

## One Man's Trash...

The trash is the first thing I notice as I exit Myrtle-Willoughby subway station in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn. Scraps of newspaper flutter across the street in the wind. Stained Styrofoam coffee cups are scattered in the gutter. The piles of black garbage bags are high enough to have been there for at least a week. Seems like the perfect place to hold a meeting for people who want to dig through the trash.

Those people are involved in the newest solution to the world's ever-nearing environmental crisis. They are anti-consumerism, anti-capitalism, eco-friendly and super green. They call themselves Freegans. They are well-known from coverage by the *New York Times* and appearances on Oprah for dumpster diving, the process of eating food found in the garbage outside restaurants and grocery stores at the end of the day. But few people know what goes on beyond the dumpster.

Brand-new digital tape recorder in hand, I descend the wobbly stone steps to enter the Freegan Bike Workshop. The dim light illuminates more of an unfinished stone basement full of a bunch of old bike parts than a workshop of any sort. A box of Christmas tree shavings stashed on top of a milk crate full of pedals fills the room with the smell of evergreens. The scent is just barely enough to overpower the palpable smell of people who haven't showered recently. I decide they would hate having my tape recorder in their faces, although with all the spare parts hanging around, I'm almost positive they could build me one.

It's 7 p.m. and there are only six people there, despite the fact that the workshop opened two hours ago. Some eat all their meals from dumpsters while others are merely looking to learn more about what it means to be a Freegan. An Asian man in his mid-

twenties shows off his studded belt as he bends to examine the gears of his blue road bike. A woman around the same age wearing a cropped gray vest and a page boy cap rummages through a pile of seats in the corner. No one is talking, except when someone occasionally asks their neighbor to pass the wrench or to hold their handlebars steady while they tighten a bolt. The workshop is only open until midnight, so they have to get as much work done as they can. They come twice a week, for anywhere from four to six hours at a time. At that rate, it will take about six weeks to create a bike entirely from scratch.

Bikes in all stages of assembly hang from hooks around the perimeter of the space. The parts were either donated, found deserted and rusting on the street, or collected from garbage dumpsters. Anyone can build a bike free of charge, although a \$25 donation is suggested for those who can afford it. The money collected goes toward rent for the building, known as the 123 Community Space. The space was founded by the Freegan Bike Workshop along with three other community groups: A New World In Our Hearts, Misled Youth Network, and the New York City Anarchist Black Cross. On Wednesday nights and Saturday afternoons, the bike workshop takes over. The space also houses a weekly after-school program on Thursdays, providing tutoring, arts and crafts, and snacks. Once a month the Anarchist Black Cross provides dinner and invites community members to write letters to political prisoners. The Misled Youth Network holds poetry nights to raise awareness and funds for wayward teens. A New World In Our Hearts sells political books and distributes anarchy pamphlets.

Today, Quinn Hechtkopf's in charge. With a wild mop of Carrot Top-esque fire red hair and matching slip-on sneakers, he hovers over various projects offering tips and

answering questions. “We’re trying to teach people to be self-sufficient,” he said. “If you learn how to use a drill, you can be handy, you can fix all sorts of stuff. I spent all day yesterday fixing a sewing machine.” A smudge of grease extends down his cheek under his right eye, a testament to the time spent helping the people carefully meddling in cartons of spare parts all around him. A friend tries to wipe away the smudge as he ducks to enter the workshop. Hechtkopf backs away, not allowing his face to be cleaned. “That’s my trademark!” he exclaims.

His introduction to dumpster diving came at Wesleyan University, a very liberal, very politically-active campus in small-town, conservative Connecticut. An entirely different kind of conservative, the 24-year-old from St. Petersburg, Florida became frustrated by how wasteful his fellow students were. At the end of each year, Hechtkopf watched students moving out of their dorms. They threw away anything that they couldn’t pack into boxes and suitcases, even if their belongings were still in good condition. By his senior year, he wanted to find a way to lessen their impact on the environment.

He and some friends decided to make a documentary about this garbage problem, which they called *Dumpster Diving Ivy*. They rummaged through trash at various Ivy League schools along the East Coast, exposing the detrimental wastefulness of these otherwise intelligent young adults. He said the bounty totaled six iPods, a laptop, and at least 600 cans of unopened beer, among other things. He moved to Bushwick a year later and found a group of New York City Freegans to dumpster dive with. “It’s a community that lives outside of capitalism by supporting each other,” he said. “I never would have started eating food out of the trash without the group.”

Without Hechtkopf, the group wouldn't be as well off either. Many Freegans embrace the idea of voluntary joblessness, as they call their unemployment, preferring not to be "slaves to capitalism" said Hechtkopf. But every four months he'll work for about a month as an electrician, making enough money to pay his own rent with enough left over to give \$300 a month to 123. When one of his sanitation worker friends finds books in the garbage Hechtkopf will sell those for some extra money as well.

Other Freegans live without working at all, or at least try. Ivan Brugere, a 26-year-old graduate student at the New School, just recently accepted this way of life. He said he was tired of working eight hours every day as a consultant for Human Rights Watch, even though he felt his work was for a good cause. Now he is ready to see how long he can last without an income. "We don't make money because we don't need money," he said.

Brugere became a vegan while growing up in Minneapolis, propelled by the vegetarian ways of his mother, he said. When he first told her he was going Freegan, she recounted tales of times in her life when she had to eat from the dumpster out of necessity. He said this made it hard for her at first to understand why he would choose to do so. Now he said she has a better understanding of the message he is trying to send.

He smiles at everyone he squeezes past, maneuvering his way through the cramped workshop, introducing himself to anyone he doesn't know. Everyone seems happy to see him. Brugere, a real Freegan people person, said he was one of the most popular contestants in the recent Freegan Fashion Show held at 123. "I made little red paper hearts," he explained, cupping his hands at his chest to show me how he held them. "I threw them to people as I was walking down the runway, so everyone got a piece of

my heart!” The event, with a \$7 suggested donation for all spectators who could afford it, raised over \$460 to help pay for rent for the community space.

Freegans and capitalists alike cheered and applauded the homemade fashions. Each of the 14 models made their own outfit on three sewing machines that were either donated or repaired using spare parts found in dumpsters around the city. Brugere said that encouraging people to create their own fashions was an important part of the event. He hopes it will help teach people not to follow the mainstream trends set forward by capitalism that tell us what we should look like.

Today he’s focused on food instead of fashion. Slung over his shoulder is a black and green canvas messenger bag brimming with red apples. “I found this whole bag of apples,” he said, smiling proudly. “I’m gonna make applesauce!” He said he is still surprised by the amount of fruit and vegetables he is able to find in the garbage. “I could live off of [the trash from] Chelsea market and be a raw vegan.”

To those of us still ordering delivery, eating out of a dumpster doesn’t seem like the most sanitary or healthy way to be a raw vegan. But this is one of the biggest misconceptions about Freeganism. “I mean, how do *you* know when an unopened bag of unblemished bananas that are not expired aren’t good?” Hechtkopf retorts. They’re not eating your moldy bread or spoiled milk; they’re eating unopened food that simply doesn’t have a place on a grocery shelf for tomorrow or won’t be as fresh in the morning. It may not be sparkingly clean, but it’s still edible. “You have to get your hands dirty,” admits Hechtkopf. “But really no more than when you wash your dishes in the sink.”

He explained that they are educated and organized about their dumpster dining. About once a week, a representative from Freegan.info, the largest organizing website for

this social movement, leads a trash tour. Disguised by darkness, participants gather on the corner of 34<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> or outside of Whole Foods in Union Square and collect any edible food they can find. The group leader delivers rehearsed speeches on why there is such waste and offers tips on when and where to go to find the best Freegan meals.

Often the leader is Christian Gutierrez, 33, who also helps out at the bike workshop. Gutierrez once worked as an investment banker, until leaving the industry in 2004 to make movies. About a year later he decided to give up his capitalist lifestyle for a more eco-friendly Freegan one. Similarly to Brugere, he found himself slowly getting sick of the daily grind. “I used to show people how to become a movie director,” he said. “I found myself kind of frustrated with how competitive people are and how cutthroat the industry is. But then I realized that it’s not the industry, it’s just capitalism, it’s the people. So I just gave up on helping people make movies and started helping people make bikes instead.”

Freegans are devoted to fighting capitalism, but their devotion comes in different levels for different people. “I’ve gone from really extreme capitalist to really extreme Freegan, and now I’m somewhere in the middle,” said Gutierrez. “Every now and then I get my jacket dry-cleaned, but I still dumpster dive most of my meals and I live in a squat.”

But if Freeganism means taking shelter in a building you don’t pay to live in, and eating food from the trash, what’s the difference between Freeganism and homelessness? When you also take into consideration the idea of voluntary joblessness the similarities are even greater. “There’s a lot of overlap between our community and the homeless community,” said Hechtkopf, holding the inner tube of a tire up to his ear to try and hear

where the air is leaking from. The difference, he explains, is that for Freegans homelessness is “not out of economic necessity, but for social justice.” From the other side of the 20-foot space, a Freegan in his late twenties with quarter-sized plugs in his earlobes wearing a black ski cap yells, “But you can learn a lot from a bum!”

I could more easily picture this vibrant conservationist community learning lessons from bums in their log cabins in Vermont or barefoot on a Southern California beach than in the heart of capitalist, consumerist New York. Then again, you can find anyone in New York. “It’s just people giving time and money to a social movement from the goodness of their hearts,” said Hechtkopf. And like many grassroots movements, Freegan.info has its headquarters here in the Big Apple. While the website has nationwide appeal, most of its resources are geared toward dumpster divers in the tri-state area.

And with good reason. In light of the city’s ever-mounting garbage crisis, Freegans want those of us still eating on New York City kitchen tables to listen up. After the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island closed in 2001, garbage has been transported by truck out of New York to distant landfills, causing additional traffic and air pollution. In 2006, the New York City Council instituted a plan to export garbage by train and by sea. While this system alleviates 90 percent of the waste from the city, it contributes to rising levels of pollution in both the air and the water. And New Yorkers are still only recycling a mere 13 percent of their waste.

Freegans are trying to take it upon themselves to change that, by simply convincing people to buy less so they have less to throw out. “We realize that it is nearly impossible to live a life without spending money in this society,” Hechtkopf admits, “but we are trying to help people spend as little as possible.”

Under intense Freegan scrutiny, I start to question the pervasive American attitude of “out with the old, in with the new.” From fancy home trinkets and electronic gadgets, to necessities like food and water, we are so focused on material goods. We are constantly buying more, usually without need. My MP3 player works just fine, but I seriously contemplated buying the new iPod Nano when it first came out, just because I thought it was cute. Had I not been on a college student’s budget, I may have bought it. And there would have been little to do with my old one except send it down the garbage chute.

“We try to re-appropriate and redistribute resources to make this lifestyle sustainable,” Hechtkopf said. “We’re looking for any sustainable alternative to capitalism. Because capitalism is not sustainable, capitalism is going to collapse.”

Until it collapses, New York City Freegans will continue dining among the abundance of options the city has to offer. Freegan.info lists many dumpster diving hotspots around the city, organized by borough and neighborhood. Groceries such as D’Agostino and Gristedes are favorites all over the city, as are bakeries and cafes such as Dean & DeLuca and Au Bon Pain. Together, these places waste about \$50,000 of food in Manhattan alone each night Hechtkopf estimates.

It’s not hard to believe. I have to dodge piles of discarded food on University just to get to class. Leaving my night class Monday at 10 p.m., I once spotted unopened packages of potatoes resting on top of the pile of garbage outside D’Agostino. With no visible growths or defects, I wouldn’t be surprised if – to save money – the market just sold them tomorrow. But instead, the potatoes could be the dinner of some lucky urban foragers.

While a Freegan may feel lucky in finding a good meal, back at the bike workshop, Hechtkopf doesn't encourage such pride. "Sure, I could tell you about the \$8,000 worth of fancy cheese, or the 600 chocolate bars, but it's *bad*," he vents. "I'd much rather it all got given to people!"

Groceries and restaurants don't give the food away because of their own capitalist interests. It costs a lot more to package, ship and distribute leftover food than to toss it to the curb. So unless capitalism does collapse, it's going to be difficult to get big corporations to limit their waste.

Until then, baby steps will have to do. Each meal created out of dumpster dived food and each new anti-capitalist convert is a small victory for Freeganism. At the bike workshop, each rusty abandoned bike recovered and turned into one less car or subway ride is a step in the right direction. And teaching people to build and maintain their own bikes is even better. As the workers are starting to pack up for the evening, I reach for my jacket and tell my new Freegan friends that it's time for me to go. Hechtkopf, surprised, asks me if I'm really going to leave without working on a bike. He makes a good case - "Building a bike is really the best way to learn about what we do here!" - but I have to decline.

He turns as a tall, mustached man with a heavy Russian accent hands him a crumpled twenty dollar bill. Opening a worn, green ledger, Hechtkopf asks if he can borrow my pencil to record the donation. He keeps track of all the donations, he explains, and the people who donate the most earn the noble title of Volunteer. He is interrupted by the unmistakable beep of a cell phone, the solitary evidence that technology exists in this do-it-yourself, back-to-basics environment. Once embarrassed about entering the

workshop with my bag of tricks, I'm astounded that he owns a cell phone. Seeing that he is not one to text and talk at the same time, I wait patiently for him to finish and hope that no one heard my gasp of surprise. He puts his phone away, and goes back to scribbling in the tattered green book. He ends up pocketing my pencil. We'll call that my donation.