Claiming the City
Civil Society Mobilisation by the Urban Poor
The Street Vendor Project

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There are as many as 20,000 street vendors in New York City - hot dog vendors, flower vendors, t-shirt vendors, street artists, fancy food trucks, and many others. They are small businesspeople struggling to make ends meet. Most are immigrants and people of color. They work long hours under harsh conditions, asking for nothing more than a chance to sell their goods on the public sidewalk. Yet, in recent years, vendors have been victims of New York’s aggressive ‘quality of life’ crackdown. They have been denied access to vending licenses. Many streets have been closed to them at the urging of powerful business groups. They receive 1,000 USD tickets for minor violations like vending too close to a crosswalk - more than any big businesses are required to pay for similar violations.

The Street Vendor Project is a membership-based project with nearly 2,000 vendor members, who are working together to create a vendors’ movement for permanent change. The project reaches out to vendors in the streets and storage garages and teaches them about their legal rights and responsibilities. Meetings are held to plan collective actions for getting the vendors’ voices heard. Reports are published and lawsuits filed to raise public awareness about vendors and the enormous contribution they make to the city. Finally, the project helps vendors grow their businesses by linking them with small business training and loans.

The Street Vendor Project (SVP) runs programs in the areas of outreach (going into the streets and recruiting new members), assistance (helping with tickets, licenses and any kinds of problems), media (talking to the press and writing reports before big rallies), education (meeting with police and community boards), and advocacy (working to pass laws and policies around vendors rights).  (www.streetvendor.org 2013)
I was born in Panama and immigrated to the US, to New York City, with my parents in 1960; my mother worked in King's County Hospital, and my father fixed beds on a cruise liner. My father taught me the tricks of the trade: how to hustle for tips, how to please customers, etc and shared stories and artifacts from all over the world. Both our parents really taught us to think big about life, and to use sports to better our futures. During the summers, I worked as an All Star Team basketball player, inspiring other kids to follow in my footsteps. I explored different campuses and universities, but I didn't want to leave my city, and decided to study physical education at Manhattan Community College. However, I always wanted to be a leader and part of something bigger than myself, and I started leading the hip crowd that was selling drugs, stealing and street fighting. When I was eventually on trial for drug possession, just as the judge told me if I broke the law again I'd get five years, my dad – who saw something in me – popped up and said, “Wait, he's been drafted, with a one way ticket, to Vietnam.” I chose the army over prison and was shipped out to Fort Dix the next morning.

I was trained in Los Angeles, got married in 1970 – and found myself with new responsibilities. I wasn’t scared to be shipped out, though, because I felt close to my New York brothers. However, when we arrived at the Vietnam airport and pulled out our rucksacks, the airport was being shelled and everything was exploding. I put my arms around the wheel of the plane and cried out for my mama; that’s when it became real: I was at war.

Forty-nine of us were sent out, and eight came back. That’s forty-one dead. They sent me back on medical conditions with heavy PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder); I was drinking and using drugs. I looked for work as a porter in shops or hotels, but no one would hire me; they would call me ‘baby killer’ and other names. It hurt that I couldn’t provide for my family or get rid of those memories, and I didn’t receive any benefits from the army. My wife left me; she didn’t understand what I was going through. I went through a period of being in and out of jail, selling drugs, fighting.

A preacher from an anti-drug program took me in as his own son, came to the Parole Board and told them to sign me over to him. I was doing really well in the rehab programs, got married again, but one day
I found my new wife sitting with her son, smoking crack, and I left fast. In 1989, I got into a Samaritan Village rehab program, started working as a weekend counselor in the Samaritan Village, and then became a youth and HIV counselor in the Bronx, where I worked for ten years. I could tell those kids what I had been through and help them make better choices than I had.

Then, my mom got sick, and I took her back to Panama. When she passed away, there was lots of fighting within my family. I couldn’t deal with this pain and ended up getting back into drugs. Since I couldn’t be a hypocrite to the kids I was working with, I had to leave. I went into detox in veterans’ hospitals, and for the first time ended up going to PTSD groups, getting diagnosed for my illnesses. After leaving the hospital – when I stayed at a shelter and received 85 USD per month from the government – I saw an advertisement about being a vendor, and I started selling CDs. Licenses for doing this are limited; you can only work in certain areas and on major streets, and there’s a lot of competition due to these restrictions. Also, there’s much police harassment, especially towards folks like me, with the police always trying to give you tickets for the tiniest infractions.

**Street vendor challenges**

It has always been a challenge to work as a street vendor because of natural conditions, such as rain or heat; there are fewer customers around for one, and if you don’t take care of yourself, you may well get sick. However, what makes it extra hard nowadays is the fact that you may get a ticket – with an increasing amount – for so many things: you don’t have your ID hanging around your neck, you have your stand too close to the doorway, or too close to the curb on the corner… You get these fines over and over again, and it gets ever more expensive – after six tickets, you are fined $ 1000 each time! Licenses have also become a constant bother; you now need permits for all kinds of things, and there is often a waiting list to get such licenses. With a license, you can work without being harassed; without it, you are committing felony for one thing or another. And knowing the rules is no easy task, since they are not written in every language.
Another problem is the overcrowding of certain blocks. With too many people working in the same area, it’s a big battle. Finally, there are lots of negative stereotypes about street vendors that one meets all the time: street vendors destroy the community; they themselves are dirty — or they leave a mess behind; they compete with local businesses; they cause crime; they’re trying to swindle people, and so on.

**Working with the Street Vendor Project**

I first heard about the Street Vendor Project when I got my tickets, and I started attending their monthly meetings. We learned about our rights, what to do if we had problems, that the project would go to court with you, and fight your tickets. One year I couldn’t get my license, because I owed too much money. I had a $12,000 ticket, a crazy amount, and we went to the New York Supreme Court with the case, and eventually we were able to drop it to $550 — and I realized that this organization really would support me.

I’ve been a member since then. I have been attending meetings, rallying the mayor, making speeches at City Hall. I was elected to the board, and I’m currently running the Veterans Group, which was started because few people in this country are standing up for veterans; the SVP is really going to change that.

We’re a coalition of Chinese artists, merchants, taco trucks, and peanut men. We need to join together, and get into the belly of the beast in order to find out what’s happening in New York City. Our members are trying to make a living in the streets, because the economy is broken and they cannot find other work. We’re trying to make money for our families — not for new cars or fancy houses — just enough money for our families here and in other parts of the world. Immigrants are working double. They’re trying to survive in the US and get more for their families in other countries.

I am 62 now, and I’ve stopped getting into trouble and started living the life so that my family and the little ones can look up to me. I’ve learned from the streets, and I’m trying to give it back here. There’s a right way to do it.
I haven’t gotten a ticket in five years, partly because there’s now a handbook given out by the SVP in five languages, with information about all the regulations – and anytime you feel attacked, we’ll come with TV crews and vendors from all different cultures, ready to fight. We have linked with movements in all five New York boroughs, have supported sand storm Sandy relief, and participated in Occupy Wall Street. We are part of something bigger!

The SVP board consists of people who speak different languages and represent different cultures, who work to strengthen the organization, going out to talk to people in the streets, inviting them to be members of our community. Our leadership meetings in the office are like a mini UN; they’re interpreting in every language, we are representing the whole world.

Different programs address different issues. For example, a women’s group deals with abuses by the welfare system, with domestic violence, with lack of access to resources and so on; a veterans group addresses issues about benefits, teaching veterans about vending and about getting back into life.

For many, vending is a reason for living. If we stop, a lot of us will wilt away; the work is what keeps us going. When you join the group of street vendors and win battles together, this puts you in a position of empowerment.

The great-grandparents of today’s street vendors built New York City, its beautiful churches, and the tall skyscrapers. If our ancestors could build the city, why can’t we continue to build it up? We put our heart, soul, our mind, our nationalities, and our parents’ backgrounds and history into our work. The art we share, or the food we sell in street carts, celebrates our different cultures and communities. We want people to taste the food and go home and share that cultural experience with their families.

We also contribute to business. We sell items for every season, but not the same items or foods that are being sold in stores. But, we feed the store shoppers, we bring people to the area to shop. We’re also the eyes and ears of the city. We can see everywhere at all times, like the police, to make sure the streets are safe. I stopped a robbery at a newsstand; other vendors have found lost children, or even stopped bombings in Times Square.
Our group is greater now than before and we are winning things. Once you know your rights, the police can't mess with you. We are fighting for the right cause and for the right people. This is what we can give to a world that believes in us.

Note
1. The Street Vendor Project is part of the Urban Justice Center, a non-profit organization that provides legal representation and advocacy to various marginalized groups of New Yorkers. (www.streetvendor.org)

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