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considering how many times the Freedom Movement were jailed all across the nation during the hard-fought struggle for civil rights, San Bruno County Jail seems a fitting place to celebrate a renewal of Martin Luther King’s vision of nonviolent social change.

As our small delegation entered the jail to hold a graduation ceremony for nine prisoners who had completed intensive trainings in Kingian Nonviolence, I felt a profound sense of history on the move. For as we walked down the long corridors of the jail, we were led by Bernard LaFayette, a close associate of Martin Luther King, Jr. and an internationally respected authority on Kingian Nonviolence.

LaFayette’s personal march through history has taken him from organizing the disenfranchised black residents of Selma, Alabama, prevented from voting by a brutal system of racism, to his present-day role in training social change activists in far-flung nations, setting up peace studies in universities and teaching nonviolence inside jail cells.

LaFayette is present at San Bruno jail to honor King’s very last words to him. On King’s last morning on earth, he told LaFayette: “Now, Bernard, the next movement we’re going to have is to institutionalize and internationalize nonviolence.” During the decades since King’s murder, LaFayette has spent his life trying to carry the message of Kingian Nonviolence to the world, training social-change activists in far-flung nations, setting up peace studies in universities and teaching nonviolence inside jail cells.

As we entered a large complex of jail cells that houses about 50 prisoners, I noticed that Theresa Guy Moran, an attorney trained in Kingian Nonviolence, was carrying a book with a cover photo of a young Bernard LaFayette standing side by side with Martin Luther King. The book, In Peace and Freedom, My Journey in Selma, is an illuminating case study of the brilliant strategies and costly sacrifices it took to win voting rights on the bloody streets of Selma, Alabama.

When several young prisoners realized that LaFayette was, in truth, the same man standing next to Dr. King in the book’s cover photo, they immediately expressed deep respect and gratitude to LaFayette for his work for civil rights in Selma.

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is heart is always with the people. His Heart Is with the People on the Street

“Michael is such an inspiration to every person who wants to be a community organizer because his heart is always with the people.” — Janny Castillo

by Terry Messman

For close to 30 years, Michael Diehl has walked through the streets and parks of Berkeley, connecting with people, talking, listening, and just being present. Many of the people he reaches out to are homeless or inadequately housed. They may be sitting alone and sometimes have unexpect-
Fresno officials demolished every encampment and destroyed tons of homeless people’s belongings. The Fresno Police Department will not allow any homeless encampments to re-emerge.

Story and photos by Mike Rhodes

The camping ban moratorium represents a step across the chasm between people experiencing homelessness and the neighbors and governmental systems that fail them. The moratorium protects camps from temporary adverse impact.

The ACLU voted for this moratorium after a groundswell of support. Homeless people, several activists from Homeless United for Friendship and Freedom, and former Occupy members spoke during the chapter’s public comment time.

Housing NOW Santa Cruz believes that a time-limited moratorium on the sleeping ban ordinance would put these assumptions to the test. Because such patterns of enforcement and impacts of criminalization are finally making their way into higher courts in this nation, support from our ACLU for addressing the sleeping and camping ban couldn’t come at a better time.

Other chapters are also examining local problems regarding the criminalization of homelessness, and the regional ACLU conference in Sacramento in April included a workshop on California’s history of criminalizing homelessness.

For further information about the work of the ACLU on this issue, please contact Steve Plesich at splesich@gmail.com.

Fresno Police Department Sergeant Robert Dewey (left) orders American Civil Liberties Union organizer and Community Alliance board member Pam Whalen to move back, as she documents the demolition of the Grain Silo homeless encampment.

Fresno Police Department Sergeant Robert Dewey has produced a power point presentation that identifies Pastor Chris Breedlove of the College Community Congregational Church as a leader in a resistance movement to stop the demolition of the Grain Silo homeless encampment in Fresno. The presentation, shown to several community groups, identifies the Brown Berets as the “muscle.”

The slide goes on to say that the group was led by Pastor Chris Breedlove of the College Community Congregational Church. Breedlove said he was “outraged, intimidated, and concerned that a citizen not charged of any crime, and not under any investigation, could be named and listed in a public document by the Fresno Police Department in what is tantamount to a smear campaign or being proscribed.”

Novella Coleman, an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) staff attorney in Fresno, would not comment about whether the characterization of Breedlove amounted to defamation, but did say that “the City has an unfortunate history of violating the rights of homeless persons by confiscating and destroying their property. So it is troubling that the City may be targeting local advocates who seek to hold the City accountable during these so-called cleanups.”

According to Breedlove, it is intimidating to be targeted by the police as the leader of a lawless group. He said, “I worry about how my future efforts, issues, and ministries will be adversely impacted by my congregation and myself being negatively branded by the FPD in such a public way. I also worry about the well-being of my family. What if we needed an emergency response by the FPD? Is there a bias among the FPD against progressives such as myself? Is there a specific FPD bias toward my ministry?”

Mario Manganiello, who is associated with, but not a member of the Brown Berets, was at the Grain Silo homeless encampment during the demolition. Manganiello said that the Brown Berets did not organize a presence there that day and is upset that the FPD is portraying them as some kind of violent gang.

“They are saying that we were the ‘muscle’ and pushing for violence and that is absolutely not true,” Manganiello said. “My concern is that, with that word, they are trying to say we are trying to promote violence or encourage other people to be violent towards the FPD.”

“But, our stance has always been peaceful at rallies and marches and we are not a violent organization. We are for nonviolent peaceful protests.”

Ralph Avita, a member of the Fresno Brown Berets, said, “I am afraid that the FPD will do as was done in the 60’s and 70’s, that day and is upset that the FPD is portraying us as some kind of violent gang.”

Pastor Chris Breedlove spoke out against Fresno Mayor Swearengin and City Manager Rudd when police began destroying every homeless encampment in town.

Pastor Chris Breedlove said he was “outraged, intimidated, and concerned that a citizen not charged of any crime” could be subjected to “what is tantamount to a smear campaign” by the Fresno Police Department.

Rough sleepers and activists believe the camping ban is a bad law because it criminalizes public nighttime sleeping, a necessity to survive. Outdoor sleeping is banned everywhere in Santa Cruz.

Housing NOW Santa Cruz believes that because such bans are part of a system used to criminalize homelessness, intentional or not, it is unconstitutional, and too easily used to selectively enforce, in the same way a loitering ticket is.

Many local residents claim that without such an ordinance our police would be unable to regulate the growing numbers of travelers and homeless people who are forced to sleep outdoors in the absence of sufficient shelter options.

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Homeless Advocates Targeted by Fresno Police

Sleep Moratorium Gains Support in Santa Cruz

by Linda Ellen Lemaster

The Santa Cruz County Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union voted to adopt a Statement of Principle at its most recent board meeting, in support of a proposed time-limited camping ban moratorium in the City of Santa Cruz.

The camping ban moratorium represents a step across the chasm between people experiencing homelessness and the neighbors and governmental systems that fail them. The moratorium protects camps from temporary adverse impact.

“Our ACLU chapter is moving toward a more progressive agenda,” said Steve Plesich, vice chair, who has been advocating for a closer examination of the sleeping/camping ban ordinance, at least since the Occupy Movement began its local growing pains.

The Santa Cruz County Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union supports in principle a limited time moratorium on enforcement of camping ban laws and ordinances within the City and County of Santa Cruz on the grounds that such laws and ordinances selective-ly criminalize the homeless community.

“While the chapter is mindful that such a moratorium raises practical problems within the community at large, we believe that the benefits of such an approach in terms of the opportunity for civic leaders, policy makers and stake- holders to reassess the efficacy of these laws and ordinances outweigh any tem- porary adverse impact.”

ACLU SANTA CRUZ
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‘70s with the more left-wing radical groups such as the Black Panther Party and classify us as the ‘bad civil rights groups’ and say that we are not honest and not true to hope that in this age of the Internet we can fight back against such a characterization. We are no longer equipped to fight with a smart phone than with a gun, as ‘Anonymous’ has demonstrated. So unless we allow them to manipulate our image, we still have a chance to win the public’s trust.’

Speaking about the role of the Brown Berets in the community, Avita said it is “to organize, educate, and serve the community who are oppressed. Unlike past Berets organizations, we are not nationalistic, homophobic, sexist, or conformist to institutions who would oppress others. Also, unlike most groups, we do support the people’s right to self-defense and thus will not consider ourselves nonviolent.”

Responding to a California Public Records Act request, the Fresno Police Department provided the Community Alliance with a version of the power point presentation that did not include the information that offended Breedlove and the Brown Berets. Sergeant Dewey, who produced the presentation, “An Overview of our Mission, Accomplishments, and Goals,” says he changed the references to Breedlove and the Brown Berets, some photos, and other minor details.

Dewey said he had reason to believe that Breedlove was the leader of the homeless advocate group, because he had previously held a press conference on the issue and had negotiated with the attorney representing the City of Fresno about the Grain Silo homeless encampment. He added that the information has been removed from the power point presentation and if Breedlove is upset he will apologize to him.

“I would apologize to Pastor Breedlove, to say that if that is what was going on, if that was an assumption I made that was wrong, I apologize,” Sergeant Dewey said. “I did take it out. I have been told by one or two other people that maybe it should be a little more generic. That is why I decided to go ahead and change it.”

The Brown Berets did not have an organized presence at the Grain Silo homeless encampment on the day of the demolition, but they had brought the attention of Dewey and the FPD.

Dewey said, “As far as the muscle, we did recognize people that we had seen in the past that were wearing obvious brown handkerchiefs and brown berets. I have done some dignitary protection in the past and I know what it looks like when one person is protecting others. That is what appeared to us as.”

Manganiello said the purpose of the group was to give the homeless enough time to move their property. “We were able to stall them (the City of Fresno) for a long enough time so the Brown Berets could bring their belongings into storage, so that was the ultimate outcome,” Manganiello said.

Sergeant Dewey said the situation differrently. “As a law enforcement officer, I can’t allow that. I can’t allow somebody else to take the tempo on a scene that I’m supposed to be in control of. The fact of the matter is that we had a trespassing issue.”

About the characterization of the Brown Berets as being the muscle, Dewey said, “I don’t think so. I apologize to their face if they want me to speak to them. I’ve got no problem with that.”

During the demolition of the Grain Silo homeless encampment on October 23, 2013, Breedlove took video footage, including a scene where he asked an on-duty police officer for his name and badge number. The officer ignored the request.

ACLU attorney Coleman, citing California Penal Code § 830.10, said that “any uniformed peace officer shall wear a badge, nameplate, or other device which bears clearly on its face the identification number or name of the officer.”

Dewey says that Police Officer Nicholas El-Helou was on duty and should have identified himself, but didn’t because he was in plain clothes and told not to “engage” unless there were problems. Dewey said he is confident that this problem will not be repeated.

Dewey shows the power point presentation to community groups in an effort to explain the dynamics taking place at the FPD as part of the City of Fresno’s work to end homelessness. He says that he initially saw the role of the FPD Homeless Task Force as eliminating the encampments and then stopping them from re-emerging.

“We can’t just ignore the underlying issue of the fact that we still have this huge homeless population that has nowhere to go,” Dewey said.

“We very quickly evolved from, ‘OK, let’s move these people along and keep the streets clean.’ That was easy! I truly think that was the easy part. That is what we do, we are cops, right? The hard part was, but what do we do now? What do we do after the dust is settled? We quickly transitioned into social work and that is a very difficult hat for us to wear.”

There is a recognition by Dewey and other members of the FPD Homeless Task Force that they will not succeed by traditional police methods alone. They do cite statistics like the 1,333 shopping carts they have removed, 125 felony arrests, and 266 new homeless encampments they have cleared, but they get more excited talking about the one-on-one encounters that have led to homeless people getting the help they need to get off the streets.

Members of the FPD Homeless Task Force have no professional training as social workers. Their “tough love” approach to ending homelessness has serious limitations, and the sometimes awkward encounters with homeless advocates makes them a less than ideal group to be on the front line in the City of Fresno’s approach to ending homelessness.

Pastor Breedlove said, “It is truly a complex and devastating human rights problem of suffering. Individual citizens need to be engaged. Communities of faith need to be involved. But, elected officials cannot abdicate their elected responsibilities on this issue as well. There needs to be a multifaceted approach for such a problem of immense complexity.”

“Housing First initiatives are one approach, but that alone will not be a total remedy. Advocates have detailed what an organized, safe and secure campsite would involve; but such sincere offers of collaboration have been ignored by all city council members and county board of supervisor’s members to date.”

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin and City Manager Bruce Rudd only exacerbate the lives of homeless people by demolishing their communities. Some within the religious fabric of Fresno believe that homeless advocates should collaborate with the city toward solutions. I’m of the mindset that it’s difficult to collaborate with an administration that sends bulldozers and intimidating task forces barreling down on a person that you’re trying to help. The City of Fresno first needs to halt harmful and costly policies toward the homeless.”

Mike Rhodes is a writer and photographer for the Fresno Community Alliance newspaper. Contact mikerhodes@comcast.net
A Constitution-Free Zone on the U.S. Border

by David Bacon

Under the Fourth Amendment, the people of the United States are not supposed to be subject to random and arbitrary stops and searches. But within 100 miles of a U.S. border, these rules don’t apply.

Last July, a worker phoned Alejandro Valenzuela, a young staff member at the Southside Workers Center in Tucson, Arizona. The police were at his home, the worker said, and were detaining him for deportation. Valenzuela and a friend discovered that Agent Action, a program that allows undocumented young people (DREAMers) to apply for deferred deportation and work authorization, had been used to detain and interrogate him.

Valenzuela was detained and intensively questioned before questioning people about immigration status after calling Tucson police about domestic violence, and a legal resident questioned about his status by Phoenix police while picking up his impounded car.

In Arizona, the ACLU documented “unprovoked assaults and verbal abuse, the unwarranted use of handcuffs and shackles, extended and recurring detention, invasive searches, property destruction and confiscation, and denial of food, water and legal representation.”

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On his behalf, the American Civil Liberties Union filed the first challenge to such an influx of 78 percent "— the "Show me your papers" law, which went into effect in September 2012, and authorizes police to enforce immigration law through "unreasonable seizures" by authorizes and encourages illegal police practices — the South Tucson police officers’ actions amounted to false arrest, vio-

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A n insidious law used by the cops in Los Angeles to harass and criminalize homeless people for sleeping in their vehicles, and using their vehicles as “living quarters,” was struck down on June 19 by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit Court.

In the case Desertain v. City of Los Angeles, the court sent a strong message all across the nation that cities cannot attempt to make homelessness illegal with egregious city laws that essentially make it impossible for homeless people to survive by staying in their vehicles.

For years, it has been a common practice for homeless people to use their vehicles as a form of shelter when necessary. Whether it is due to a lack of money, or dire circumstances that leave them little choice but to sleep in their vehicles when the city they reside in does not offer them any other decent options, living out of a vehicle is an alternative to staying in overcrowded and unsafe homeless shelters, or sleeping on the sidewalks, or under the bushes, or on the brutal streets.

In 1983, the City of Los Angeles enacted Municipal Code Section 85.02 to attack its homeless population, making it illegal for people to use their vehicles as “living quarters” either overnight, day-by-day, or otherwise while the vehicle was parked on city streets, or in City-owned parking lots, and parking lots owned or under the control of the Los Angeles County Department of Transportation.

During the week of September 23, 2010, Los Angeles officials created the Venice Homelessness Task Force, with 21 cops who had orders in Section 85.02 to use, and arrest homeless people for using their automobiles as “living quarters.” The cops were also supposed to hand out information to people living in their vehicles about providers of shelters and other social services.

A number of brave souls, including Chris Cagle, Leroy Butler, William Warivonchik, Lerey Butler, William Cagle, and Chris Taylor, fought back against the discriminatory anti-homeless laws of Los Angeles. As a result, the court struck down the law that made it illegal for homeless people to use their vehicles as “living quarters” in the City and County of Los Angeles.

Many gravely ill and disabled homeless people have been arrested in Los Angeles for using their vehicles as “living quarters” and had their vehicles impounded. Those arrested under this law included one person who had congestive heart failure, and another that had epilepsy. Another was an individual suffering from severe anxiety and depression after he lost his own legal temp business company that he had for almost ten years, and also lost his home during bad economic times.

Some of those arrested were found in a home, such as food, bedding, a mattress, and cleaning supplies, all of which are necessary for homeless people to live.

Across California, entire families have been forced to use their vehicles as a form of shelter because their cities do not offer enough decent housing options.

The brave people who fought back against the insidious law argued that Section 85.02 is unconstitutionally vague on its face because it provides insufficient notice of the conduct it penalizes and promotes arbitrary and discriminatory enforcement. The court agreed with them.

The court ruled that Section 85.02 provides inadequate notice of the unlawful conduct it proscribes, and opens the door to discriminatory enforcement against the homeless and the poor. Accordingly, the law violates the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment as an unconstitutionally vague statute.

The court further believes that for many homeless people, their automobile may be their last major possession, the means by which they can look for work and seek social services. The City of Los Angeles has many options at its disposal to alleviate the plight suffering of its homeless citizens. Selectively preventing the homeless and the poor from using their vehicles for activities many other citizens also conduct in their cars should not be one of those options.

The criminalization of the poor and the homeless in cities across the United States is cruel and inhumane. Other attacks on the poor and the homeless include the notorious sticket laws in San Francisco and the attempt to create such vicious laws in the City of Berkeley.

Sleeping bans exist in Santa Cruz, San Diego, and St. Petersburg, Florida, under the guise of “no camping laws.” Some cities prohibit sharing food with homeless people unless you have a permit, and many cities refuse to grant permits to feed poor and homeless people in their communities. In Orlando, Florida, people from Food Not Bombs have been arrested and sent to jail for feeding the poor and hungry, and Food Not Bombs volunteers have been harassed and arrested in San Francisco and other cities in past years.

Laws against panhandling are another attack on the poor in many cities, and homeless people are being subjected to eviction from public parks and inhumane treatment in many cities across the nation.

Lynda Carson may be reached at tenstrule@yahoo.com.
“We hang out here because we’re not allowed in the upskirt of downtown. Some of us aren’t permitted because of the way we look. People have a label on us. They see me as a person who eats out of a trashcan.”

— Linda Harris, a cancer survivor who lives in Skid Row

Story and photos by David Bacon

“T

he people’s general,” says TC, explaining the nickname he’s been given on Fifth Street in the Skid Row area of Los Angeles. He earned it by keeping the homeless residents of Skid Row informed and educated, in part through the literature table he maintains near the El Cortez Hotel. Under the table are the donated clothes he collects, which anyone can take.

“I’m a soldier in the war on poverty,” General TC declares. “I’ve been living here for two years, and I love it because I love the people — most of ’em, at least. I don’t like being homeless, and down here it can be hard. But sometimes it can be beautiful too, because people are beautiful, no matter how down and out they may be.”

The nickname, Skid Row, isn’t the scene of a military conflict, but it is contested terrain nonetheless.

“There are two communities on Skid Row — the havens and the have-nots,” says Deborah Burton, who lives in subsidized housing nearby. “Working and living together makes a community. We’re here and we’re not going anywhere.”

And whether living on the sidewalk or in single-room hotels, this sense of community is a product of their efforts to keep living there. On Sixth Street, people gather every day at Gladys Park, sharing a couple of drinking fountains, a few patches of grass and several trees.

“People here accept you for who you are,” Linda Harris says. “She’s a cancer survivor, which has given her bumps all over her skin. No one gives her a second look, though, or other than to say hello. They don’t care about how you lose your name at you. Down here everyone is equal.”

That’s not her sense of the attitude she faces once she leaves the park, though. “We were lucky,” she says. “Happier times.”

Deborah Burton feels the same scorn at Coles Restaurant on Sixth. “We used to go there because it was affordable,” she remembers from her youth. Then the eatery changed hands, and set up tables outside on the sidewalk to serve the new, more afflu- ent population downtown. “You had to go up to the counter to get your food. It was like a restaurant that went out of business.”

Poor tenants had to use a separate entrance and gated off the elevator. “And it’s across the street from a converted office building where the starting rent is 90 times higher,” he says.

Effectively, that makes Skid Row a community in which both low-income and higher income people live together. Stabilizing low-income housing affects people living on the street. Sidewalk-dwellers and hotel-dwellers are not two separate communities, but one larger one, and people move from one status to another. Los Angeles had about 58,000 homeless people in 2013, 8000 more than two years before.

Both General TC and Sean Gregory had rooms and lost them, pushing them onto the street. Terri King was homeless for three years, and then got a room at the Lyndon Hotel. “Since I got a place I’ve had my teeth done, my ears done, and I have medical care,” she says.

Bill Fisher, a disabled ironworker, would have been homeless after leaving the hospital last December. Instead, he moved into the Star Apartments, a new project of prefabricated modular units erected by the Skid Row Housing Trust which manages 25 low-income developments throughout downtown.

Fisher and his friend Thomas Ozeki now manage the Star Apartments community. A cop gives a ticket to a poor bike rider on Skid Row. Activists accuse the police of harassing poor residents in order to force them out of the neighborhood.

“I don’t like being homeless, and down here it can be hard. But sometimes it can be beautiful too, because people are beautiful, no matter how down and out they may be.”

General TC, who calls himself “The People’s General,” lives on the sidewalk on Skid Row. He is an activist with the Los Angeles Community Action Network.

Creating Community on Skid Row in L.A.

For days after his eviction, General TC moved from the sidewalk to the park. “Afterwards,” he said, “they required you to show an ID and Social Security card or a room key to get in, and charged you $10 for a room.” He eventually found a room in a cheap hotel, and the experience transformed him.

“People here accept you for who you are,” Linda Harris says. “She’s a cancer survivor, which has given her bumps all over her skin. No one gives her a second look, though, or other than to say hello. They don’t care about how you lose your name at you. Down here everyone is equal.”

That’s not her sense of the attitude she faces once she leaves the park, though. “We were lucky,” she says. “Happier times.”

Deborah Burton feels the same scorn at Coles Restaurant on Sixth. “We used to go there because it was affordable,” she remembers from her youth. Then the eatery changed hands, and set up tables outside on the sidewalk to serve the new, more afflu- ent population downtown. “You had to go up to the counter to get your food. It was like a restaurant that went out of business.”

Poor tenants had to use a separate entrance and gated off the elevator. “And it’s across the street from a converted office building where the starting rent is 90 times higher,” he says.

Effectively, that makes Skid Row a community in which both low-income and higher income people live together. Stabilizing low-income housing affects people living on the street. Sidewalk-dwellers and hotel-dwellers are not two separate communities, but one larger one, and people move from one status to another. Los Angeles had about 58,000 homeless people in 2013, 8000 more than two years before.

Both General TC and Sean Gregory had rooms and lost them, pushing them onto the street. Terri King was homeless for three years, and then got a room at the Lyndon Hotel. “Since I got a place I’ve had my teeth done, my ears done, and I have medical care,” she says.

Bill Fisher, a disabled ironworker, would have been homeless after leaving the hospital last December. Instead, he moved into the Star Apartments, a new project of prefabricated modular units erected by the Skid Row Housing Trust which manages 25 low-income developments throughout downtown.

Fisher and his friend Thomas Ozeki now manage the Star Apartments community.
Activists Stage Jack London’s Radical Iron Heel
“We are going to take your governments and your palaces...”

Art, Puppetry, Theater and Music Bring Jack London’s The Iron Heel to Life.

by David Solnit

No, he’s not just the dog story and survival-adventure writer of Call of the Wild and The Sea-Wolf. Jack London’s The Iron Heel is the strongest articulation of London’s emerging anti-capitalism and may have been the first dystopian-utopian science fiction novel.

Written in 1907, the novel predicted the first World War (though with a different outcome), and the merger of corporate power with authoritarian government seen in fascist governments in the 1930s and 1940s and today in the escalating concentration of power and wealth in our current corporate capitalism.

Much of it reads like it could be today, which is why a group of community artists, activists and organizers — the Iron Heel Theater Collective — have chosen to bring it to life using puppetry, painted picture-story cantastoria banners, readers theater and live music.

The first performance on May 18 played to an enthusiastic full house at the Hillside Community Church in El Cerrito and benefited TeamRichmond.net — the progressive candidates for Richmond City Council and Mayor (candidate Eduardo Martinez is the lead performer of the readers theater performers).

Richmond progressives and ordinary folks are battling against Chevron, Wall Street banks, the realty industry, building trades unions, and other parts of the local power establishment that are spending millions and fighting hard to return Richmond — the most progressive city in the United States — to being a company town.

The next performance is scheduled for the evening of October 31, 2014, as part of the Jack London Society Biennial Symposium to be held in Berkeley.

I met Tarnel Abbott over the last decade working on mobilizations against the Chevron Richmond Refinery and with the election campaigns of the Richmond Progressive Alliance, who put an end to the 100-year rule of Chevron in its former company town, Richmond, Calif. Tarnel is a straight-talking retired member of SEIU Local 1021 (used to be 790).

The former Richmond librarian was awarded by the California Library Association’s Intellectual Freedom Committee the 2006 Zaia Horn Intellectual Freedom Award for her tireless advocacy of free speech. She is also Jack London’s great-granddaughter and continues, as her father did, London radical activism.

Tarnel was invited to perform from her great grandma’s The Iron Heel and her own writing on the Occupy movement at the Ankara Theater Festival in 2012 and again this year, with Richmond artist Regina Gilligan. I assisted Tarnel and Regina this year, sharing puppetry and cantastoria-making skills, creating a “cantastoria” or picture-story-painted-ban series and slightly larger-than-life masks which they took to Ankara, Turkey.

“Cantastoria,” in the words of leading U.S. cantastoria-maker-performer Clare Dolan, “is an Italian word for the ancient performance form of picture-story recitation, which involves sung narration accompanied by reference to painted banners, scrolls, or placards. It is a tradition belonging to the underdog, to chronically itinerant people of low social status, yet also inextricably linked to the sacred.

“It is a practice very much alive today, existing in a wide variety of incarnations around the world, and fulfilling very diverse functions for different populations. Picture-story recitation in its earliest form involved the display of representational paintings accompanied by sung narration. Originating in 6th century India, this religious and then increasingly secular practice evolved as it spread both east and west.”

Jack London described writing The Iron Heel in a letter to a friend in 1908, calling it “a novel that is an attack upon the bourgeoisie and all that the bourgeoisie stands for. It will not make me any friends ... am having the time of my life writing the story.”

Jonah Raskin, author of The Radical Jack London, wrote: “It was not until the coming of the First World War that it began to attract readers and to win London admiration for his prescience.

Indeed, only when socialists in France went to war against their socialist brothers in Germany, and when the rallying cry of ‘international solidarity’ fell on deaf ears, did The Iron Heel attract an international following. The rise of Hitler and Mussolini solidified London’s reputation as a ‘sociological seer.’ In Trotsky’s eyes, he was a genuine ‘revolutionary artist,’ and far more perceptive than either Rosa Luxemburg, the early twentieth-century

Larger-than-life puppets of anti-capitalist organizer Ernest confronting Mr. Wickson, leader of the 1%.

Mona Caron photo

See Activists Stage Iron Heel page 11
certificates, you’ll be joining an army of
world, it doesn’t come easily. You have to
civil rights movement. They knew that
months on end before they engaged in the
movement who trained for months and
one-half months, just like Dr. LaFayette
every single week for the last four and
the deep South in the early 1960s.
attended today by young prisoners in San
between the nonviolence training sessions
and support for the graduates.
Along with Haga and LaFayette, other
speakers at the graduation included Gus
Newport, former mayor of Berkeley and
currently a member of the National Council
of Elders; Michael Nagler, founder of the
Peace and Conflict Studies Program at the
University of California; and Theresa
Moran of the East Point Peace Academy.
More than 60 prisoners cheered enthu-
siastically as Haga introduced the nine
graduates. “We are getting you off the
cellblock in completing several months of sessions
to become certified as trainers in Kingian Nonviolence
Conflict Reconciliation.
“Always say that nonviolence is a des-
tination,” Haga told the prisoners in the
large cellblock. “We never become nonvi-
olicent because we’re perfect and imper-
fect. You’ll never get to a place where we’ll
never fail in being nonviolent because we’re
human beings, and each one of us, myself included, are all imperfect.
So we’re always going to fail, but it’s about
how we get back up again. It’s about the
study of the practice of nonviolence and
getting better and better at practicing this
philosophy every single day.”
The level of enthusiasm that greeted his
comments was remarkable. The cell-
blocchooked with praise and applause and
support for the graduates.
Then Haga drew a direct parallel
between the nonviolence training sessions
attended today by young prisoners in San
Bruno jail and the formative trainings that
civil rights activists such as James Lawson,
James Forman and Bernard LaFayette
held to prepare for sit-ins and marches in
the deep South in the early 1960s.
Haga said, “We have been practicing
every single week for the last four and
one-half months, just like Dr. LaFayette
and a lot of the leaders of the civil rights
movement who trained for months and
months on end before they engaged in the
civil rights movement. They knew that
change doesn’t come by just trying.
Wrong! It’s trying to change something in your
own life or trying to change something in
the world, it doesn’t come easily. You have to be
committed to this practice.”
The nine men graduating from this
program then stepped forward and received
their certificates to the prolonged applause of
their fellow prisoners.
Haga said, “As each of you receive these
certificates, you’ll be joining an army of
thousands and thousands of Kingian nonvi-
lent warriors around the world, and joining
a family and joining a movement — from
refugee fighters in Nigeria, to high school
students in Chicago, to educators in Nepal, to
peace activists in Japan, Sri Lanka and
Colombia. Dr. LaFayette has been going around the
world recruiting people into the
world of Kingian nonviolence.
“So you’re really joining a massive
movement of people who have committed themselves to try to create the
beloved community. So I hope you are proud of yourselves because I am incredibly proud
of you and happy for you.
Gas Newpart, the former mayor of
Berkeley and a member of the National
Council of Elders, told the prisoners, “I
just want to say congratulations. I know
how difficult it is. I remember coming out
of the streets, the person that steered me
towards nonviolence was Malcolm X.
Thank you for allowing us to be here.
Good luck and God bless you.”

The BOOMERANG EFFECT

In an interview after the ceremony,
Newport said it was remarkable to see Dr.
King’s vision of nonviolence coming to
life all over again in a jail in San Bruno so
many years after his assassination. He
said that the civil rights movement had a
“boomerang effect” on U.S. society.
Newport recalled the riots after King’s
death when it seemed like everything had
been lost, and the momentum of the move-
ment was gone. People at the time “didn’t
realize how deeply rooted the movement
had become,” he said. They couldn’t see at
the time that “with a little water and sun-
shine how things would go on blooming for
another 50 years.”

“It’s the boomerang that can turn
everything around,” Newport said. “At a
certain moment, it just turns around in its
flight. These jail trainings are saying,”
Open up your mind, your spirit, your life,
and understand what you are now capable
of, in serving the greater society.”

Gandhi said that poverty is the worst
form of violence. Newport echoed that in
saying that extreme poverty is often the
underlying cause of the deprivation that
stri-
des people to crime. “Poverty is the grad-
daddy of crime and war,” Newport said.

“We know that people who are serving
time often got in trouble because they
were victims of society. Let’s face it,
poverty is the granddaddy of crime and
war. This country must begin to recognize
that. These young people, given the
chance, and given some education and
training and exposure to a new life and a
job, will do more to help turn around this
society than some of the people sitting in
Washington, D.C., right now.”

When asked why he had gone so far out
of his way to attend a nonviolence gradua-
tion for a handful of prisoners in a remote
jail in San Bruno, Newport said, “We who
are about peace know that they don’t have
to look at the world through the eyes of
capitalism or violence or war or violation
of the environment. We are here because
we care about peace and human beings.”

WE CAN’T THROW PEOPLE AWAY

Theresa Guy Moran, an attorney work-
ing with the East Point Peace Academy,
has taken 40 hours of training in Kingian
Nonviolence. In an interview at the jail,
she said that she finds it very “moving”
to take the message of Kingian Nonviolence
into the jail cells.

“It’s a population that people generally
discount, dismiss and throw away,” Moran
said. “And I see great potential, and great
love and great caring here. I mean, I don’t
romanticize this. People do a lot of things
that lead to jail, and then they do what is
appropriate to make amends. But we can’t
afford to throw anyone away. God doesn’t
make mistakes.”

Kazu Haga described to the gathering
his belief that the spirit of Kingian nonvi-
lence is indestructible, and could not be
killed even by an assassin’s bullet.

“Benjamin the assassin who fired the bullet
int Martin Luther King on the morning of
April 4, 1968 – that assassin missed” he
said. “Because the assassins weren’t just
trying to kill a person, they were trying to
kill a philosophy, a set of ideals, and a
movement. Every time we come together
to talk about Kingian nonviolence and Dr.
King’s legacy, we are the evidence that
the assassin missed his target. So we are
all joining that legacy.”

Then Haga introduced LaFayette to the
gathering, saying, “There have probably
not been very many people on this earth
who have done more to keep that legacy
alive than Dr. Bernard LaFayette.”

LaFayette told the prisoners, “I’m
thrilled to be here with you. I’ve been in jail
before. I’ve been arrested 27 times. This
whole idea of nonviolence is spreading
around the world. I’m so proud of you.
You are joining a global community of people
who have found there’s another way.”

LaFayette met with King at the Lorraine
Motel in Memphis on April 4, 1968, the
morning of the assassination. King was
scheduled to travel with LaFayette to
Washington, D.C., to announce to the press
their plans for the Poor People’s Campaign.
But King had to stay in Memphis to work
with striking sanitation workers so he sent
LaFayette ahead, promising he would join
him in the nation’s capital.

All that history was on LaFayette’s
mind as he addressed inmates at the
San Bruno jail. He gave one of the most mov-
ing expressions of hope I have ever heard.

“When they tried to kill Martin Luther
King, they missed,” LaFayette said.

“Because Martin promised me something
in Memphis when I was with him on April
4, 1968. He said, ‘You go on to
Washington, D.C., to organize the Poor
People’s Campaign and I’ll be along later.
Then he was shot and killed that very day.”

“Martin Luther King was a man of
his word. Almost 50 years later, he
showed up in a huge, 30-foot memorial
statue on the National Mall in
Washington, D.C. — right where he said
his word. Almost 50 years later, he
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They Refused to Let Justice Be Crucified

The Tri-State Conspiracy to murder Medgar Evers, Bernard LaFayette and Rev. Benjamin Cox.

by Terry Messman

On the same day that legendary civil rights leader Medgar Evers was assassinated in Jackson, Mississippi, two other civil rights leaders were targeted in co-ordinated assassination plots: Benjamin Cox, a leading organizer for CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) in New Orleans; and Bernard LaFayette, director of the Alabama Voter Registration Campaign for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

On the same evening that Evers was murdered by an assassin in his carport in Jackson, Mississippi, 26-year-old Bernard LaFayette was killed in his home in New Orleans. His assailants quickly drove off into the night.

The coordinated murder plots are now known as the “tri-state conspiracy.” This little-known history is vividly recounted in Bernard LaFayette’s book, In Peace and Freedom, My Journey in Selma.

After narrowly avoiding assassination, LaFayette went on to spearhead the successful voter registration campaign in Selma that directly led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. He was chosen by Martin Luther King Jr. to become the national coordinator of the Poor People’s Campaign in 1968.

In light of his indelible work in the civil rights movement, and in light of the immeasurable value of the countless training sessions in Kingian Nonviolence that LaFayette has conducted all over the world, it is sobering to realize how close the nation came to losing one of its most dedicated practitioners of nonviolent resistance on the same day that Medgar Evers was murdered.

Bloody Sunday in Selma

Selma, Alabama, was one of the most significant early encounters of the civil rights movement. It shocked and galvanized the nation. President Lyndon Johnson had already signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and before the Selma brutality, he had said that he was not willing to spend any more political capital on pushing federal legislation to defend voting rights.

Certainly, the price was paid in full and not only by those beaten nearly to death by Alabama police. Martyrs paid a more permanent price. Jimmie Lee Jackson, age 26, a nonviolent protester who marched for voting rights along with his grandfather, mother and sister, was shot to death by Alabama state police in February 1965. This shocking murder of an innocent, unarmed, young man sparked the famous Selma to Montgomery March.

Immediately after Bloody Sunday, Viola Liuzzo was shot to death. James Reeb was beaten to death by white racists and Ku Klux Klan members.

The deaths ignited a moment in the legacy of the Freedom Movement. Hundreds suffered bloody injuries and some were clubbed nearly to death as police used clubs and tear gas to disrupt the march. Amelia Boynton, LaFayette’s closest personal ally and one of the most conspicuous supporters of the voting rights campaign in Selma, was severely beaten, knocked down to the asphalt and hospitalised.

Yet, LaFayette concludes his account of Bloody Sunday with a remarkable passage about how nonviolence can succeed at the very moment when it seems brutalized and beaten down. He wrote: “An objective analysis would conclude that the protesters were defeated. However, from the songs in their souls, one could hear victory. And it was victory, as this march, referred to as Bloody Sunday because of the bloodshed, increased the awareness of the important issue. Part of our strategy was to make the nation aware of the conditions people were suffering when they protested about their right to vote. When the national audience saw the horrors, the national conscience was awakened.”

A Nation is Galvanized

Bloody Sunday was perhaps the bloodiest encounter of the entire civil rights movement. It shocked and galvanized the nation. President Lyndon Johnson had already signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and before the Selma brutality, he had said that he was not willing to spend any more political capital on pushing federal legislation to defend voting rights.

So it is all the more remarkable that, as a direct result of Bloody Sunday, Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which ensured voting rights for black citizens and banned racial discrimination at the polls. Many analysts and historians consider the Voting Rights Act to be the most significant and powerful legislation of the entire civil rights struggle, the story of the two assassins who were shot down as a king.”

In the years since his death, Medgar Evers has been honored in movies and books and songs; his memory and legacy have been celebrated at Arlington National Cemetery; and a memorial statue of the slain civil rights icon was erected in Jackson, Mississippi, in June 2013.

Bob Dylan honored Evers in the song, “Only a Pawn in their Game.” Dylan sang, “Today, Medgar Evers was buried from the bullet he caught. They lowered him down as a king.”

The folk singer Phil Ochs, deeply committed to the cause of civil rights as a musician and an activist, wrote an anthem, “Too Many Martyrs,” with an unforgettable description of Evers’ murder. “He slowly squeezed the trigger, the bullet left his side, It struck the heart of every man when Evers fell and died.”

Even though the cold-blooded murder of Evers is now remembered as a highly significant moment in the history of the civil rights struggle, the story of the two other intended victims who were shadowed by murder plots as part of this tri-state conspiracy is almost unknown.

Bernard LaFayette gets ready to board a bus on his Freedom Ride in May 1961. Photo credit: Bruce Davidson/Magnum Photos

The cover of Bernard LaFayette’s book shows him with Martin Luther King Jr. in Peace and Freedom, My Journey in Selma.

CORE activist Rev. Benjamin Cox just happened to have traveled out of New Orleans that fateful night. “That chance trip saved his life,” LaFayette writes.

Rev. Cox had been arrested many times for organizing sit-ins that succeeded in integrating several restaurants, including McDonald’s. In May 1961, Cox and 12 other activists became the original Freedom Riders, riding the bus from Washington, D.C., to New Orleans.

After the FBI told Cox and LaFayette that they had been targeted in the tri-state conspiracy that claimed Evers’ life, the two men realized they had escaped death by the narrowest of margins. With a grim sense of gallows humor, LaFayette wrote: “We’ve been friends for many years and sometimes Cox sends me a ‘death-day’ card instead of a birthday card!”

LaFayette was only 22 years old when he began directing the Alabama Voter Registration Campaign for SNCC in January 1963. Yet he already was a seasoned activist after being arrested two years earlier during the restaurant sit-ins with the Nashville Student Movement in 1960.

Only a year later, LaFayette became a Freedom Rider. He gives a harrowing account of being brutally beaten by a mob of white racists who attacked the Freedom Riders at the Montgomery bus station in May 1961. Yet LaFayette is always the indefatigable teacher of nonviolence.

Instead of focusing in his book on the
bhorrible violence the Freedom Riders were subjected to, his real message is to teach how nonviolent activists can face physical violence and maintain their spirits intact and their movement alive.

"In the Montgomery bus station a ranting, violently irrational white man..." [In Peace and Freedom, p. 11.]

Bernard LaFayette’s mugshot, taken on May 24, 1961, after his arrest with other Freedom Riders in Jackson, Mississippi.

**THE MOST HOSTILE CITY**

Far from being deterred by these violent attacks, the young activists were determined than ever to put the nonviolent teachings of Martin Luther King and James Lawson into practice in one of the most hostile and intolerant of southern cities — Selma, Alabama.

Selma was considered so dangerous and intensely racist that the SNCC leadership had totally written it off as an impossible area to organize. When LaFayette asked James Farmer of SNCC, to appoint him as director of the Voter Registration Campaign in Selma, he learned that SNCC had just removed Selma from its list of target cities. After a few months in Selma, Farmer and his staff had returned to their headquarters in Atlanta.

Yet LaFayette remained dedicated to putting the teachings of nonviolence to work in a city where they would meet the toughest test imaginable. Farmer formally reappointed and appointed him director of the voter registration campaign in Selma.

The SNCC office in Selma is a highly insightful case study in community organizing whose lessons remain as valuable today as they were then.

LaFayette arrived in Selma in January 1963, he began bringing together an embryonic organization of SNCC residents to carry out a systematic voter registration drive.

Selma had been a target city for two years, but there was a philosophy going out from SNCC in Atlanta that Tom Zeke and his staff would have to proceed with the registration drive because Selma was no longer safe.

Writers who have studied the Selma campaign have written about the double-edged sword of courage in the face of death threats and bombings. The Selma campaign was the best of times, and the worst of times. It was the best of times because it was a direct result of the Selma campaign and the march to Montgomery. President Johnson and the Congress passed the Voting Rights Act and ripped up many of the Jim Crow laws that prevented black citizens from voting.

It was the worst of times because Viola Liuzzo, a civil rights activist and mother of five, was shot to death by a Ku Klux Klan member as she was ferrying marchers between Montgomery and Selma after the rally. LaFayette knew Viola Liuzzo as a selfless activist for justice. LaFayette wrote, "She was as fragile as a flower, a woman of the best of times, and the worst of times. It was the best of times because it was a direct result of the Selma campaign and the march to Montgomery. President Johnson and the Congress passed the Voting Rights Act and ripped up many of the Jim Crow laws that prevented black citizens from voting.

In Peace and Freedom, p. 104.]

The Magnificent Movement

And that is when the movement rose up and magnificently met the challenge. People persevered in spite of the deaths of innocent young girls in church. They persevered in the face of the assassination of Medgar Evers and President Kennedy. In the face of the death threats and bombings and the savage brutality of Selma Sheriff Jim Clark, the movement defied all expectations, drew strength from the arc of the moral universe.

Nonviolent resistance has been defined as "rebellious perseverance." LaFayette watched as that spirit of perseverance emerged in Selma. "We considered ourselves soldiers in a nonviolent army and would continue to fight against violent acts with nonviolence. Violence was never a deterrent for us. We believed that if we sustained the movement in spite of the violence, we would succeed and bring about a nonviolent change in our society," he said.

It all built up to an historic showdown during the three marches from Selma to Montgomery. The first march on March 7, 1965, was "Bloody Sunday" when hundreds of marchers were brutalized by police on the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

The second march was held only two days later on March 9. Hundreds of marchers crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge and the entire crowd knelt down in prayer with Martin Luther King and Ralph David Abernathy in what they called a "Confrontation of Prayer."

Many were very critical that the marchers turned around and walked back across the bridge instead of continuing on and provoking a mass arrest. In LaFayette’s analysis, those critics didn’t understand what the real purpose of that march was.

The organizers were waiting in expectation that the federal government was on the verge of lifting an injunction against the right to march. They held the second march to keep the heat and the media glare on the city of Selma, but they wanted to avoid an unwanted, unnecessary and irrelevant battle with the federal government at a time when they were pressing federal officials to overturn Alabama’s local laws that prevented African-Americans from exercising their voting rights.

The organizers had analyzed things correctly. The federal injunction was indeed lifted only days after the second march, and the third and final march was scheduled for March 21, 1965. Now the battle lines were clear. It was the Freedom Movement versus Alabama officials — from Gov. George Wallace on down to Sheriff Jim Clark — who had illegally prevented black citizens from voting for decades.

On March 21, the third March to Montgomery began in Selma and five days later, a large group of marchers reached Montgomery and held a massive rally of 25,000 people on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol.

**How Long, Not Long**

Martin Luther King delivered the historic “How Long, Not Long” speech. King said, "How long must this arch of baseline be crucified and truth bear it? If I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long because truth crushed to earth will rise again.

"How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever…" [In Peace and Freedom, p. 114.]

In Peace and Freedom, p. 114.]

Bernard LaFayette, Noah Liuzzo, Rev. James Reeb, Martin Luther King Jr. and the four girls killed in Birmingham, Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley. I remember, now and always, how an oppressed and insulted people, a people subjected to a nearly totalitarian system of violence, were heralded by overwhelming numbers of state-sanctioned violence, found the courage to march on with all the odds against them, march on despite the beatings and bombings and bloodshed, march on despite the murders. They refused to let truth be crushed and justice crucified.
German revolutionary, or V. I. Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, who admired London and seems to have borrowed the phrase ‘the aristocracy from The Iron Heel’ to describe that sector of the working class that had lost its way from the trauma of revolution and the savagery and social justice thing.”

Diehl said, “They get plenty of that, but he doesn’t give people the skills to help all those in need, and get housed and stabilize their lives. Consequently, there is a high burnout rate among workers in homeless services. We had a couple long conversations sitting on a bench in Peoples Park while Food Not Bombs was serving a meal to the street people. I was talking up to some who were homeless and I was helping people desperate to get off the streets. But the work is extremely frustrating, he says, because there are not enough services to help all those in need, and nowhere near enough housing for all the people desperate to get off the streets. Consequently, there is a high burnout rate among workers in homeless services. I don’t want to be another paper shuffler sending people to go here and there,” Diehl said. “They get plenty of that already. I need connect people to the mental health services or housing, there needs to be some significant investment in that. That’s why I’m not going to give up the social justice thing.”

Diehl deals with many people on the street who act out, who yell and get violent or abuse them, when he sees people desperate to get off the streets, he says, “I applaud that. It’s important to help people stabilize their lives. But the work is extremely frustrating, he says, because there are not enough services to help all those in need, and nowhere near enough housing for all the people desperate to get off the streets. Consequently, there is a high burnout rate among workers in homeless services. I don’t want to be another paper shuffler sending people to go here and there,” Diehl said. “They get plenty of that already. I need connect people to the mental health services or housing, there needs to be some significant investment in that. That’s why I’m not going to give up the social justice thing.”

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In recent years, homeless, low-income residents and community groups have worked together to ensure that Skid Row in L.A. has affordable housing.

Leonard Woods lives in the Hotel Alexandria on Skid Row. He and a group of residents kept developers from displacing all the poor people living in the hotel.

Community on Skid Row

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In Pershing Square, managers say they’re setting up a community garden, which they see as an organizing tool. “It helps create community,” Fisher points out. “In the middle of Skid Row, look how beautiful it is.”

In addition, the community garden provides a source of fresh vegetables — a rarity on Skid Row, which activists call a food desert. “I have to catch two busses to get to the closest grocery store,” Deborah Burton charges. Fisher says that when they harvested their first zucchini, they discovered that some residents had never eaten the vegetable.

Now the garden produces Japanese cucumbers, tomatoes, sunflowers, potatoes, garlic and rosemary as well.

“All we have is a class,” Ozeki explains. “Right now, we’re planting seedlings, and people learn to prune, and then put fish into the watering cans. Urban gardens require a lot of care.”

To help spread access to gardening resources, and therefore to fresh produce, LA CAN helped form the Skid Row Garden Council. Organizations donate seeds, soil and sand, which the council distributes to buildings where residents set up a garden. Ozeki guides urban gardeners in three other buildings belonging to the Housing Trust. “They have 19 buildings with gardens,” he says.

According to LA CAN organizer Eric Ares, “Nutrition education is a big part of our work. We want to grow our own food so that we don’t rely just on markets.”

As LA CAN’s own building, the activist community set up a rooftop garden, growing tomatoes and other vegetables in containers of dirt hauled up several flights of stairs. In their new office, setting up the rooftop garden will be easier — it’s a one-story building.

“Everything we grow is distributed free or prepared in meals for our community,” Ares emphasizes.

The local farmers markets often see downtown’s affluent residents as their preferred clients, and LA CAN has negotiated with many of them to get them to accept Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards from poor residents. In California, public assistance and food stamp benefits are paid into accounts, and recipients then use the cards to buy food.

“At the City Hall market, getting EBT access was easy, but at the Grand Park market the managers didn’t want to take them at all,” Ares charges. In Pershing Square, managers say they’re setting up their own, separate system.

The Pershing Square market tried to use security to push homeless and obviously poor people out on market days, and even forced a woman in her 80s, who’d been handing out free sandwiches for years, to stop her distribution. “But we worked with them, and they backed off,” he says.

LA CAN has also started its own food distribution program, a Pop-Up Market organized with Women Organizing Resources. “We get food in Southern California and sell it, but not for profit,” Ares says. “We started in South LA, and now we’re bringing it downtown.” In its first six months, the market distributed 3.8 tons of organic produce.

Homeless people define Skid Row as a community in many ways. General TC points out that most homeless men are veterans. Gregory says it’s the largest single community of people in recovery from alcoholism and addiction in the country.

“There’s also a community of artists who live here and I’m one of them,” Gregory boasts. He’s acted in plays about addiction and recovery put on by one of the area’s oldest theater groups, the Los Angeles Poverty Department. Another local ensemble, Cornerstone Theater, incorporates Skid Row residents and their ideas into its productions.

Yet another group, the Women’s Action Coalition, organizes an annual variety show to highlight local talent and raise money to support women and families.

Skid Row’s population is overwhelmingly male, in part due to county policy. From 2005-2008, the Board of Supervisors declared “zero tolerance” for families living on Skid Row. Under pressure from Supervisor Gloria Molina, teams from Children and Family Services interviewed parents in Pershing Square, at the Union Rescue Mission, and other Skid Row locations to determine if they were fit to remain with their children.

In 2007, they took 15 children from their parents. The policy caused great controversy. Another supervisor, Yvonne Braithwaite Burke, told the Los Angeles Times, “There should never be an assumption that because you’re poor, you should be taken from your parents and placed in foster care.”

The policy was eventually ended, but today women and children make up less than ten percent of Skid Row’s population. Class and race increasingly determine who can have children downtown. Toddlers in expensive strollers are a common sight outside market-rate lots.

“A community without children is a community without a future,” according to LA CAN co-director Becky Dennison. “We have to improve the community, as opposed to push poor mothers or women of color out.”

Some measures that were felt as discriminatory by homeless people and hotel residents have been successfully challenged. A policy by some hotels to charge a guest fee to family members staying overnight was overturned. A federal court forbade police from confiscating the belongings of homeless people.

Meanwhile, however, city code section 41.18D still prohibits sitting and lying on the sidewalk between 6 a.m. and 9 p.m. Poor residents accuse the police of using it selectively against them, and the Safer Cities Initiative targets police enforcement to Skid Row east of Main Street.

In 2006, the 50 extra police it mandated for the area issued 12,000 citations. In response, that year the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ordered the city to stop its overzealous approach.

Nevertheless, citations have continued, and last year, two LA CAN members handing out seedlings for gardens were even cited, and one officer warned hotel tenants they should “keep moving” once they walked out of their building.

“Toddlers in expensive strollers are a common sight outside market-rate lots,” Dennison says. “They complain about the homeless problem, but there’s one sure way to get hundreds off the street,” Gregory says, and points to the Cecil Hotel on Main Street, where a deal fell through that would have rehabilitated hundreds of rooms for people living on the sidewalk. “We are fighting for a place that belongs to us.”

“The Skid Row community is one of the most vibrant communities in Los Angeles,” Dennison says. “Folks take care of each other, know each other and live very densely. Here, you either create community or you get wiped off the map.”

All photos are by renowned photojournalist David Bacon. With thanks and appreciation to Equal Voice News. See more at: http://www.equalvoiceforfamilies.org/