with daily trips to Oakland, ensuring our son gets his methadone dose and a hot breakfast, bringing him home to bathe when his body oozes with infection. Too many missed daily appointments at the methadone clinic results in removal from the program. The addict ends up with drawal and seeks street drugs to ease the pain, exacerbating the problem.

This is not our story. Every one of these homeless people that you see has a family somewhere. Homelessness, like addiction, affects the entire family.

We live with guilt when we sit down at the family table with the empty chair and as we tuck ourselves under warm covers on a cold and stormy night. Holidays and birthdays go by with regrets. What could we have done differently? We know we did the best we could, but the guilt still haunts us.

What can you do? Advocate for the poor. Help to keep the recycle centers open. When you see a homeless person, talk to him (or her). Remind them there are people who care. Acknowledge them.

Share what you can, even if it is only a smile. Spare change, food, toiletries, even clean socks can be a Godsend. I have a cousin who buys a new jacket before it’s needed and finds a homeless person for his old one. He was homeless once. He knows.

Remember — there is no guarantee that you will always have a roof over your head.

In 2013, Kay met Al Smith, a new love who doted on her. Flowers’ theory. His theory: Flores tripped over Kay’s bundled frame. He said he

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Former Recycler Keith Arivnwine Recalls His Life on the Streets — and the New Hope He Discovered

Memoir by Keith Arivnwine as told to Lauren Kawana

When I was living on the streets, I was running from life. I had no responsibility. It was just to get away from reality. This is what I chose to do.

I was born and raised in Oakland. In the late ’80s and early ’90s, I owed some money I couldn’t pay and was forced to leave my surroundings. I ended up with the homeless, hiding out. I adopted their way of life. I got comfortable.

I began recycling. I was a regular out there. I would get up early to find things and get to the recycling center before it closed at 4 p.m. After a drop-off, I might go on another run just to get a little extra money.

Employees from recycling centers will come home from work and buy recycling from me. They would buy cans for 7 p.m. to 12 a.m. at their homes for half the price — catering to people who just need a few dollars. Other folks run other recycling operations all night — some out of their trucks — but they pay even cheaper.

At the end of it, you may get a few hours of sleep. You burn out.

People also have their recycling neighborhoods — areas where they’ve been recycling for years. If you come into their territory, they’re gonna have a problem.

This could happen here in West Oakland or up north in Berkeley. If you’re not a real tough person, you worry about something being done to you and doing something to somebody. It’s a whole other world.

I would often tell myself, at the end of a long day of recycling, wouldn’t it be nice if I just had a regular eight-hour job? A 9 to 5 job, where I could actually sleep and rest and be myself? But this is how we survive.

The closing of Alliance Metals is like closing a factory, like Del Monte in Emeryville, where hundreds of people lost their jobs. All recyclers are entrepreneurs. Everyone they hire has to bring cans and bottles to the center. But they won’t get unemployment; everybody’s stuck.

At Alliance Metals, the recyclers will likely start stealing and doing whatever they have to do to survive. I’m not saying it’s right, but what else are they going to do? While you do have some bad seeds, you have a lot of people who do this to live — for positive things. They’re part of the neighborhood too.

After living as a recycler for so long, I didn’t think there was another way. From 1993 through 2012, I was in and out of the probationary and in and out of this lifestyle. I became a squatter. I would find an abandoned house and sell drugs. I was stealing and selling drugs, and not using them; but I was no better than anyone else. It’s really sad when you say you’re all right with it. It’s a really dark place.

My family would come looking for me, and I would say to them, “I’m fine.” I was not ready to do something different. My son, my family, my mother — nobody could force this on me. Because I had to retrain myself from within.

In 2012, I was arrested for possession of stolen property. It was the best thing that could have happened to me. This time felt different. I knew I was touched by the grace of God.

While I was in jail, I met a man who told me really good things about St. Mary’s Center in Oakland. When I got out, I went straight to St. Mary’s and entered the Winter Shelter.

I had nothing but the clothes on my back and the desire to change. St. Mary’s is down the street from the lifestyle I knew, so at first I didn’t want to be there. But something pushed me forward. I lived at the Winter Shelter for four months. At the shelter, I was introduced to all kinds of programs. I went to classes every day that covered things like money management, changing your emotions, even art.

The art instructor Susan Werner used to say, “Draw whatever is on your mind.” I drew the abandoned house and my old lifestyle — the buggy in front of the house down the street. Until one day, I told her: “I’m cool. I don’t want that anymore. I have a different desire.”

That’s when I drew a new picture of “my apartment,” before I got it. I no longer wanted that homeless lifestyle, and buggy-pushing. I had to take the time to be reborn from within. Everything starts from within.

Then, I made a plan. Once you make a decision to do something different in life, you have to have a plan. With a stable place to stay, I applied for General Assistance and was able to get a bus pass, a BART pass, and eventually a cell phone.

With just a little money to build with, everything started. Now, at 60 years old, I have been living in my own apartment for three years.

I come to St. Mary’s Center to talk with others. I encourage them, and give them something positive to see.

I have seen a lot of people make transformations similar to mine. When I was living on the streets, some people gave me a few dollars here and there, but never once would they try to make me feel like I was a bad person. That’s why I never say anything negative. I always try to be positive and encouraging.

When I see the folks I used to live around, they say, “You was right there with us. Whatever you have to say, I’ll listen because you understand what we are going through.” I have to be strong enough to be around these people so I can offer that encouragement.

God gave everybody free will. You’d be surprised: you do have a choice. Three years later, I’m still learning new things. I want to be here to show people they have a choice, just like somebody did for me.

When I entered St. Mary’s winter shelter, I had nothing but the clothes on my back and the desire to change. I no longer wanted that homeless lifestyle, and buggy-pushing. I had to take the time to be reborn from within.

Keith Arivnwine was a homeless recycler on the streets of Oakland before turning his life around. He now has stable housing and is a highly respected advocate at St. Mary’s Center, serving on their Council of Elders.

“Awake to survival.” Keith Arivnwine took this photo as part of “On Our Way Home,” a photography exhibit created by St. Mary’s Center.

When I was homeless, I used a shopping cart to carry my belongings and to recycle,” said Arivnwine.

Editor’s note: Keith Arivnwine first learned about St. Mary’s from a prisoner in jail. That man was Cornelius Saulsberry, a well-loved member of the community who helped many people in his Oakland neighborhood, helped women feel safe in bad areas, and referred many people to homeless programs. Everyone loved his great sense of humor.

Sadly, Saulsberry died suddenly last month, and Arivnwine gave a very moving tribute to his friend at a recent memorial at St. Mary’s for members of the community who died. Cornelius will be greatly missed.