

THE

LANDLORDS' NIGHTMARE P9 • MIGRANTS ARRIVE P14

INDY

22

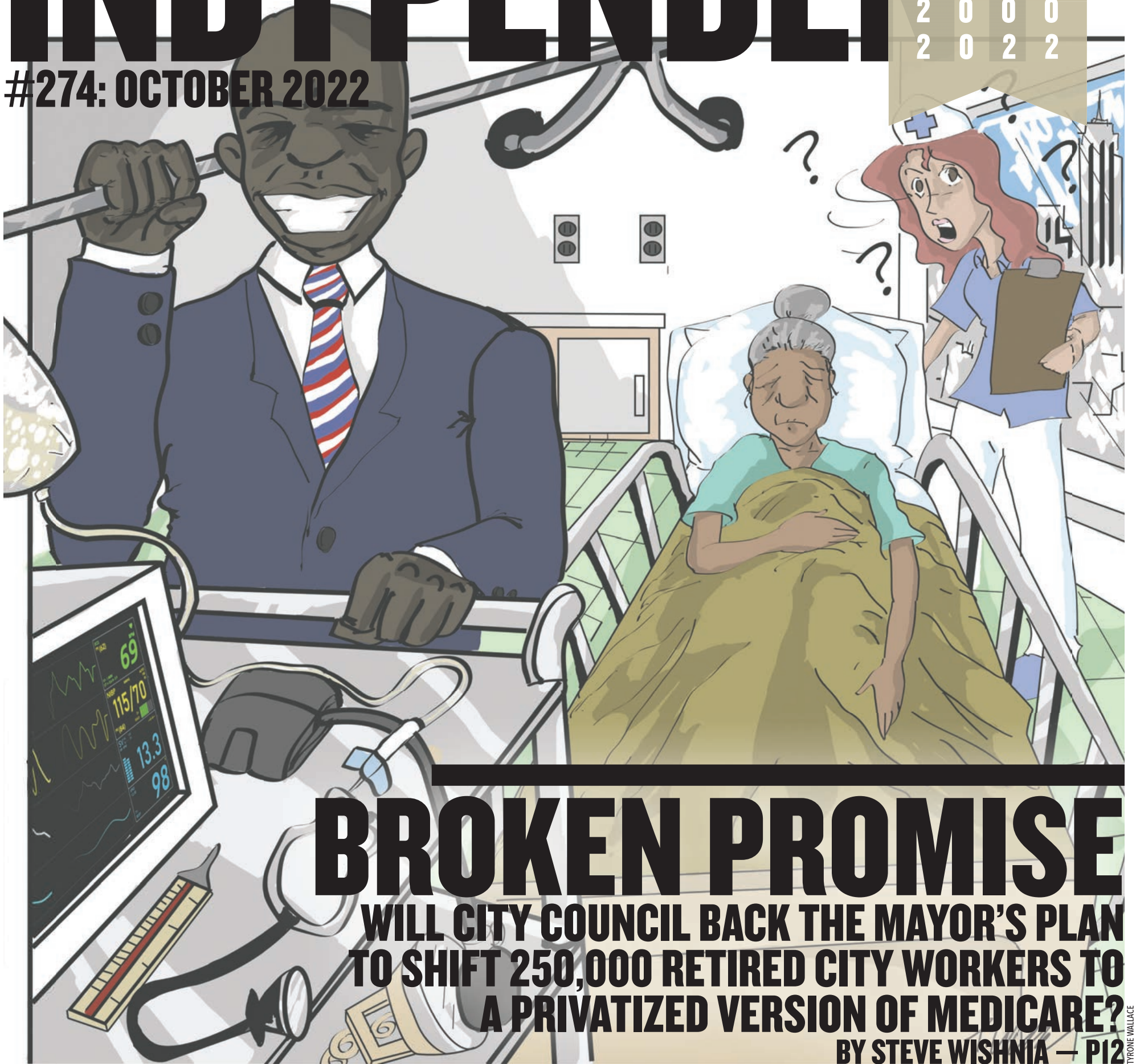
YEARS

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# THE INDYPENDER

#274: OCTOBER 2022



## BROKEN PROMISE

WILL CITY COUNCIL BACK THE MAYOR'S PLAN TO SHIFT 250,000 RETIRED CITY WORKERS TO A PRIVATIZED VERSION OF MEDICARE?

BY STEVE WISHNIA — P12

TYRONE WALLACE

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**COOPER SQUARE COMMITTEE'S STUDIO ONE**  
59-61 E 4th St. #3W, Manhattan

**OCT 7–OCT 21 • PRICES VARY**

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The 11th annual Workers Unite Film Festival comes at a time when labor unions are more popular in public opinion polls than anytime in more than 50 years. The festival features films that highlight the struggles, successes and daily lives of all workers in their efforts to unite and organize for better living conditions and social justice in the United States and around the world. Some showings are free. More info via [www.workersunitefilm-festival.org](http://www.workersunitefilm-festival.org).  
**CINEMA VILLAGE**  
22 E 12th St., Manhattan

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**SKATER'S CIRCLE**  
Central Park, Manhattan

**OCT 10 • 12PM–4PM • FREE**

**ROCKAWAY FALL FESTIVAL**  
The Rockaway Fall Festival is scheduled to kick off

Monday, October 10. There will be a host of activities including an exciting mechanical ride, sport games, a bounce house, a haunted maze, a pumpkin patch, arts and crafts, giveaways, light refreshments, music and more.  
*Bay 32nd Street & Beach Channel Drive, Queens*

**OCT 15 • 6PM • FREE**

**BOOK LAUNCH: SOCIALIST RECONSTRUCTION: A BETTER FUTURE FOR THE UNITED STATES**  
*Socialist Reconstruction* takes seriously the question of what it would look like to build a socialist society in the United States, transforming what housing, healthcare, education, public safety – and many other institutions – can do for the public. The launch features a dialogue with organizers Claudia De La Cruz, Jodi Dean, Eugene Puryear and Brian Becker. You can purchase the book online via <https://bit.ly/3V03qUm> or in-person at the booktalk. Use the code SOCIALISMNOW for 15% to buy it before launch date.  
**THE PEOPLE'S FORUM**  
320 West 37th St., Manhattan

**OCT 23 • 1PM–2 PM • FREE**

**FALL FOLIAGE HIKE IN NORTHERN CENTRAL PARK**  
Join New York City Parks rangers in a fall tradition. The group will hike through the Forever Wild preserve of Central Park's North Woods beneath a canopy of fall colors. Bring water and a cap! Call (212) 360-1444 for more info.  
*W 100th St. & Central Park West, Manhattan*

**OCT 28–NOV 10 • DAILY • \$15**

**CINEMA: THE RUNNER**  
"An illiterate, but resourceful, 11-year-old orphan, living alone in an abandoned tanker in the Iranian port city of Abadan, survives by shining shoes, selling water and diving for

deposit bottles thrown overboard by foreigners, while being bullied by both adults and older kids. But he finds solace by dreaming about departing cargo ships and airplanes and by running... seemingly to nowhere." *The Los Angeles Times* called *The Runner* "the greatest performance ever given by a child." Iran; 1984; approx. 94 mins; written/directed by Amir Naderi; starring Madjid Niroumand. A conversation with Naderi and star Niroumand will follow the 8:40 show on Oct. 28. See [filmforum.org/film/the-runner](http://filmforum.org/film/the-runner) for showtimes.  
**FILM FORUM**  
209 West Houston St., Manhattan

**OCT 29 • 1PM–6 PM • \$15–\$20/ FAMILY**

**FAMILY AFFAIR: FAMILY DANCE BROOKLYN WITH ARI COLEMAN**  
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**NOWADAYS**  
56-06 Cooper Ave., Ridgewood, Queens

**OCT 31 • 2 PM–10 PM • FREE**

**TNC'S VILLAGE HALLOWEEN COSTUME BALL**  
Theater for the New City has presented its Halloween ball annually since 1976. This year it will be an open-air celebration outside the theater under a large tent. Performances, a costume competition and dancing to the music of swing and Latin bands are planned. Admission is free but donations will be gratefully accepted. No reservations are

**STREET PARTY:** On Oct. 31, thousands of costumed revelers will participate in the 49th annual Village Halloween Parade.

necessary – the entire public is invited! More info via [theaterforthenewcity.net](http://theaterforthenewcity.net).  
**THEATER FOR A NEW CITY**  
155 1st Ave., Manhattan

**OCT 31 • 7PM • FREE**

**THE VILLAGE HALLOWEEN PARADE**  
NYC's creative and spooky procession – each year, more than 50,000 zombies, ghouls, robots, giant puppets and more things that go bump in the night take to the streets for a night of costumed revelry. This year's theme is freedom! Only participants in costume can participate in the parade. The Brooklyn United Marching band ft. special surprise guests will play Jon Batiste's "Freedom" and more. Official afterparty will be held at Webster Hall ("Webster Hell"). Visit [halloween-nyc.com/](http://halloween-nyc.com/) for more.  
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Indy supporters gathered on September 15 to celebrate 22 years of a “free paper for free people.”



## **DEFEND THE COMMONS, P5**

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At a moment when book bans are spreading, Brooklyn Public Library is making its free e-library card available to young people in all 50 states.



## **ADJUNCT UNION, P8**

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## **ANOTHER AMAZON UNION VOTE, P9**

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## **LANDLORD'S NIGHTMARE, P9**

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Anthony Sims is heading home after more than two decades behind bars, but full exoneration remains elusive.

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A controversial plan to transfer 250,000 municipal retirees to privately-run Medicare Advantage heads to City Council.



## **WELCOMING MIGRANTS, P14**

Renée Feltz talks with Murad Awawdeh, executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition.

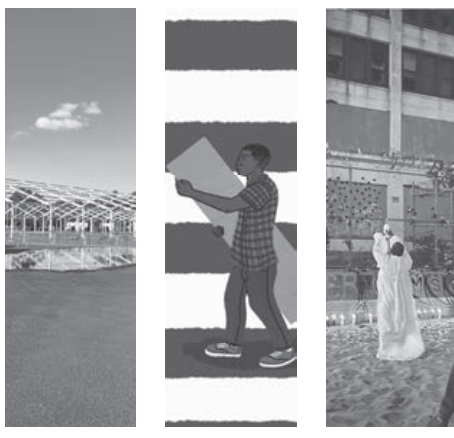


## **RUSSIANS HELPING UKRAINIANS?, P15**

An LGBTQ+ group leads the way.

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Ariadna Phillips of South Bronx Mutual Aid tells the NY City Council about the city's failure to meet the basic needs of migrants.



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Seed the Vote is mobilizing thousands of volunteers to do voter outreach in key swing states in this year's midterms.

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The People's Beach in the Rockaways has been a seaside refuge for queer beachgoers for decades. That could soon change.

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Little Amal made a giant impression on everyone she met during her recent visit to New York City.



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Miranda Isaacs' long-deceased father was a paragon of progressive political values, self-sacrifice and bravery, or so she was told.

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The good reverend reflects on the new fascism, totalitarian consumerism and whether nice guys finish last.



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**SPOTTED:**  
Democracy Now host Amy Goodman.



**SOCIALIST SENATOR:** State Senator Jabari Brisport with an Indy supporter.

## A CONSPIRACY OF HOPE

**T**he *Independent* began in 2000 as a scrappy four-page, black-and-white newspaper and has become a community institution. On Sept. 15, scores of supporters – community organizers, activists, artists and leftist luminaries – packed into a Park Slope backyard for a fundraising party to celebrate the paper's 22nd anniversary.

"If we want to continue to be a part of history making, we got to support The Indy," said Women's March co-founder Linda Sarsour. "We got to continue to invest in news that is accurate and that is speaking directly to the hearts and minds of the people."

"When you support The *Independent*, you support a movement to lift people up, a movement that says every single one of us

deserves to live in dignity," said State Senator Jabari Brisport, a democratic socialist whose underdog 2020 campaign was covered extensively by The Indy.

Our 22nd anniversary party also marked the beginning of our year-end fund drive. On this night we raised more than \$5,000, an important first step as we seek to meet our largest-ever goal of \$50,000 and bounce back stronger than ever from the hardships imposed by the pandemic. You can make a gift at [independent.org/donate](https://independent.org/donate) or send a check to The *Independent*/388 Atlantic Ave., 2nd Fl./Brooklyn, NY 11217.

— INDYDEPENDENT STAFF



**ALL SMILES:**  
Peace and justice activist Leslie Cagan and Indy Editor-in-Chief John Tarleton.



**SOLIDARITY:**  
Women's March co-founder Linda Sarsour.



**CATCHING UP:** Indy contributing writers Bennett Baumer (right) and Nicholas Powers.



**INDYLUJAH!:**  
Reverend Billy takes it all in.



## ASSOCIATE EDITOR'S NOTE



# THE INDY IS A PUBLIC COMMONS WE MUST DEFEND

BY AMBA GUERGUERIAN

**Y**ou will read in this issue about the loss of the historic queer “People’s Beach” at Jacob Riis Park, one of the last semi-unsanctioned spaces in the city. You will read about tenants being evicted by billionaire landlords, about retired city workers being taken off public health care and about books being banned. But more than just learning about these slices of depressing news, you will learn about how people are resisting them. You’ll notice that — and I believe this is something that makes *The Independent* unique — the notable majority of each page focuses on people’s *response* to what’s going on.

But it is true; we, the people of New York City, are being asphyxiated! Pushed out of our apartments, yes, but not only. Free space is being privatized, bulldozed and policed more than ever. *The Indy* exists to find out how we can reclaim these public commons and to highlight those who are doing so.

The increasing corporatization of this city isn’t something that we simply cover, but are threatened by, because *The Independent* is a public commons. We provide free news for the people, by the people on the politics in New York City that most affect the working and poor. We, the team that puts together the paper, are not separate from those identities. We know well the struggle to make ends meet.

And it’s something I accept. While I wish that our highly unequal society didn’t make it so hard for radical projects to be well-funded, I do not for one moment wish I were anywhere else other than here, under a pile of blankets encased in a sweater because my cheap landlord won’t put the heat on, working to put together another issue.

The first article I read in *The Indy* was titled “58 Arrested in Standoff with NYPD Over Broken-Windows Subway Policing” featuring incredible action shots of the Harlem protest. I totally identified; I was enraged about the hiring of extra subway cops (it cost more to hire them than the

money the MTA would save by “fighting” fare evasion), and thought it was frankly badass to see an established news outlet reporting from the heart of the protest. Soon after, I reached out to *Indy* Editor-in-Chief John Tarleton with my resumé. He invited me to come to an editorial meeting and said he was impressed with my CV, which was a little surprising — I didn’t have direct experience with journalism and wasn’t sure how well radical community organizing and trekking through the country’s southern borderlands would come off, but it turns out I fit right in.

Although I sweated bullets throughout my entire first editorial meeting (and in order to conceal this, felt the need to keep my jacket on in *The Indy*’s warm, tiny, well-packed office), I had a blast. When John made a wiseass comment about *The New York Times* and everyone burst into laughter, I knew I was home. The next month, there was an opening for officer manager and I took the job.

In December 2020 I got my first cover story, “Black Lives Matter Backlash: The NYPD’s War on Protesters Intensifies,” and soon another one — “Cold as ICE: North Jersey Counties Rake in Millions from the Feds While Holding Immigrant Detainees in Subhuman Conditions.” I had done some deep investigating which paid off; within a few weeks of the piece being published, two Jersey counties announced they would end contracts with ICE. I still cover immigration and incarceration, my original beats, but have branched out to include housing and labor. In March, *The Indy* broke news when I authored “Labor Advocates Denounce Amazon’s Presence at Workplace Safety Conference.” Within two months of the article’s publication, the American Bar Association, which hosted the conference, ruled against allowing corporate sponsors.

It’s not always so glamorous. Plenty of grunt work is required to make this project happen. If you’re a subscriber, John or I probably personally sent you your *Indy* this month. Between distribution cycles, I take my ‘03 Pontiac Vibe up to our office in Downtown Brooklyn, pack that baby full with newspaper bundles and drive around the city refilling

empty newsboxes, hands dyed with ink for days afterwards.

It’s not just myself and John, though. We have an incredible team of contributing writers, artists, copy editors, proofreaders and neighborhood news-box stewards who simply check on the newspaper box closest to them every once in a while and make sure it’s looking good. Something I heard when I first started hanging around the paper has been ringing particularly true lately. *The Indy* is a community, a network built over the past 22 years that spans across the city, encompassing the incredible writers, photographers, artists and delivery team that work on the paper as well as readers, donors, advertisers and the many fearless groups and organizations that we cover. Our community is elastic, so we constantly see it shifting, adapting, including more voices and concerns.

That’s why *The Indy* is a public commons, and like all public commons, we are constantly facing the threat of extinction. Media is being monopolized. Newsrooms are closing across the country. It’s sad. I write to whoever is reading with urgency: Now is the time to fortify our existence as a people’s institution.

In this huge city, it’s easy for us as individuals or groups to feel isolated. *The Indy* helps us see our connectedness, see ourselves as something more than the sum of our parts, as a movement of movements. If you believe in what we do, if you want more of it and if you can see yourself as a part of our extended community, please make a donation. And if you can afford to, even if it’s a small amount, please make that donation recurring. You can visit [independent.org/donate](http://independent.org/donate) or send a check to The Independent/388 Atlantic Ave., 2nd Fl./Brooklyn, NY/11217.

### TO LONGEVITY!

*Amba Guerguerian is The Independent’s Associate Editor.*

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THANK YOU!





NINA BERMAN

# BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY VS. THE BOOK BANNERS

## NEWLY-MINTED BPL E-CARDS ARE NOW AVAILABLE TO YOUNG READERS IN ALL 50 STATES AS BOOK RESTRICTIONS PROLIFERATE

BY ELEANOR J. BADER

When the Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) launched its Books Unbanned initiative in April, the library system did something unprecedented: It allowed 13- to 21-year-old readers living anywhere in the country to apply for free library e-cards. This, the BPL announced, is a direct rebuke to a dramatic spike in book bans and book removals from public and school libraries in towns and cities throughout the 50 states. It was a clear repudiation of the well-coordinated campaign led by rightwing groups including the Heritage Foundation, Moms for Liberty, No Left Turn in Education and the Manhattan Institute to restrict what young people can find on the shelves of their community libraries.

The newly-minted e-cards, library staff explained, give young readers access to the BPL's entire digital catalog, approximately 350,000 e-books, 200,000 audio books and more than 100 databases.

Public response to the initiative, BPL spokesperson Fritzi Bodenheimer told *The Independent*, has been largely positive. In fact, since its start, the program has issued e-cards to more than 5,000 people from every nook and cranny of the United States. In addition, Bodenheimer adds, the number of teen library volunteers has more than doubled since the effort began.

"Youth are often the people most impacted by book bans and censorship," she explains. "They are typically the ones caught in the middle and denied access to materials they might want to read. We don't keep records of what they're downloading, but they should be able to read what they want."

High school English teacher Summer Boismier agrees, which is why she put both an anti-censorship statement and the BPL's QR code on the books in her Norman, Oklahoma, classroom. But after parent Laney Dickson complained about Boismier's messaging seen on a book her daughter brought home from school in early September, a brouhaha ensued, and in short order, Secretary of Education Ryan Walters — currently the Republican candidate for State Education Superintendent — issued a public call for Boismier's teaching license to be revoked. Boismier has since resigned from her position.

According to a statement issued by Walters, who did not respond to *The Independent's* request for an interview, "There is no place for a teacher with a liberal political agenda in the classroom. Ms. Boismier's providing access to banned and pornographic material to students is unacceptable and we must ensure that she does not go to another district and do the same thing."

Boismier, of course, is not the only educator to find herself in the right wing's crosshairs. Groups including the American Library Association have noted that librarians have been doxxed, harassed online and denounced as "pedophiles" and "groomers" for refusing to remove LGBTQIA+-affirming books from circulation. Some librarians, *The New York Times* reports, have resigned as a result.

Not surprisingly, this has encouraged the right, and rather than petering out, censorship campaigns have continued to ramp up. The upshot is that numerous restrictions now limit what kids, and in some cases adults, can read and study in many parts of the country.

What's more, this year is on track to have the highest number of book bans ever recorded by the ALA. Indeed, a report issued in mid-September cited 681 attempts to restrict 1,651 titles in the first eight months of 2022, compared to 729 attempts to restrict 1597 titles in the 12 months of 2021. Books that address gender identity, race and sexuality are the most frequent targets, with Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer*, Jonathan Evison's *Lawn Boy*, George M. Johnson's *All Boys Aren't Blue*, Ashley Hope Perez's *Out of Darkness* and Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* topping the list.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone, the director of the ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom, told the *Indy* that while the BPL is the only library system to provide unlimited e-cards to young readers, other libraries are also finding ways to resist book bans and censorship. Some, she says, have instituted an "honor system" to allow library users to anonymously take and remove materials without having to formally check them out. In addition, she

says that a host of locales have brought independent book sellers, civil libertarians and progressives together to sponsor book giveaways of texts such as Art Spiegelman's Holocaust memoir, *Maus*, after it was opposed by conservatives in Tennessee last spring.

"The fact that we do not have a federated library system in the U.S. means that everything is local," Caldwell-Stone says, which leads to great disparities in the reading materials that people can obtain. "In places where people are very low income or have limited internet access, they typically have limited access to information. Institutions like libraries are meant to serve everyone's intellectual needs. Access should not depend on one group's moral agenda or political priorities. Young people need information on gender identity, sexuality and sexual identity. This information can be lifesaving and help them become whole." The same is true, she adds, for books that deal with race, racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Asian attitudes and Islamophobia.

Librarians overall see preservation of intellectual freedom as a galvanizing issue, Caldwell-Stone continues, and a recently formed coalition between the ALA and 25 organizations including the American Federation of Teachers, the American Indian Library Association, the Chinese American Librarian's Association, the Human Rights Campaign, the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Coalition Against Censorship and the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund is now working to push back against rightwing efforts to suppress knowledge and curtail intellectual exploration.

The ALA is unequivocal in its denunciation of book bans and attempts to limit the ideas that people are exposed to: "A few organizations have advanced the proposition that the voices of the marginalized have no place on library shelves," the group's statement on censorship concludes. "To this end, they have launched campaigns demanding the censorship of books and resources that mirror the lives of those who are gay, queer or transgender, or that tell the stories of persons who are Black, Indigenous or persons of color. Falsely claiming that these works are subversive, immoral or worse, these groups induce elected and non-elected officials to abandon institutional principles, ignore the rule of law, and disregard individual rights to promote government censorship of library collections. The ALA strongly condemns these acts."

Likewise, the Brooklyn Public Library. Although the e-cards were initially intended to give users access to materials for a one-year period, BPL recently announced that the cards will not expire but will instead continue to give youthful cardholders unlimited use of library resources.

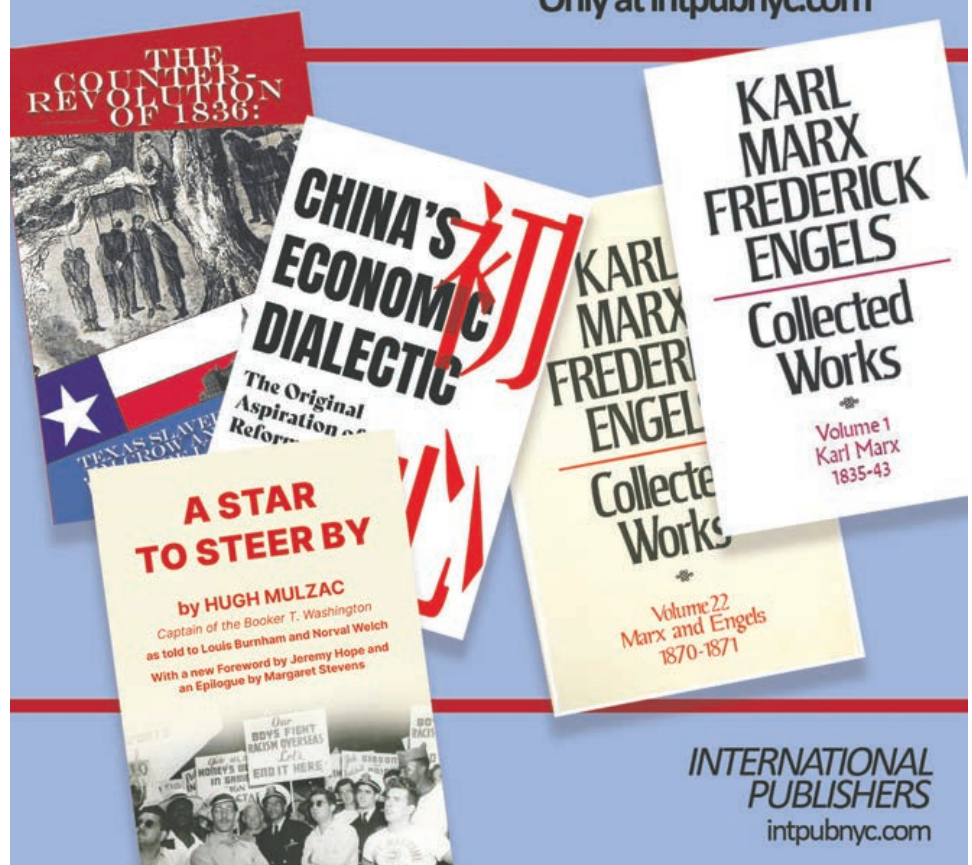
**FREE SPEECH:** Summer Boismier (center), an Oklahoma high school teacher who was forced out of her job after giving her students information on how to apply for free BPL e-library cards, headlined a Sept. 24 panel discussion at the Center for Brooklyn History.



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MIKE DRAKE

# NYU ADJUNCTS MULL STRIKE VOTE

BY ALEXANDRA CHAN

**T**he 3,000 adjunct professors at New York University began a strike-authorization vote Sept. 26, as they demand large pay increases to bring their salaries up to a living wage.

The part-time faculty generally earn the minimum salary of \$6,260 a semester for each four-credit lecture course they teach. The university's contract with their union, Adjuncts Come Together-United Auto Workers Local 7902 (where this reporter is an intern), expired Aug. 30, but has been extended twice for 30 days.

"We hope to avoid a strike, but that depends on NYU getting serious in bargaining," the union's bargaining committee said in a message to members Sept. 19. "We have yet to see meaningful movement on the issues that matter most to adjuncts: pay, reappointment rights, pay for training and other duties, and health insurance."

The vote will continue through Oct. 7. A strike authorization will empower the bargaining committee to call a strike if they deem it necessary.

The union was formed in 2002 in response to the lack of job security, healthcare access, and fair compensation. It now also represents adjuncts at The New School nearby.

The issues remain much the same 20 years later. Adjuncts, who are estimated to make up close to half of U.S. college faculty, generally work on one-year contracts, frequently need to take assignments from multiple universities to make rent, and often do not receive health benefits.

The NYU union is demanding a four-year deal with 10% pay increases each year, according to its contract campaign website. The university administration argued that the adjuncts should accept a 4% raise, because that is what it is giving full-time faculty, although full-time professors' base salaries are far higher. On Sept. 14, NYU increased its offer to a 6.5% raise in the contract's first year. ACT-UAW 7902 President Zoe Carey said that would make a difference of "roughly \$9" per contact hour but would still fail to keep up with the rate of inflation.

The union also wants all adjuncts to be eligible for health

**CORPORATE UNIVERSITY:** NYU adjuncts with UAW Local 7902 rally for a fair contract. Their employer charges undergraduates \$58,000 per year in tuition and controls a \$5.8 billion endowment.

insurance after one semester, and to have stronger and clearer rights to be reappointed.

In a university-wide memorandum sent out on June 9, the administration said its 4% pay increase for full-time faculty "reflects concerns expressed by faculty — with which we empathize — about the need to ensure the competitiveness of NYU's faculty salaries." It also recommended

another increase for non-unionized administrators and staff.

ACT-UAW 7902 has also sought COVID-19 compensation, as adjunct faculty continued to work and support the university through the pandemic. But the June 9 memorandum said that only non-bargaining unit faculty and administrators would be eligible for bonuses of \$2,000 to \$5,000.

"There has to be an understanding of part-time workers as legitimate workers who need benefits," says NYU unit chair Cate Fallon, a Tisch School of the Arts instructor.

NYU boasts that it raised a record \$988 million in funds in Fiscal Year 2021. The university's endowment now stands at \$5.8 billion, \$1.1 billion more than last year. It is also one of the largest private property owners in New York City. NYU recently purchased a 10-story building for its downtown Brooklyn campus for \$122 million, and it expects its 735,000-square-foot arts, residence, sports, and classroom complex at 181 Mercer St. to open in the spring.

ACT-UAW 7902 President Carey, who teaches at The New School, says that while both universities' administrations "are very difficult and very anti-union," NYU is on a whole other level.

"They mask it as incompetence," she says. "But it's just union-busting, anti-union behavior all the time. So they slow-walk our grievances, they take forever to respond to our emails when we make information requests, and what they end up sending to us is incomplete, incomprehensible, super-disorganized, or not what we asked for."

The university's 2,200 graduate student workers, however, won a 30% raise, better health coverage, and paid parental leave in a three-week strike by the Graduate Student Organizing Council last May.

"We need to unionize all the academic workers across all disciplines," Carey asserts. "The more labor presence, the more collective action we can take across our different sectors, the stronger we're going to be."

## UNION LEADS NEVADA RENT CONTROL BATTLE

With housing costs exploding in Nevada, the state's largest labor union has launched a campaign to win local rent-control laws. The Culinary Workers Union, UNITE HERE Local 226, is canvassing for its "Neighborhood Stability" proposal and calling on candidates to endorse it, with the aim of getting it enacted in Clark and Washoe counties, the Las Vegas and Reno areas.

The proposal would limit rent increases to 5% a year, prohibit them during the first year of tenancy, and require landlords to give tenants 90 days' notice of any increase. Units built in the past 15 years and owners who live in the building would be exempt.

"We call upon you to stand up for Nevadans and against corporate Wall Street price-gouging landlords," the Culinary Union says in an online statement. The union earlier this year unsuccessfully tried to get a rent-control initiative on the ballot in North Las Vegas, a city of 250,000 people.

By one estimate, the median rent for a one-bedroom apartment has shot up by two-thirds in Las Vegas and by 90% in Reno over the past five years. The two cities are also hot spots for investors buying up rental properties.

"My apartment was recently sold and even though there haven't been any new improvements or renovations, they want to raise my rent to \$1,200 — that's a \$500 increase!" Culinary member Isabel Alejandra Saldana of North Las Vegas, a casino-restaurant cook and a single mother of three children, said in a story posted online.

In New York State, pro-tenant legislators plan to reintroduce a "good cause" bill next year that would prohibit all but the smallest landlords from evicting tenants without a specific reason, such as not paying rent, and require them to justify large rent increases. It would protect more than 1.6 million households in unregulated units.

Last year, 14 labor unions, led by the health-care workers' 1199SEIU, endorsed the bill. But without support from Gov. Kathy Hochul, State Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins, or Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie, it never got a hearing in either house of the legislature.

California and Oregon both enacted good-cause laws in 2019.

— STEVEN WISHNIA



## UNIONS



NINA BERMAN

# 'PEOPLE ARE TIRED OF THE UNION-BUSTING'

BY AMBA GUERGUERIAN

Amazon workers at the ALB1 warehouse near Albany will vote on Oct. 12, 13, 15 and 17 on whether to join the Amazon Labor Union. This will be just the fifth time that workers at an Amazon warehouse in the United States have voted in a union election supervised by the National Labor Relations Board. If successful, they will be the second warehouse to win, after JFK8 on Staten Island in April.

"People are tired of the union-busting on the floor. A worker came up to me the other day and said, 'Hey, when are we voting? I need to vote,'" said Heather Goodall, who has led the unionization effort at ALB1, about 10 miles southeast of Albany.

With over 1.1 million employees, Amazon is the second-largest employer in the United States after Walmart. Founded in 1994, the retail behemoth has become notorious for poor working conditions and demanding dangerously fast productivity rates. Computers constantly track employees' movements, and if the monitor senses them standing still, stretching, or taking a bathroom break, it flags them for "Time off Task (TOT)," and workers who accumulate too much TOT are fired.

Goodall, whose son died in 2014 while on the job in a GlobalFoundries semiconductor plant, started working at ALB1 in February. "When Amazon came to our area, we were getting excited, because I have a 15- and 17-year-old that attend school in that district and could potentially get a job to save money for college. When I heard that there were these working conditions, I wasn't willing to take a chance with my other children. So I took the job to do investigating on my own as a mom, actually," she told *The Indy*.

By the end of March, Goodall was talking to other workers about unionizing. In

## STICKING TOGETHER:

Heather Goodall (left) and Kim Lane (right) from the Amazon Labor Union's Albany local join a rally in front of Jeff Bezos's Midtown mansion during the union's Labor Day Parade.

June, she learned about the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), the independent union formed by Staten Island Amazon workers in 2020 that won the election at JFK8. Goodall and the other workers she had corralled for the campaign immediately gelled with the ALU's ideology and worker-led model. (Before teaming up with the ALU, Goodall met with RWDSU and the Teamsters but felt that the push to unionize Amazon must be led by the workers themselves.)

By July, the newly-formed ALU Local 2 had gathered enough signed union cards from ALB1 workers to initiate the NLRB election process. The union estimates that at least 600 people work at the warehouse.

The core organizing group in Albany consists of around 10 workers, with dozens more participating in support efforts. ALU members have been calling other workers at the warehouse to secure *Yes* votes.

"In a group of 10, for every two hard Nos, we have five *Yeses*, and the rest are on the fence. So now it's just about educating people that are on the fence," says Goodall.

Amazon has deployed intensive union-busting tactics. The company flies in trained union-busters from out of town who are paid \$3,200 a day to cosplay as workers wearing orange jackets. "Amazon has people approaching people in the warehouse, calling workers, texting workers, emailing them, broadcasting on TVs in the warehouse, flooding the break rooms and the bathrooms, even our work stations," said Goodall.

The company announced it was giving workers a \$1-an-hour raise on Sept. 28, which labor law states is not to be done during a union election. Goodall says the raise proved to workers how much the union has already done. The ALU is demanding much more, though: a raise to \$30 an hour, an end to mandatory overtime and an end to the inhuman TOT system.

"If Amazon made \$12 billion on Prime Day while [workers] were dying, why can't the workers get a bonus? You think a \$1 raise is gonna shut down our union efforts? You're completely wrong! If they took the \$12 billion and divided it by the workers in the U.S., we would each receive a \$12,000 bonus," says Goodall, who is fiercely determined to win.

## HOUSING



SSEN/AMBA GUERGUERIAN

# BROOKLYN TENANTS GET ORGANIZED

BY AMBA GUERGUERIAN

Greedy landlords are a dime a dozen in New York. And they often break the law with impunity. But some of them are starting to reap the consequences: militant new tenant unions that want to bring the class war to their doorsteps.

Since March, Brooklyn Eviction Defense (BED) recently announced it has helped form 24 tenant associations and three tenant councils (with one having reached over 20 buildings), all of which are expanding, reports the group. Describing itself as an "autonomous union of organized tenants and tenants associations fighting landlord harassment, disrepair, rising rent and threats of eviction," BED began in July 2020 around an eviction defense at 1214 Dean St. in Crown Heights.

BED's rapid growth comes with context. Market-rate rents in New York City skyrocketed to above pre-pandemic levels in March and tenants in rent-stabilized apartments are seeing their largest rent increases since 2013. At 8.6%, the U.S. inflation rate is at its highest in 40 years, and in New York City pandemic job losses linger more than in any other major U.S. city. In this "post-COVID" reality, tenants are banding together.

BED defines a tenant's association as an organized collective of tenants living in the same building or building complex working to improve their living conditions. A tenant council encompasses multiple buildings run by the same landlord.

On Aug. 1, tenants living in buildings operated by Greenrock Management formed a tenant council after multiple renters had their rents increased by \$1,000 per month — a predicament that many New Yorkers experienced this spring-summer. At 219 13th St. in Park Slope, a tenant association formed because the 25-unit building hadn't had gas since May. After 311 and HPD provided no recourse, the renters decided

to organize. They commenced a rent strike on Oct. 1. At a 192-unit building in Flatbush, tenants started organizing when BED helped to do doorknocking that revealed conditions of disrepair span across the building. At their second tenant association meeting, 65 people showed up, ready to take action.

A tenant association can be helpful in many ways. For example, a tenant reached out to BED last month because their landlord was threatening them with an illegal eviction, says the group, which responded by setting up a safety network for the tenant. When the landlord eventually broke into the tenant's apartment, members of a BED tenant association located just a few blocks away were able to intervene. They walked over and successfully ejected the landlord and his goons from the building.

"Tenants come together to defend their living conditions but also to transform the politics of their everyday life," says BED Tenant Union, which openly operates within a revolutionary, abolitionist and communist framework and whose members comprise a range of Brooklyn tenants.

To connect with BED Tenant Union, go to [brooklyn eviction defense.org](http://brooklyn eviction defense.org) or call (917) 982 2265.

## TAKING ACTION:

Residents living in buildings operated by Greenrock Management formed a tenant council on August 1 after multiple renters had their rents increased by \$1,000 per month.



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## MASS INCARCERATION



# ANTHONY SIMS IS COMING HOME

## BUT EXONERATION REMAINS ELUSIVE AS BROOKLYN DA DOUBLES DOWN ON CONTROVERSIAL MURDER CONVICTION

BY THEODORE HAMM

In early September, Brooklyn District Attorney Eric Gonzalez made headlines by announcing that his office will dismiss 378 low-level convictions linked to 13 former NYPD officers found guilty of misconduct. Yet that same week saw the office wrap up its defense of a murder conviction that many leading exoneration advocates view as fundamentally flawed.

Although he is the most progressive of the city's five DAs, Gonzalez and his office often dig in their heels when challenged — and in the case of Anthony Sims, Brooklyn prosecutors have been fighting to preserve a conviction based on the word of an extremely dubious witness.

Sims' post-conviction hearing started last fall and ended in early September. Brooklyn Judge Danny Chun will now decide whether Sims' 1999 conviction stands, with a decision expected in early December.

From his 1998 arrest for a Bushwick murder through his parole hearing this past summer, Sims has never wavered in asserting his innocence. Sims' stellar record while in prison enabled him to gain parole on his first attempt, and he will be released in November. Sims now hopes to replicate fellow Brooklyn exonerees Derrick Hamilton, John Bunn, Sundhe Moses and Gerard Domond, all of whom saw their convictions overturned while they were out on parole.

"Anthony should not have been in prison in the first place," Brooklyn exoneree Jabbar Collins told the parole board in his letter in support of Sims, whom Collins spent time with at Green Haven prison in the early 2000s. Brooklyn State Senator Julia Salazar, in whose district the 1998 murder occurred, also expressed both strong support for Sims' parole and "serious doubts" regarding his guilt. Salazar noted that she is "convinced that Anthony did not receive a fair trial, in part due to the improper withholding of exculpatory information and evidence by the prosecutors."

There has never been any dispute that along with his friend Julius Graves, Sims entered a Chinese food restaurant and the counterman Li Run Chen was then murdered. Sims' legal team contends that Graves, not Sims, shot Chen. According to Graves' girlfriend's testimony in the recent hearing, Chen had made unwanted sexual advances toward her on the day of the murder, making Graves angry at Chen. The hearing also focused on evidence not provided to Sims at trial regarding an eyewitness whose claim that Graves was the killer shows up in a police report from the time.

As *The Independent* reported, Julius Graves has provided

**FAMILY TIME:** Anthony Sims in a 2015 photo with his sons Anthony Sims, Jr. (left) and Antoine Sims.

multiple different accounts of what happened at the crime scene, testifying in the 1999 trial that he was inside the storefront when the shots rang out but stating under oath last year that he was outside. On the stand last fall, Graves admitted to two lies during his original trial testimony — including that he had been meeting regularly with his probation officer. In his September summation, Sims' lead attorney Ilann Maazel declared that Graves is a "serial, pathological liar."

Maazel showed that trial prosecutor Mark Hale (former head of Brooklyn's Conviction Review Unit) made Graves' claims central to his summation. "Ladies and gentlemen," Hale told the jury, Graves "was inside the store and he saw Sims" fire the shotgun. In the recent hearing, Hale claimed to

remember nothing about the case. During his two appearances last fall, Graves gave two different explanations of where outside the restaurant he supposedly was.

"He has no respect for this court," Maazel said of Graves. "He has no respect for the truth." The packed courtroom included prominent exoneration advocates Jeffrey Deskovic, Elizabeth Felber and Derrick Hamilton, each of whom told *The Independent* that they viewed Maazel's summation as "devastating."

Brooklyn ADA Ernest Chin responded by deriding Sims' team's claim as "a massive conspiracy." He called the testimony of one of Sims' key witnesses "a concoction." Julius Graves, Chin insisted, had "remained consistent" in his account from trial through the recent hearing.

Chin further presented Graves' conflicting statements regarding his location at the time of the shotgun blast as understandable. "Julius Graves was watching a murder that Sims perpetrated," Chin said. "He wasn't watching where his feet were placed."

In response, Maazel observed that "it's kind of remarkable" that the DA's office would rely on "a serial perjurer [as] their main witness." And as he reminded Judge Chun, the jury never heard about Graves' anger towards the victim as a motive.

During the trial, Sims' defense attorney told the jury that Graves committed the murder. Upon conviction, Sims then met with parole officials for a Pre-Sentence Report. As the report summarizes, Sims "stated that he was asked by a friend to go with him to a Chinese restaurant and that the friend shot the deceased." Unlike Graves, Sims has thus told the same story from day one.

"We're over the moon regarding Anthony's parole status," says Keisha Sims, Anthony's wife and number-one advocate. "But we'd rather celebrate his exoneration."



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# BROKEN PROMISE

## PLAN BY MAYOR, UNION LEADERS TO MOVE 250,000 RETIRED CITY WORKERS INTO PRIVATIZED MEDICARE ADVANTAGE PROGRAM SPARKS FEAR, OUTRAGE

BY STEVEN WISHNIA

In March, New York State Supreme Court Judge Lyle Frank stopped Mayor Eric Adams' administration's attempt to switch the roughly 250,000 retired city workers to a private Medicare Advantage plan, saying it violated city law — so the administration is now trying to change that law.

Section 12-126 of the City Administrative Code states that the city “will pay the entire cost of health insurance coverage for city employees, city retirees, and their dependents” up to the cost of the standard “benchmark plan.” In collaboration with most of the main city workers' unions, the administration wants to add an alternative: It and the Municipal Labor Committee (MLC), the group of 102 city employees' unions that negotiates benefits, could jointly agree on a new benchmark plan for “any class of individuals eligible for coverage.”

That “would enable the city to make Medicare Advantage the only premium-free retiree plan,” says Stuart Eber, president of Council of Municipal Retiree Organizations of New York City. It could also charge retirees who want to keep traditional Medicare roughly \$200 a month per person, as in the plan Judge Frank's ruling rejected.

If the change is enacted, Eber adds, that would “seriously undermine the health-care protections for all city workers. It will allow the city to renegotiate the rate for everyone and place employees into different ‘classes’ with reduced benefits, eliminating the protections and equal treatment regarding health benefits that current and retired employees have now.”

The City argued that the Medicare Advantage plan the court stopped would have provided the same benefits while expanding many other services.

The retiree groups opposing it, however, say the private plans typically have higher copayments and require referrals and pre-approvals for many procedures, and there is no guarantee that doctors, hospitals and other providers will accept them, particularly out of state. They want to stay with Senior Care, a Medicare Part B supplemental insurance plan that covers the 20% of costs Medicare doesn't.

But after the March court decision, Steven Cohen, lawyer for the New York City Organization of Public Service Retirees, the group that filed the lawsuit, told *The Independent* that the city still had a “nuclear option”: Since the ruling said the city couldn't charge retirees for staying with Senior Care as long as it gave them that option, it could simply stop offering it.

Changing the law, he told *The Independent* in late September, “is half the nuclear option. This is the tactical nuclear option.”

The other half, he says, will come in the next few weeks, when the city puts out its “summary program description” of health benefits.

A hearing on the city's appeal of the March decision is scheduled for Oct. 27.

### CITY COUNCILS TURN

The proposed change must be approved by the city council. No bill to do so had been introduced as of Oct. 1, although Mayor Adams plans to work with the MLC to get one passed.

The mayor “believes the Medicare Advantage Plan is in the best interest of retirees and taxpayers,” a spokesperson told *The Independent*. “We support this measure by the Municipal Labor Committee to ensure the plan can be implemented in accordance with the law.”

The MLC voted to approve the change Sept. 8. Supporters included District Council 37, the United Federation of Teachers and the Uniformed Sanitationmen's Association. The 10 opponents included the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), which represents City University of New York faculty and staff.

The MLC argues that the City's costs have increased drastically: With hospitals raising prices by 6% to 10% a year, what the city spends on hospital bills went up more than 50% between 2016 and 2021, rising by \$1 billion to reach nearly \$3 billion. The main reasons for switching retirees to Medicare Advantage, however, are a 2014 deal the MLC and then-mayor Bill de Blasio made to tap into the Healthcare Stabilization Fund, its benefit fund, to give teachers raises and one in 2018 in which the unions agreed to find ways to save \$600 million a year in health-care costs. That bill has now come due.

“The proposed Medicare Advantage plan is one of the tools the MLC is using to save money (estimated \$600 million annually) that would be used to support health care for city workers, including the city's Healthcare Stabilization Fund,” UFT spokesperson Dick Riley told *The Independent*.

According to a transcript of the Sept. 8 meeting obtained by the *Independent*, MLC attorney Alan Klinger said that if the change is not approved, Martin Scheinman, the arbitrator overseeing the health-savings deal, will probably “order something, because he recognizes the city will be out \$600 million to a billion dollars.”

### OPPONENTS CRY FOUL

“Our former unions are selling off our benefits to pay off a bad deal they made,” says Marianne Pizzitola, president of the New York City Organization of Public Service Retirees and the Fire Department EMS Retirees Association. “It's truly disheartening that they made a really bad deal that they don't want to fix, but they want someone else to pay for.”

City workers have traditionally accepted lower wages in exchange for job security and better benefits, including retiree health care. But Adams has refused to meet with retirees to discuss the issue, Pizzitola says.

Under the current administrative code, says Steven Cohen, the City will pay up to about \$775 a month per person for health insurance, but retiree coverage is significantly cheaper because Medicare pays 80% of costs.

The city has tried to take away retirees' free health care several times by eliminating reimbursement for Medicare Part B plans, Pizzitola says. But “even in the fiscal crisis” of the 1970s, it couldn't do that.

Changing the administrative code also “opens a door to future changes to the quality or cost of active employee health insurance,” PSC President James Davis said in a message to members Sept. 9. It means “the City and the MLC could agree jointly on a different plan as the standard for either retirees and their dependents or active employees and their dependents, and provide only the cost of that plan. The modified language does not specify what if any



STEVEN WISHNIA



GEORGE BRANDMAN

elements of health insurance coverage a new ‘benchmark’ plan must include.”

A Sept. 8 letter from city Office of Labor Relations Commissioner Renee Campion to MLC chair Harry Nespoli says they agree to designate plans for only two classes under the proposed change: Medicare-eligible retirees and active workers, plus retirees under 65. But that letter is an agreement, not law, Pizzitola says — the proposed law doesn't specify what a “class” is.

The MLC said the change “is only intended for retirees who are Medicare-eligible — and that's not true,” she adds. “Coming up real soon is the intent to change the benchmark plan for the actives.” The City is expected to issue a request for proposals (RFP) in October to replace its current plan for active workers.

The City's aim is “not only to get around the court decision,” says Cohen. “By not pegging the cap to a specific plan, they give themselves the freedom to eviscerate health care for anyone.”

The switch to Medicare Advantage “is one part of the overall package,” Allan Klinger told the Sept. 8 MLC meeting. “Having an RFP issued for the actives plan” is part of it too.

“When looking at the administrative code, we want protections,” Geof Sorkin, executive director of the UFT Welfare Fund, said in a Facebook group discussion Sept. 19 whose transcript was obtained by *The Independent*. “Recently, there was a Medicare Advantage ruling, and the judge — in my opinion — exceeded his authority. So we want to go around that by changing the administrative code. We disagree that the City only has to have one health plan — we believe in ‘choice.’”

### CONTRACT TALKS

The City is now indicating to the unions that it can't reach new contracts until the Medicare Advantage issue is resolved.

“The city made one thing clear: in order to get the raise we deserve, we must resolve the issue of health care,” DC 37 President Henry Garrido wrote in a Sept. 29 message to members. Without a long-term solution to control costs, he continued, the City will be forced to begin charging workers for health insurance, and that means “any

pay increase we secure will be completely absorbed by your out-of-pocket expenses for health care.”

Controlling costs, he concluded, “means transitioning our retirees to the Medicare Advantage plan, which provides premium-free access with more coverage than the current plan and will result in an estimated \$600 million in annual savings.”

The political alignments of unions on Medicare Advantage parallel those on single-payer health care. In June 2021, just as the New York Health Act appeared likely to come up for a vote in the state Legislature, DC 37, the UFT and the Sanitationmen, along with building-trades, police and several smaller public-sector unions, joined insurance companies and business groups in signing a letter denouncing the single-payer legislation as “disastrous.” The PSC, along with health-care unions such as 1199SEIU and the New York State Nurses Association, were strong supporters. The bill never made it to the floor.

“It's just outrageous what they're trying,” says Julie Schwartzberg, a former vice president of DC 37 Local 768. “They're pitting current workers against the retirees, by saying ‘We can't deal with raises until we settle the Medicare Advantage issue.’”

Local 768 represents social workers, field health workers and restaurant inspectors — most of whom don't make a lot of money, Schwartzberg says, so an extra \$2,300 a year in health-care premiums would be a big bite out of their pensions.

City leaders “never think of other ways to do things,” she adds. In a city full of tax-evading multimillionaires, “there should be enough money in the city budget for raises for city workers and good health-care benefits for retirees.”

### PUSHING BACK:

Retirees with District Council 37, the largest municipal union in the city, march in defense of their right to continue being covered by Medicare.

### NO TO PRIVATIZATION:

Retired city workers with the Cross-union Retirees Organizing Committee (CROC) protest outside City Hall.

### WHAT'S WRONG WITH MEDICARE ADVANTAGE?

Medicare Advantage is a program offering private health-insurance plans as options to replace traditional Medicare. Unlike traditional Medicare, plans are not paid for services rendered, but are paid up-front and can profit from denial of care. They can offer extra benefits, including dental and drug benefits, but they use limited networks of physicians and hospitals, and they can restrict care with prior authorizations and formulary restrictions.

Since payment per-person based on average cost would severely over-pay for the healthy and under-pay for the sick, this method of payment creates incentives that worsen disparities in care. Medicare attempts to correct for this with risk adjustment (paying more for higher risk than lower risk beneficiaries), but risk adjustment cannot be made anywhere near accurate enough to avoid over-paying for the healthy and under-paying for the sick. Medicare Advantage plans therefore use strategies to sign up healthier beneficiaries and discourage

sicker ones, so as to secure a healthier than average pool of beneficiaries while getting paid as if their beneficiaries had average health risks, and profiting from the difference.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) added diagnoses to the risk adjustment formula in 2004 in an attempt to make it more accurate, but this only improved its predictive accuracy from 1% to 12% and introduced a major opportunity for Medicare Advantage plans to game the formula by “upcoding,” which means choosing more specific or severe (and more highly paid) diagnosis codes than would be required for purely patient care purposes and sometimes fraudulently adding irrelevant or non-existent diagnoses. According to one expert estimate, the cost to Medicare of aggressive diagnostic coding by Medicare Advantage plans and the failure of CMS to correct for it will reach several hundred billion dollars in coming years.

Medicare Advantage plans have achieved profitability largely by gaming their risk pools, up-coding and blunt restrictions on care, including issuing millions of inappropriate denials for care that met Medicare coverage rules and

minimally, if at all, by improving care. Typical administrative costs for Medicare Advantage plans, including profits, have been in the 15-20% range, compared to around 2% for traditional Medicare prior to the Affordable Care Act.

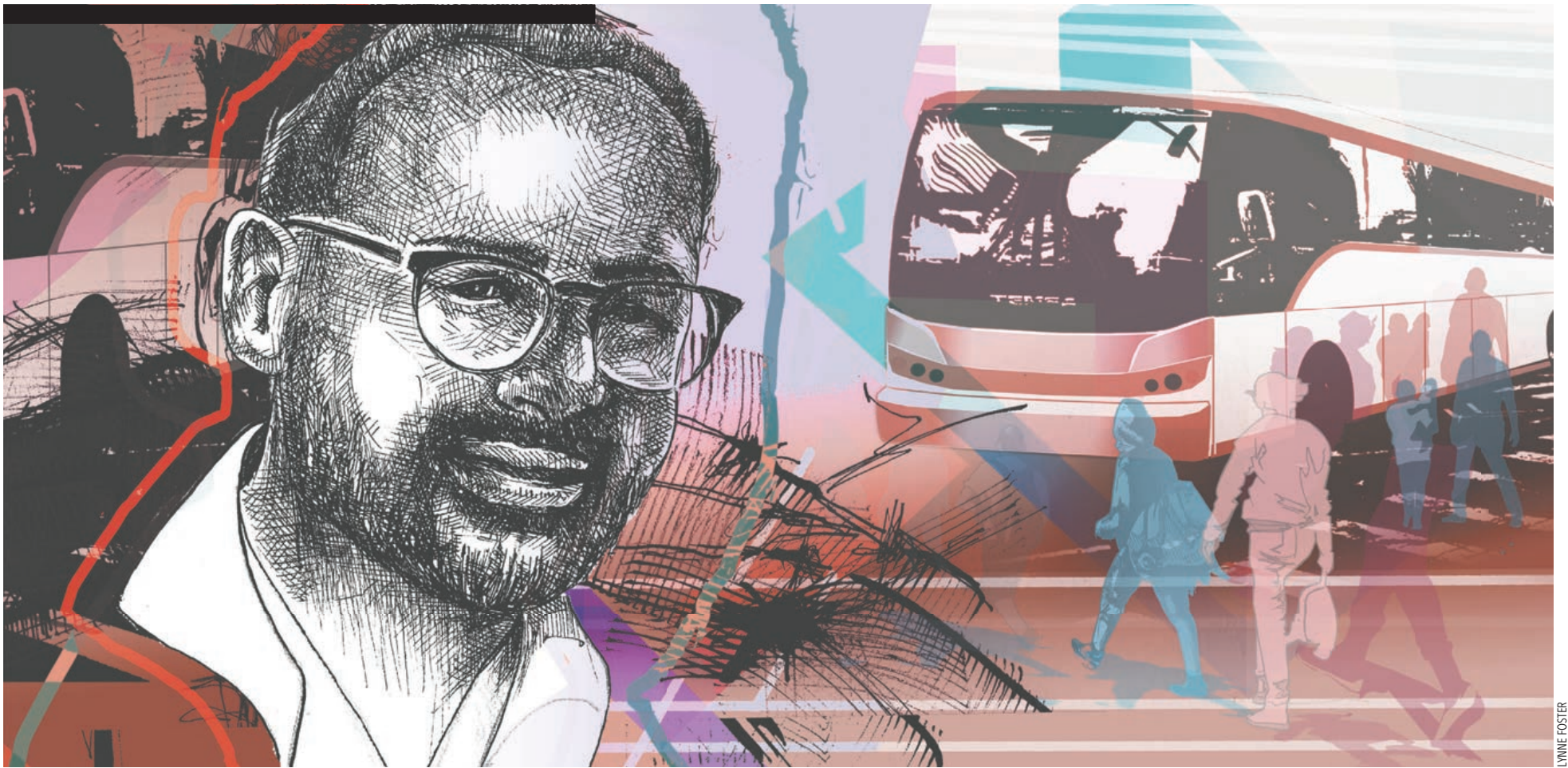
It would be far more cost-effective for CMS to improve traditional Medicare by capping out-of-pocket costs and adding improved benefits within the Medicare fee-for-service system than to try to indirectly offer these improvements through private plans that require much higher overhead and introduce profiteers and perverse incentives into Medicare, enabling corporate fraud and abuse, raising cost to the Medicare Trust Fund, and worsening disparities in care.

These problems are not correctable within the competitive insurance business model, and the Medicare Advantage program should be terminated.

— DR. STEPHEN KEMBLE

Stephen Kemble, MD is a Board member and chair of Policy Committee for Physicians for a National Health Program (pnhp.org).





LYNNE FOSTER

# WELCOMING THE STRANGER

## AN INTERVIEW WITH NEW YORK IMMIGRATION COALITION'S MURAD AWAWDEH

BY RENÉE FELTZ

**A**s thousands of migrant asylum seekers arrive on buses in New York City from the U.S. southern border — many sent without their consent by Republican governors in Texas and Florida who are playing politics with people's lives — community activists have led efforts to welcome them with dignity and to push city, state and local officials to mobilize more than the minimal resources offered so far. As *The Independent* went to press, the City announced it was relocating a sprawling relief center it has assembled in a Orchard Beach parking lot to Randall's Island and *The New York Post* ran a headline about a Hells Kitchen public school "overwhelmed with 100 migrant kids." Meanwhile, the buses keep coming. *The Indy* spoke to Murad Awawdeh, who grew up in Sunset Park as the son of Palestinian immigrants and is now executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition, about the ongoing work to welcome the new arrivals and how this fits in with their long-term goals.

**THE INDYPENDENT:** How has the New York Immigration Coalition been involved in greeting migrants, asylum seekers and refugees arriving on buses at Port Authority and establishing the "Welcoming New York" campaign?

**MURAD AWAWDEH:** First and foremost, I want to give a huge shout out to folks on the ground who are doing the work day in, day out, not just at Port Authority Bus Terminal but also with many other buses coming to New York City. The ones coming to Port Authority are mostly coming directly from Texas but there are others coming from Washington, D.C. and other areas. I give a huge shout out to Artists, Athletes and Activists led by Power Malu, Team TLC NYC led by Ilze Thielmann, Adama Bah, and all the amazing volunteers who are

doing this work sometimes 18-20 hours a day. I want to make sure they get the praise they deserve.

The New York Immigration Coalition started to engage with people from the Southern border back in the spring when folks just started arriving at our office because authorities said this is where they should go for shelter and services. We quickly realized immigration officials who were processing folks were actually listing the New York Immigration Coalition as the home address of individuals coming or being sent to New York. So once we started to connect the dots, we said: "There is something off here." There were conversations with other organizations who said they'd been receiving significantly more than us.

Then we had a meeting with the City and said we think a lot more folks are going to be coming here and that the city should expand emergency shelter immediately to support additional folks who are coming in, as well as create a welcome center and fund expanded emergency legal services and support organizations on

the ground who are going to need to support folks who are coming in. As you know, New York City and New York State have welcomed immigrants for centuries, from Europeans to African and Asians folks, to those from the Middle East and across the world. We want to be sure to continue to uplift our welcoming reputation, and the work we've historically done.

Shortly thereafter, buses started coming directly from Texas. We welcomed dozens of buses from the Southern border at Port Authority, and provided them with dignity and care packages. So, the work is ever-continuing. We've launched a Welcoming New York Campaign to demand perhaps the most outlandish thing we could have ever asked for: a cross government, coordinated response. We want the federal, state and local government to be working together to ensure all migrants and asylum seekers coming in are welcomed with dignity and respect.

**Mayor Eric Adams announced, via press release, that the City plans to open what he called "humanitarian relief centers" as well as its shelter system to house arriving migrant asylum seekers. City Councilmember Alexa Avilés visited migrants at a shelter in her district and told *The Indy*: "We have a long way to go." Your take?**

The only relief center announced so far [at the time of this interview] is the Orchard Beach parking lot relief center. We flagged our concerns when the announcement was made, since no one asked us beforehand what we thought about it. This does not seem tenable and has the potential to create more harm than good in this moment. Orchard Beach is incredibly far from mass transit. It is also a flood zone that was recently flooded!

We want to make sure people have access to support and services, but saying people will be there for 24-96 hours is a little concerning. The initial intent was for it to be temporary, but

if it becomes permanent de facto shelter, this would be against our Right to Shelter Law in New York City.

We've asked what these relief centers will do, how they will operate and for a chance to give feedback that is taken into account. We are asking the City for a short, medium and long-term plan. The buses are not letting up. They are coming with more vigor. Initially it was a bus or two, then it rose to three, and now NYC receives six or nine buses a day coming directly from Texas. This does not include others making their journey on their own. So we are seeing an increased amount of folks coming up here and we have not really addressed how we are going to ensure folks are given dignified shelter.

**In addition to shelter, most migrant asylum seekers need help navigating their cases. How could the Access to Representation Act ensure they get legal assistance?**

Regardless of immigration status, everyone should have counsel, and a right to counsel, when they are going through immigration proceedings. The Access to Representation Act was introduced by New York Assemblywoman Catalina Cruz and State Senator Brad Hoylman and grew out of work by the New York Immigration Coalition, the Vera Institute and the Immigrant Advocates Response Collaborative. It would literally ensure that whoever needs an immigration attorney receives one, and contribute to the long-term solution of building out access to lawyers.

**How have members of the New York Immigration Coalition been impacted by welcoming the city's newest arrivals, and what are you working on next?**

Membership in the NYIC includes over 200 organizations across New York state, and for the past three years we have been focused on many things: fighting for immigration legalization at the federal level and also expanding rights and services at the state and local level; for the expansion of rights and services for our communities here in New York City, and also combatting Covid-19 and making sure our community has access to Personal Protective Equipment like masks, and is able to get vaccines. Folks had really stretched their capacity in recent years because the need has been so great. Now, again we are stretching our capacity. So we really need New York City and the state to step up and provide resources to support these organizations so they are able to continue doing the amazing work they are doing with service delivery as well as being providers across the board.

*For more, see [Nycic.org](http://Nycic.org), [Artists-Athletes-Activists.org](http://Artists-Athletes-Activists.org) and [TTLCCNYC.org](http://TTLCCNYC.org).*





OLGA FEDOROVA

# RUSSIANS HELPING UKRAINIANS?

## A NEW YORK-BASED LGBTQ+ GROUP LEADS THE WAY

BY ELEANOR J. BADER

**V**iolette Matevosian is the national coordinator of RUSA LGBTQ+, a New York City-based organization that began in 2008 as an initiative of Manhattan's Congregation Beit Simchat Torah (CBST). Although the project's initial goal was to assist queer Jews emigrating from the countries of the former Soviet Union as they acclimated to life in the United States, the organization is now working hard to help those fleeing the war with Russia

This was not the first time RUSA LGBTQ+ changed its mission. The first change took place in 2013, when the Russian parliament passed a law to promote "traditional family values" to minors and shuttered queer-serving agencies and online forums. Human rights activists quickly saw it as a homophobic assault on the community.

According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), the impact of the policy was immediate and "had a stifling effect on access to [LGBTQIA+] affirming education or support services with harmful consequences for LGBTQ youth." What's more, HRW notes that almost immediately after passage of the measure, members of the community saw an uptick in "social hostility" toward those who failed to conform to heteronormative standards. Not surprisingly, this exacerbated feelings of vulnerability for LGBTQ+ Russians and, in the aftermath of the law's enactment, many queer individuals sought to leave the country; thousands have since emigrated to the United States.

RUSA LGBTQ+ was there to help them—and the now independent group did so regardless of whether the newcomers were Jewish, Russian Orthodox, atheist, or of another faith; volunteers quickly connected the newcomers with pro bono legal representation, English classes, medical care, and additional resources.

More recently, however, the organization felt compelled to change its mission once more, this time to assist Ukrainian war refugees. In addition to referring them to services and legal help, they are also working with several people who wish to bring friends or family members into the United States through the Uniting for Ukraine (U4U) program. That program kicked off in April, 2022, and gives

**ORGANIZER AT WORK:** *Violette Matevosian, national coordinator of RUSA LGBTQ+, a New York City-based organization whose original goal was assisting queer Jews emigrating from the countries of the former Soviet Union.*

Ukrainians expedited entry into the United States — an opportunity that has not been extended to asylum seekers from other war-torn countries. But here's the catch: To be eligible applicants must have a U.S. sponsor, a guarantor who files paperwork with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services stipulating that they will provide full financial support to the newly arrived immigrant during their two-year stay. The program also stresses that U4U does not provide a pathway to either a green card or citizenship.

As of early July, 74,000 U4U applications had been filed, and 47,600 had been approved.

Most of those entering the United States, Matevosian says, are not queer. Has there been any resistance to having an explicitly LGBTQ+ advocacy group assisting them? I ask since reports of trans people being harassed by Ukrainian border guards as they attempt to leave the country have been well documented.

"For the most part, Ukrainians coming into the U.S. are open-minded and are not prejudiced toward LGBTQIA+ people. They understand that we are just living our lives. They value freedom and are grateful for the help we've given them," Matevosian says.

But that is not to say that everything is going smoothly. In fact, Matevosian makes clear that problems and challenges abound. "People are frustrated by the amount of bureaucracy they've encountered with U4U. They are allowed in, told they can work, but typically have to wait months and months for their work authorization documents to be issued," they explain. "It's especially frustrating that there is no way to check the status of an application online. Some people have had job offers rescinded because they don't have the needed authorization. We're a small group, but we make decisions fast. We've set up GoFundMe pages, distributed the money raised to individuals and families that need it, and have collected supplies for kids enrolling in U.S. schools for the first time. RUSA LGBTQ+ also knows that it is important to build community among new arrivals. In the last few months, we brought people together for a tour of the Metropolitan Museum, organized a picnic in Central Park, and held a fundraiser that brought in \$13,000."

Most heartening, Matevosian continues, are the burgeoning networks — virtual and in-person — that have cropped up to help new arrivals connect to supports, from counseling to social groups, that make the transition easier. Nonetheless, Matevosian adds, "Ukrainians asylees coming in are very connected to their home country. They are loyal to Ukraine and want to go back if and when they can."



TWITTER@RNJUST

# MUTUAL AID GROUPS MOBILIZE

**BAD IDEA:** *The Orchard Beach tent city as it was being assembled.*

BY AMBA GUEGUERIAN

**A** large collective of mutual aid groups has been responding to the crisis in New York City that began in June when Texan Gov. Greg Abbott started sending busloads of asylum-seeking migrants (refugees) here and to other "liberal" cities. Since then, around 15,000 migrants have arrived. The Mutual Aid Collective projects a total of around 75,000-100,000 arrivals over the coming months. As of Sept. 2, Arizona and California also started sending migrants to New York City, the collective reports.

As *The Independent* went to press, the City announced it was relocating tent facilities assembled in a flood-prone parking lot in Orchard Beach, Bronx to Randall's Island.

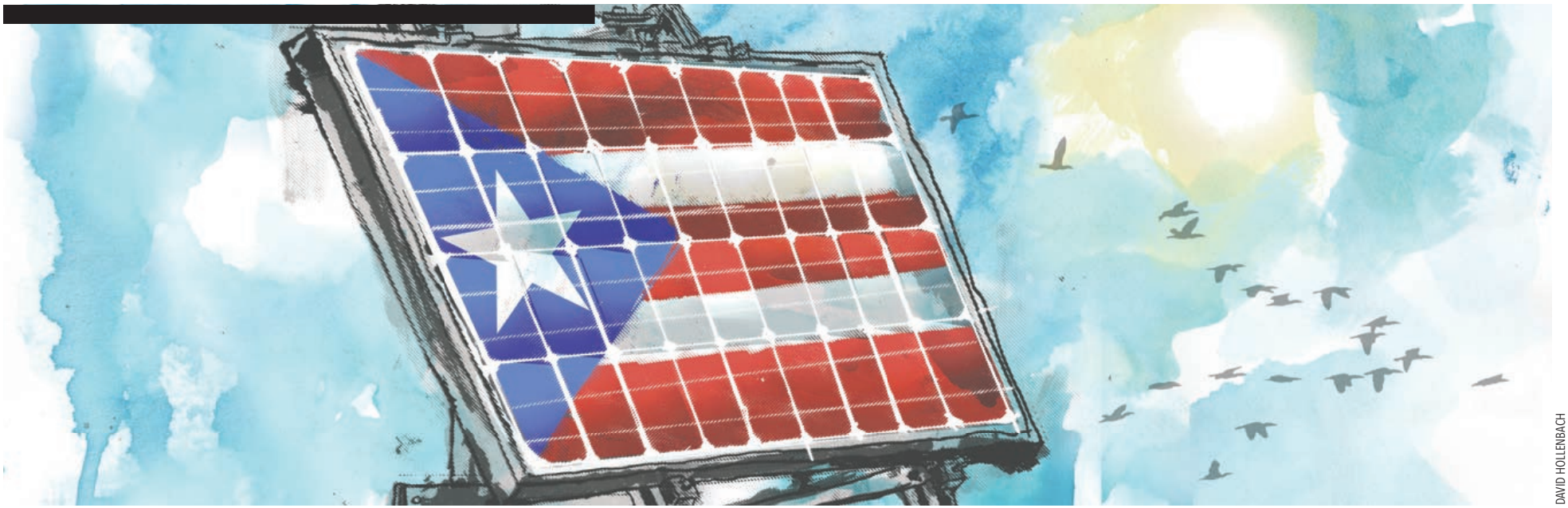
Ariadna Phillips is a founding member of South Bronx Mutual Aid, one of the groups in the collective. Phillips visited the tent city early in the morning on Saturday Oct. 1 to see how it was holding up. Not well. A video she took of water pooling on asphalt after a mere half inch of rainfall helped spark an outcry that forced the City to abandon its Orchard Beach plans. The Texas-based contractor chosen by the city to erect the site had built the identical "icebox" detention center in Texas during the Trump administration.

A day earlier, Phillips appeared before the city council's Committee on Immigration. She elaborated on the dismal treatment migrants have experienced. Here is a lightly-edited excerpt from her testimony.

*The mutual aid collective, which includes many mutual aids, allies, faith communities, and autonomous activists working alongside arriving migrants, has been handling ongoing care and support for thousands of asylum-seeking migrants since early August, every day.*

Continued on page 20





DAVID HOLLENBACH

# BRING ON THE SUN

## HURRICANE FIONA MAKES CLEAR THE URGENT NEED FOR ROOFTOP SOLAR IN PUERTO RICO

BY RUTH SANTIAGO, CATALINA DE ONÍS & HILA LLORÉNS

On Sept. 20, 2022, many people in Puerto Rico experienced the five-year anniversary of Hurricane María without electricity or running water. Fiona, a Category 1 hurricane, dealt yet another devastating blow to the archipelago's centralized energy system, which relies on imported fossil fuels. When Fiona made landfall on Sept. 18, only households and businesses with rooftop solar or generators were able to keep the power on. The dangerous storm damaged and destroyed roads, bridges and water infrastructure, downed electric transmission and distribution lines, caused landslides, and flooded entire neighborhoods, leaving many without safe and healthy living conditions.

Puerto Rico's existing electric transmission and distribution lines run primarily from the south, where the two most polluting fossil-fired power facilities are located, to the San Juan metropolitan area. The power plants in the south are sited in low-income, low-wealth neighborhoods, home to many Afrodescendant and Black Puerto Rican families already dealing with environmental racism. Most people in southeastern Puerto Rico and in many other marginalized areas have no way to access alternative sources of energy. With lack of access to drinking water and power, people will die as a result of this power outage. Especially given the timing of this latest hurricane, the ongoing impacts of climate colonialism have reopened unhealed wounds from five years earlier.

Since Hurricane María in 2017, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has allocated an unprecedented \$16 billion for Puerto Rico's electric system and hazard mitigation. Yet local authorities have opted to rebuild the exact same system that repeatedly collapses. The ethical, relevant investment of FEMA funds is a matter of saving lives, equity and environmental, climate, and energy justice.

Puerto Rico's current fossil-fuel-powered electric system puts the most marginalized communities in harm's way. This network of energy colonialism is an everyday source of contamination, whether in the form of coal ash, toxic waste or other pollutants, and these conditions contribute to disproportionately high levels of cancers, respiratory ailments, cardiovascular diseases and skin rashes, among other health problems. This lethal system also contributes greatly to greenhouse gas emissions that are responsible for global heating, and the constant power outages inflict significant economic and emotional stress on the low-income, low-wealth communities most negatively impacted by them.

### PUERTO RICO EPITOMIZES ENERGY COLONIALISM & INJUSTICES

In 2020, Puerto Rico handed over operation and maintenance of its power distribution and transmission to LUMA Energy, a joint venture created specifically for the job by Texas-based Quanta Services and Alberta-based ATCO. Luma, however, is performing even worse than the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA), which previously oversaw the archipelago's electric energy system. Since LUMA took over most components of the electric system in June 2021, residents have experienced an uptick in power outages and fluctuations in electric voltage and current.

The deterioration of the electrical system under LUMA has had adverse effects on public health, as hospitals, healthcare centers and homes are frequently left without power. The instability puts life and property at risk by causing damage to appliances, medical equipment and even generators. As a result, expensive appliances may stop working, refrigerated food and medicine often spoils, and electric home-health medical equipment becomes unreliable or unusable. The damages have affected small and large businesses and essential institutions such as schools, as well as food inventories — all of which cause distress, economic losses and disruptions in services.

While the economic losses from constant power outages can be measured, the enormous emotional toll and suffering caused by the ongoing, entwined energy and climate crises is much harder to quantify. All the while, LUMA lobbies to rebuild the existing centralized, fossil-fuel-enabling transmission and distribution system with a historic amount of federal disaster recovery funds.

The archipelago's dependence on expensive imports makes the cost of living high — and unaffordable for many residents. When high-priced appliances, medicine or home health equipment are damaged, most people do not have the income or savings to replace these items time and again. As far as we know, neither LUMA nor the local or federal governments have set up an accessible and satisfactory claims process for reimbursement for damaged appliances or other expenses incurred from the constant power outages. It is abundantly clear that the centralized electric energy system does not function amid the chaotic and cruel climate realities experienced in Puerto Rico and throughout the Caribbean.

In the aftermath of Hurricane María, Puerto Rico's transmission and distribution system and centralized energy generation proved unreliable and dangerous. Promises of false "solutions" to the problem led to several scandals with U.S.-based companies and PREPA. For example, Montana-based Whitefish Energy and Oklahoma-based Cobra profited handsomely from dubious work and no-contract bids. In 2020, New York-based New Fortress Energy built a liquefied gas terminal to import highly volatile methane gas to San Juan. The terminal is frequently inoperable and lacks the necessary authorization from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

In southern Puerto Rico, the coal-fired power plant in Guayama, owned by Virginia-based AES, continues to spew toxins and contaminate the South Coast Aquifer, on which thousands of people rely for potable water, and Hurricane Fiona's destruction of critical water infrastructure has added major barriers to accessing clean drinking water.

Additionally, large-scale renewable energy installations also are vulnerable to extreme climate-disruption-driven storms because of their centralized nature. The Punta Lima Wind Farm was blown away by Hurricane María, as was a utility-scale,

land-based solar array near where the storm made landfall. Similar infrastructural problems emerged during and following Hurricane Fiona. Meanwhile, existing decentralized solar alternatives demonstrate that other models are not only possible but vital.

### DISTRIBUTED ROOFTOP SOLAR FOR ENERGY JUSTICE

Through a proposal called We Want Sun/Queremos Sol, civil society groups are calling on PREPA to deny the renewal of LUMA's contract, which expires on Nov. 30. Rather than extend the unreliable services of a private company, advocates are urging the local government to invest FEMA recovery funds in life-saving, distributed renewable energy, primarily rooftop solar and energy storage systems (batteries). Such investment would provide power to Puerto Rico residents, businesses and other organizations, even in extreme situations of climate crisis.

We understand the potential of this kind of distributed renewable energy firsthand. One of us (Ruth) experienced these intensely difficult conditions in Puerto Rico during Fiona but was able to keep the power on throughout the storm and ongoing destruction because of rooftop photovoltaics on her home.

Termination of the LUMA contract would release a historic amount of disaster recovery funds that could be used to equip residences, businesses, hospitals, schools and other buildings with batteries and distributed solar energy systems, mainly on rooftops but also in parking lots and other suitable places. These funds should not be used to rebuild the same vulnerable, centralized power grid, powered by imported fossil fuels. Refusing this hazardous dependency and opting for a distributed alternative also would spare scarce land that should not be sacrificed to build industrial-scale renewable energy projects. Agricultural and ecological land must be reserved for other purposes, including developing food sovereignty and reclamation efforts.

Puerto Rico need not be a place of disaster. The people of the archipelago already have mapped out — and in some places, built — solutions to these challenges as they refuse the centralized fossil fuel system. Sixteen billion dollars are already earmarked to save residents' lives. How many more people need to die for FEMA to invest in rooftop solar alternatives?

The Biden-Harris administration must make good on its commitment to tackle the climate crisis and center environmental, climate and energy justice by positioning Puerto Rico as an example of what recovery funds can do to transform the electric system. It is past time for the reimaginings provided by our communities to be taken seriously to create new systems that transform power and advance justice. The Queremos Sol proposal must be supported. For immediate mutual aid in the aftermath of Hurricane Fiona, archipelago and diasporic collaborators have organized a call for donations directly to Jobos Bay communities. Puerto Rico and all its Caribbean island neighbors need energy justice now!

*This article originally appeared at nacla.org as "Another Hurricane Makes Clear the Urgent Need for Rooftop Solar in Puerto Rico."*





DANIEL FISHER

# SWINGING THE VOTE

## GRASSROOTS GROUP WILL SEND THOUSANDS OF VOLUNTEERS TO KEY MIDTERM SWING STATES

BY STEVEN WISHNIA

“We don’t want you to have to worry about fascism,” says Kara Murray-Badal of Seed the Vote.

Seed the Vote, founded in 2019 in the Bay Area, is one of several groups that have abandoned the left’s traditional disdain for electoral politics. “We coalesced around the strong belief that the left and social-justice movements needed to prioritize defeating Trump,” it says. “Our communities were under relentless assault from a white nationalist, authoritarian administration.”

Their methodology is sending volunteers to canvass in battleground states, working with local community organizations and labor unions, says Peter Hogness of Water for Grassroots, a New York City-based group that merged with Seed the Vote in April.

“We’re going to be knocking on doors six days a week until the election,” says Andrew, a canvassing co-leader in Philadelphia, who asked to be identified by only his first name.

In 2020, Seed the Vote had almost 7,000 volunteers. This year, it’s working in six states: Arizona, Georgia, and Nevada, trying to defend incumbent Democratic senators against Trump-cult challengers, and North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, trying to win Republican-held Senate seats.

It’s campaigning in Phoenix with LUCHA (Living United for Change in Arizona) and UNITE HERE Local 11; in the Atlanta area with the Asian American Advocacy Fund PAC and Showing Up for Racial Justice; and in Reno with the Culinary Workers Union, UNITE HERE Local 226. It’s canvassing in Durham, North Carolina,

with Durham for All; in Philadelphia with UNITE HERE locals; and in Wisconsin, phone-banking with Citizen Action Wisconsin.

States “have their own cultures, experiences, and organized groups,” explains Murray-Badal. “We wanted to support that work instead of acting like we knew more.”

Rather than give a blank check to Democrats, says Hogness, their goal is to build working-class power that lasts beyond the election. They’re also eschewing the mainstream Democratic strategy of trying to persuade “swing voters” such as moderate Republicans. Instead, they’re trying to reach “the other swing voters” — people who don’t often vote.

“We’re not looking to convince red voters,” says Murray-Badal. “We’re trying to get workers who otherwise would not vote to the polls.”

When she canvassed in Georgia in 2020, she says, “every single day, I talked to someone who wouldn’t have otherwise voted.” She adds, “I don’t think I talked to a single person” who liked elements of both Democrats and Republicans.

Both she and Hogness say reaching voters is more about listening than talking, trying to find out what is important to them and what motivates them to vote. People who don’t vote regularly have a “justified cynicism” about political parties, says Hogness.

“We’re not trying to convince people that elections solve everything,” says Andrew, “but that it’s a necessary element.”

He first volunteered to canvass with Seed the Vote in the Atlanta suburbs in 2020, when he was a recent college graduate just out of quarantine and looking for a way to do something political. Now, he organizes on labor issues and rent control with the Democratic Socialists of America. On the day we speak, he’s taking a break from canvassing in a largely black neighborhood of North Philadelphia.

It’s a neighborhood where most campaigns don’t bother to canvass, because turnout is usually low — so showing up “really makes a difference,” Andrew says. “We can’t always change people’s minds, but having that conversation is important.”

In Philadelphia, he says, the concerns people mention most frequently are gun violence and poor garbage collection. There may be no Democratic or Republican way to pick up garbage, as the saying goes, but there are differences in the parties’ attitudes about funding public services and whether sanitation workers should get union wages and pensions.

In Nevada, says Hogness, it’s housing costs. Rents for one-bedroom apartments in Reno and Las Vegas are esti-

mated to have gone up by more than two-thirds. The Culinary Union has begun campaigning for local rent control laws (see article on page 8). Canvassers also talk about UNITE HERE’s job-training program for the hospitality industry, in which graduates are guaranteed a union job.

Abortion rights are a huge issue everywhere, says Murray-Badal. “People feel like the government is taking something personal.”

In Philadelphia, Andrew says, even people who consider themselves apolitical were “genuinely shocked” by the Supreme Court decision to let states outlaw abortion. (Republican gubernatorial candidate Doug Mastriano has said that women who get abortions should be prosecuted for murder.)

Another major aspect of canvassing, especially in the shadow of voter suppression, Schneider says, is giving people information about how to vote — the deadline for registering, applying for mail-in ballots, and where they’re supposed to go to the polls.

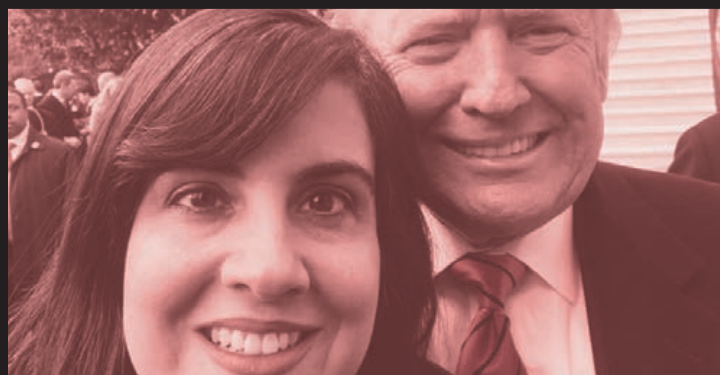
On one level, Hogness says, the goal is to elect politicians who can deliver legislation that would protect abortion rights and voting rights and improve workers’ ability to organize unions. On the other, it’s the political “harm reduction of keeping fascists out of office.”

The Republican senatorial candidates in all six states have either claimed that Donald Trump won the 2020 election or evaded acknowledging that Joseph Biden won. In Pennsylvania, the governor appoints the state’s top election official — and Mastriano chartered buses for the Lite-Beer Hall Putsch of Jan. 6, 2021.

Hogness plans to go to North Carolina, because the Senate race there between Democrat Cheri Beasley and Republican Ted Budd has not gotten much attention. Beasley, former chief justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court, lost re-election by 401 votes in 2020. If elected, she would be the first black senator from the state since it ratified the Constitution in 1789.

“If we do the organizing right, that is a very winnable race,” he says. “This could be the race that decides whether we’ll be able to have a democratic election in 2024.”

To volunteer for Seed the Vote, sign up at [seedthevote.org/sign-up/](https://seedthevote.org/sign-up/). You can also volunteer to phone bank from home.



### WEB EXCLUSIVE: NYC’S ONLY SWING DISTRICT

Check out the latest from longtime Bay Ridge resident and activist Emanuel Jalonschi on the hard-fought contest for New York’s 11th congressional district. The district, which encompasses all of Staten Island and parts of South Brooklyn, has swung back and forth between Republicans and Democrats over the past decade and will play a key

role in deciding which party will control the House in 2023. In 2020, Republican Nicole Maliotakis prevailed and then subsequently backed Donald Trump’s baseless charges that he lost the presidential election due to fraud. In July, Maliotakis voted against legislation that would have codified Roe v. Wade and ensured abortion rights nationwide. For more, go to [independent.org](https://independent.org).

— INDEPENDENT STAFF





NICKY YEAGER

# ‘THE PEOPLE’S BEACH’ IS A QUEER LANDMARK THAT DESERVES TO LIVE ON

## A BEACH FREQUENTED BY PREDOMINANTLY QUEER AND TRANS PEOPLE SINCE AT LEAST THE 1940S IS UNDER THREAT

BY NICKY YEAGER

Ever since the queer community in New York learned that the abandoned hospital on the city property behind Bay 1, the first beach in Jacob Riis Park, is being redeveloped — which is expected to dramatically change this historically queer beach — a sense of anxiety has hung over summer’s end. The City has stated its plans to demolish the old Neponsit Beach Hospital as soon as mid-October, but talks

are ongoing over what will fill the lot directly behind Bay 1 in Queens Community Board 14 meetings and among NYC Health and Hospitals officials and city councilmembers. Abandoned since 1998, the old hospital has functioned as a physical shield between the conservative Rockaways neighborhood and openly queer beachgoers who, out of direct sight, feel safe flocking to these sands where all types of bodies, gender expressions and public displays of affection are welcomed. When the building comes down to expose people who have historically been considered “deviant” and undesirable in public space, the delicate balance of this unofficial queer beach may well be jeopardized.

This summer, Bay 1, referred to as ‘Riis Beach’ and sometimes known as ‘The People’s Beach,’ was busy as ever while rumors circulated that the hospital lot could be redeveloped as condos. The property deed, however, only allows for building a healthcare facility or a park on the land. Whether these restrictions will help maintain Bay 1 as a queer-friendly space remains to be seen.

Councilmember Joann Ariola (R-Queens), elected in 2021, told *The City* in August that the land will become a passive park with trails and promised that a playground would not be built, a possibility queer beachgoers have long opposed due to concerns that placing a children’s playground so close to a de facto nude beach would be used as a pretext to target queer beachgoers. In an email to *The Independent*, Councilmember Ariola was more vague about what she supports. “I support the community that I represent, so I am in favor of what my constituents want to see developed at the site. It’s important to remember that people live here all year long — for them it is not just a summer weekend destination, it is their entire life, and we need to think of their needs.”

• • •

ON FRIDAY, SEPT. 16, an intimate group of longtime beachgoers and queer community members held a closing ritual for the Neponsit Hospital. Local artist and advocate WILLIE the GENIUS led the ritual, honoring the spirits of those passed in the hospital along with members of the group’s ancestors and lost loved ones, inspired by Black and Indigenous traditions such as Yoruba (Ifá) and Voodoo. WILLIE spoke to the hospital’s history, first built in 1915 for children suffering from tuberculosis at the behest of muckrak-

ing photojournalist and social reformer Jacob Riis.

Since at least the 1940s, queer folks have been visiting the beach; writers from Audre Lorde to, recently, Torrey Peters have described Riis Beach in their books. “We’ve been marginalized so many times,” WILLIE said, connecting the physical marginalization of tuberculosis patients here at the edge of the city to later marginalization of stigmatized HIV and, most recently, monkeypox patients. In 1985, once the hospital had been converted into a city-run nursing home, Mayor Ed Koch attempted to move 10 AIDS patients there for treatment with the potential to add more, but a lawsuit filed by residents of the Rockaways and broader pushback driven by HIV stigma blocked the move from happening.

This divide hasn’t gone away: There’s a “general hostility,” says organizer Jah Elyse Sayers, or at least a perceived one, between queer beachgoers at Bay 1 and nearby Nepon-

**“IT WAS THE ONE PLACE I COULD GO AS A HOMELESS TEENAGER WHERE COMMUNITY WOULD HOLD ME.”**

sit neighborhood homeowners. According to David Henkin, whose family members have lived at one of the only two houses that directly face Bay 1 since 1948, members of the homeowners association have been eager to work with the police to surveil the beach.

“The local community would love to see the elimination of the community at Riis Beach,” says Petr Stand, an urban designer and planner working with organizers.

Yet not all members of the neighborhood feel negatively towards the beachgoers, including a small group of queer residents of the Rockaways and homeowners like Henkin’s

*Continued on page 20*





RESPECTIVE COLLECTIVE@RESPECTIVECO.ON.TWITTER

# LITTLE AMAL COMES TO NEW YORK

BY JESSICA MAX STEIN

What if you could make the refugee crisis literally too big to ignore? Amir Nizar Zuabi, artistic director of the Amal Walks project, is hoping to do just that — through an 11-foot-tall puppet of a 10-year-old Syrian refugee girl named Little Amal. A common Arabic name, Amal means “hope.”

Since Little Amal started “walking” in July 2021, she has traveled over 5,500 miles across 12 countries, from Syria to England, passing through Turkey, Greece, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, France, Poland and the Ukraine, holding nearly 200 events in 85 different locations. On Sept. 14, she came to New York City, greeted at John F. Kennedy Airport by the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and children’s chorus.

Little Amal spent 17 days in New York, working with over 100 partners across the city to create 55 events in all five boroughs. And she didn’t merely go to tourist destinations like Times Square — Little Amal saw the “real” New York, from Jackson Heights to Bed-Stuy, Mott Haven to Snug Harbor.

*The Independent* caught up with Little Amal in Dumbo, Brooklyn. The crowd waited for her at the Pearl Street Plaza, then followed her as if she were the Pied Piper over to Jane’s Carousel in Brooklyn Bridge Park, a striking visual with the stunning 11-foot puppet against the glittering backdrop of the East River and the Manhattan Bridge.

Amal watched other puppets riding on the carousel and danced to live music before disappearing into St. Ann’s Theater, which is co-producing the New York events with The Walk Productions.

Through this sort of street theater, Little Amal confronts us with the harsh realities of a worldwide refugee crisis. The crowd walked past a restaurant, some patrons stared, some got out their phones to take pictures, and others just kept on eating and talking. A woman in an apartment window tried to describe Little Amal to her partner, making huge gestures, as he peered out the window, puzzled. Another boon of the outdoor events is that they are COVID-safe, a deliberate choice by the producers.

Little Amal was designed and built by Handspring Puppet Company, which created the magnificent life-sized puppets for Broadway’s *War Horse*. She is made largely of cane and carbon fiber, materials that are both lightweight and resilient. “This is a little migrant child who has been forced to leave her home and is seeking her mother,” says Handspring Executive Director Basil Jones, who with Handspring Artistic Director Adrian Kohler came out of retirement to make Little Amal.

Three performers bring Little Amal to life, working together as one entity. Two are outside the puppet, operating the arms; the third performer, walking inside the puppet on stilts, also manipulates the complex web of strings and pulleys that control Amal’s extraordinarily expressive face. The puppet is mostly low-tech, except her eyes, which the inside performer manipulates remotely using a tiny computer. The puppet’s mechanics are similar to the oversized Gorg puppets on the much-loved 80s Jim Henson production *Fraggle Rock*.

“Little Amal is a beautiful way to see how people can come together behind a common cause,” says Adrina from Brooklyn. She appreciated all the different languages spoken in the crowd, from German to Spanish to Arabic.

Many in the audience were immigrants themselves. Sarah, from Australia, noted her privilege in being able to come to America with a visa and apply for a green card. “Not everyone’s that lucky,” she said. “There’s a lot of refugees and immigrants in this country that have not

been given the same luxury to live here freely.”

Others, like Domenica from Brooklyn, were the children of immigrants. Domenica identified strongly with Little Amal. Her mother, a 51-year-old Ecuadorian migrant, died three months ago very suddenly. “My mom was my whole world,” said Domenica. “So for the past three months, I’ve been this little girl looking for my mom. This is the thing: We look at a situation like the refugees and we’re removed. It’s not happening to us until it does, and then you realize, ‘We’re all Amal.’ ”

Still others in the audience, like nine-year-old Neon, were children themselves. Neon had studied the project in school before coming with his mother and some family friends. “This was fun,” he said.

Many in the audience had come to more than one Little Amal event, such as Heather from Brooklyn. “We were thinking it would be wonderful if she could meet the busses of refugees that are arriving at our doorstep now,” she said.

Darren, from Manhattan, came to the event with low expectations, and found himself moved. “This is the stuff that makes New York livable,” he said. “I’m leaving feeling uplifted and a little more aware of what’s going on. This was a special night.”

**LARGER THAN LIFE:** An 11-foot-tall puppet of a 10-year-old Syrian refugee girl named Little Amal strolls through the streets of New York City.



## MUTUAL AID

Continued from Page 15

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Before asylum seekers arrive in NYC, most have their identity documents taken from them at the border by immigration officials and are forcibly separated from their families, without phones to know where they are.

Migrant families and individuals have been consistently abandoned to our care outside Port Authority and shelter intake. This includes emergency medical transport upon their arrival, which we have coordinated and done accompaniment to city hospitals as many arriving are injured and ill from the Texas detention encampment centers, which according to migrants, the new Orchard Beach encampment closely resembles.

We tirelessly pick up asylum seekers that have not known where to go and were simply on the street as they walked to addresses printed on immigration documents. These addresses were often churches or shelters that had no knowledge of these migrants, and turned them away upon arrival. Dozens of migrants have attempted to walk from airports—such as Newark, LaGuardia, JFK, or White Plains — whom we found and escorted.

It is through this organizing we have realized the depth and breadth of shelter abuse and general negligence all unhoused New Yorkers face. Their belongings are constantly

stolen or repossessed by shelter staff, including immigration paperwork. Queer asylum seekers are often assaulted and now within our sanctuaries. We have heard from hundreds of migrants that they prefer to sleep on the street than in the shelter because of the dangers there.

Despite the omnipresence of DHS police, migrants trying to report abuse in shelters are simply told to vacate the shelter. Migrants have been beaten and tased by large groups of shelter police and NYPD in retaliation for speaking out. Families, including mothers, have been explicitly threatened by shelter officials for reporting ongoing narcotics trafficking and other corruption that occurs with the blessing of shelter officials.

• • •

The city has set up a navigation center that is of little use as migrants cannot get there and don't even know it exists. This migrant navigation center is supposed to be the multimillion dollar answer for migrants, but if they do manage to get an appointment over a month from now, they are referred for services they don't have a way to access or even be contacted about if groups like ours do not intervene. We continue to provide clothing and essential items because they are not given elsewhere.

At shelter intake, couples are being denied the conditional placements without proof of domestic partnerships or marriage and are simply told they must be separated, or assigned

to walk to a shelter that then sends them to yet another shelter upon arrival.

Countless men who, after walking for hours from intake sites to “assigned” shelters like the Atlantic Armory, are then told there are no beds available, walk back across boros, and sleep on floors in the waiting room from early morning until late at night. The food they receive is frozen.

At [DHS' Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH)] shelter intake, families are also served frozen inedible blocks when they arrive. Many spend two days there, again sleeping in chairs or on the floor. They are sometimes bussed in the middle of the night, or told to walk across boroughs with their children without support and made to leave again at 7AM, only to spend the whole day and evening at PATH again, including pregnant women and children.

We testify to give you a sense of the gaps and frankly, abuses, in shelter, food, safety, and dignity that thousands of asylum seekers have faced upon arrival in our city. There is nothing humanitarian about the existing shelter system, and the plan to place migrants in outdoor tents in flood zones as the temperature drops is cruel and potentially fatal. Our city must do far better.

For the full version of this testimony, visit [bit.ly/3e1Eqvb](https://bit.ly/3e1Eqvb).

For resources and how to support, see South Bronx Mutual Aid on Instagram @southbronxmutualaid and Twitter @SBX-MutualAid.

## QUEER BEACH

Continued from Page 18

family.

At the closing ritual, after members of the group shared experiences and stories on the beach, another organizer asked if anyone else would like to speak, and Henkin came to the middle of the circle to express support. “I thought it was really important to show up,” Henkin told The Indy. “We, the family, really wanted to make sure that the folks working to protect Bay 1 knew that they have friends in the community,” he said. “We’re super concerned that — you know, when the hospital comes down, we want to make sure that the community continues to have a joyful space to be.”

Tense moments occur frequently between the United States Park Police — the law enforcement agency responsible for patrolling the beach — and beachgoers, some of whom sunbathe and swim nude. In August, Veronica Kirschner was ticketed and arrested there by federal Park Police on charges of disorderly conduct and resisting arrest, but bystanders stated her nudity was the cause for arrest. In mid-September, police disrupted both the hospital closing ritual and festivities the following day, on Saturday, Sept. 17, during a series of events called Jacob Riis Pride planned for the last big beach day of the season. According to Sayers and organizer Ceyenne Doroshow, on that day police trotted horses through a crowd, the horses then defecated in front of the food area, and beachgoers were left to clean it up.

Doroshow believes that Councilmember Ariola made a personal call to the police that day, and says that Ariola has never met with her or the other organizers fighting to

protect Riis Beach, despite their efforts. “I don't want to shock her,” she says. “I want to sit and talk with her.”

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SINCE NEWS OF THE HOSPITAL DEMOLITION began spreading in September 2021, two petitions have been created, one by an individual beachgoer, and another later by GLITS (Gays & Lesbians Living in a Transgender Society).

Doroshow, who is the founder and executive director of GLITS, says the most important thing is for input from the LG-BTQ+ community to be heard. “Considering Stonewall is not really a community place,” she says, and not a place where Black and brown queer and trans people feel comfortable in the modern day, “what I want to do here is provide.” When asked how long she's been going to the beach, she responded, “Oh, Christ... At least 40 something years. I was on that beach when I was homeless, because it was the one place I could go as a teenager where community would hold me.”

Organizers from groups like GLITS and Project Abigail, and unaffiliated regular beachgoers, have been speaking at Queens Community Board 14 meetings and working to present a new proposal for the hospital lot: Apply for historic landmark status and establish a land trust to be run by the community. The GLITS website offers the plan's mission statement. “To secure Riis Beach in perpetuity for long-term, sustainable community use and preserve both its history and cultural importance to the diversity of New York City.”

Turning that dream into a reality will be

an uphill battle as the mayor and the local council member, in this case Ariola, hold most of the power in determining land use decisions like this one. But were it to succeed, the advocacy group would steward the land. Doroshow imagines opening a health and wellness center geared toward trans people — to fit the health-related deed restrictions — as well as hiring former sex workers and formerly incarcerated people who face severe barriers to employment. “All ran by us,” she says.

• • •

THESE PROPOSALS MAY BE NEWS TO MANY in the queer community who have heard about the redevelopment; most of us are simply expecting the worst. What the space will look and feel like come next beach season is wholly uncertain with the protective privacy wall of the hospital gone, increased police presence, and a civic struggle potentially escalating.

When it comes to changing Riis, a prevailing sentiment is something in the vein of “just leave us alone,” a presumption that any greater government involvement at the site spells bad news. Queer communities, including the Black, brown and working-class trans people for whom Bay 1 is especially significant — and who don't have Fire Island to escape to — are used to a feeling of mistrust and skepticism that resources will genuinely be allocated with them in mind. For some, it feels like the destruction of the hospital is the beginning of a familiar cycle — Queer and trans people of color being pushed to the margins of urban space, making do with a non-conventionally desirable space, building that space up as a place

of gathering, belonging, abundance, and care, and then, ultimately, being displaced all over again.

The case of Riis Beach echoes that of the Christopher Street Piers. These piers, also a haven for queer homeless youth in New York, grew heavily policed along with the gentrification of Greenwich Village in the late 80s and 90s. Starting in the summer of 2000, a movement of queer and trans youth of color fought back to preserve access to the piers for themselves and future generations.

Why is it that the only two options we are offered in our cities are urban decay or gentrification? For decades, you find yourself next to a crumbling hospital with asbestos in it and where the only bathroom is three quarters of a mile down the beach, and then one day, people start talking about bettering your environment somewhat, and just like that, they want to drive you out. What would it look like to be able to ask for more? To feel secure that asking for resources means you will actually receive them? How would space be organized differently? In a city where free, public space is disappearing for everyone, it has already never been a real public good for groups like Black and brown queer people of color.

In the coming months, GLITS will be planning more focus groups, seeking volunteers, and building their proposal. It may not be until next summer that the future of Riis Beach is front and center for the community, but for a plan this ambitious, strong mobilization will be needed. Another fight for a pillar of queer life in New York City is coming up.



# OH, THE STORIES WE TELL

*I Meant to Tell You*

BY FRAN HAWTHORNE

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN UNIVERSITY PRESS, 268 PAGES  
NOVEMBER 2022; AVAILABLE FOR PRE-ORDER

By Eleanor J. Bader

It's safe to say that everyone sometimes lies, whether by omission of key facts, embellishment or complete fabrication. And it is also a safe bet that, while we often get away with our deception, the crumbling trust that ensues when we are unmasked can make us wonder what we were thinking when we concocted the fib. Worse, the unraveling can cause an avalanche, especially if the untruth is foundational.

Miranda Isaacs, a 32-year-old healthcare analyst at the fictional Center for Liberal Alternatives in Washington, DC, and the protagonist in Fran Hawthorne's complex, evocative and nuanced second novel, *I Meant To Tell You*, is getting a crash course in these realities. Her world begins to splinter when her fiancé, Russ Steinmann, is vetted for a job with the U.S. Attorney's office and a routine security check reveals that seven years back, she was charged with kidnapping. While the charge was eventually reduced from a felony to a misdemeanor, the investigation shatters the couple's domestic tranquility since Russ knew nothing about his partner's arrest history.

"Any false statement or inaccurate information during the employment application process may result in the revocation of the position, as well as collateral consequences,"

Russ furiously explains when the facts come to light. "I could lose my job," he says.

Tensions mount and the couple agrees to temporarily separate. This decision sends Miranda back to her mother's suburban Maryland home to lick her wounds and regroup.



ESTEBAN JIMENEZ

A cascade of revelations then unfolds. Among them, Miranda reaches out to Ronit, her long-estranged college best friend, to replay the incident that led to the arrest. It's an emotional and beautifully wrought scene, bristling with tension as the two reexamine Ronit's attempted flight to Israel with her toddler daughter to escape Ronit's physically and psychologically abusive husband.

The limits of sisterhood — how far any of us might go to help a beloved and endangered friend — are parsed, without resolution. After all, these are not issues that can be easily pegged to a formula.

But there's much more to the story. After the arrest comes

to the fore, Miranda and her mom have more than a few difficult exchanges, including a discussion about Jerry Isaacs, Miranda's father. Miranda had always been told that Jerry was a militant, anti-Vietnam War protester who later went to California to work on the United Farm Workers' grape boycott. His death in a motorcycle crash when Miranda

was six month old has become a family legend. Throughout her childhood and the childhoods of her two much younger half-siblings, Jerry was held up as a masculine paragon, a firebrand who embodied progressive political principles, self-sacrifice and unwavering bravery.

Turns out, Judith pretty much invented this persona to inspire her kids, creating a near-perfect being who hovered over them as they came of age. The truth — that Judith had been a pregnant teen who had no idea what happened to Jerry Isaacs, a kid she slept with only a handful of times — receded over time as Judith concocted story after story about Jerry's short but heroic life. In fact, by the time she discovered she was pregnant, Jerry was long gone and she had no idea how to tell him that she was carrying his child.

It's an amazing disclosure, rendered realistically and matter-of-factly. Indeed, the richly drawn characters in *I Meant To Tell You* are both wholly human and wholly believable; humor and pathos seamlessly intertwine in this resonant and revealing narrative.

The novel is a redemptive tale and as the tenuous ties that bind us are illuminated, it will make you smile, grimace and, most important, think about the stories you tell.

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SCAN ME



## REVEREND BILLY'S REVELATIONS

*Dear Rev,  
Who calls this NEO-fascism? What does that mean — its the old kind come back again. Fear immigrants and LGBTQ+ people and fear everything that moves. Fear difference. Vote your fears. How do we get out of this very old trap?*

— MAURA

Dear Maura, the Left is beginning to notice that when you live in Totalitarian Consumerism as we do, then all of life becomes the "Other". The idea of celebrating diversity is the kind of Human Justice that is also Earth Justice, because this is a matter of life and death — the Sixth Extinction, a hundred dead in Florida, 1500 drowned in Pakistan, 30 million homeless, the Himalayas and Greenland melting, hundreds of species disappearing weekly. We're all the Other because the corporate colonizers are investing in direct mass murder. The scale is by orders of magnitude greater than any time in our history. It is not just moral. And the alternative to fascism is not just a feel-good thing. It is not just ideologically the right thing. If we resist fascism we seem to be saying no to racism, sexism, classism, able-ism. These are all the normative habits of the violent monoculture. So it can appear to be ambitious and complex. But it's simple, too. We want to live.

— BILLY

• • •

*Hey Billy,  
I'm an easy-going guy who doesn't anger quickly and prefers to defuse tense situations with a light-hearted joke or comment. It's all good except I have people in*

*my life who think they can act like jerks to me because they know I won't lash out. Is it time for me to toughen up and embrace more conflict?*

— ROBERT

Greater self-awareness is always a good thing even if it leads to hard-to-face truths. Listen above all to the people who you trust, who care about you... But Robert stop pursuing static human types. Just discover who you are and go from there, expand that self. And you might be unlikeable to most. You have to practice being unlikeable, Robert. When on the subway, stand up and shout "THE NYPD WOULD LIKE TO REMIND YOU THAT BACKPACKS AND LARGE CONTAINERS AND YOUR BEST DREAMS AND YOUR DEEP SUBCONSCIOUS AND YOUR STINKY LITTLE PRIVACY WORLDS ARE SUBJECT TO RANDOM MASTURBATION"... I say this because lots of abusive sameness can be traced to our pretending-we're-not-marching-to-one-drummer. And that drummer has a gun. Or maybe these jerk friends who criticize you are carrying something even worse than live ammo, like shame. Don't change your identity Robert, change your fucking species. See yourself as an Orangutan on the beauty contest runway, in a hoopskirt made of spiders and vomit and neon bite-size drones woven in your hair. You think I'm kidding?

— REV

**REVEREND BILLY TALEN IS THE PASTOR OF THE CHURCH OF STOP SHOPPING. HAVE A QUESTION FOR THE REVEREND? EMAIL [REVBILLY@REVBILLY.COM](mailto:REVBILLY@REVBILLY.COM) AND UNBURDEN YOUR SOUL.**





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