

Becoming Visible

A new homeless voter registration drive has already empowered 300 people to stand up for themselves. And with a nationwide event planned for the end of the month, we may be on the verge of a new constituency.

by Seth Baum



Courtesy of CPPAX

It started when Jim Cronin, Frank Atkinson, Roger Schagnon, and Dwayne Lopes, each homeless at the time, met with their state representative, Anthony Petricelli. They asked what was on the table at the House on issues of direct importance to them, such as jobs, affordable housing, health care, and substance abuse programs. Petricelli answered that there were things on the table, but they weren't going anywhere, largely because homeless people are not voting and speaking up for themselves. This left them annoyed but resolved to do something about it.

Since then, they have been spearheading a homeless voter registration drive based out of the Pine Street Inn. The project is currently run by Frank and Jim, with support from Pine Street Director of Government and Community Relations Amy Coolidge.

Getting homeless and low-income people registered to vote has been a challenge for them, as people are often saddled with misunderstandings of their eligibility or concerns over the responsibilities of being registered. Many convicted felons were under the impression they couldn't vote despite having served their time—this is not true. Others worried about jury duty. But, as Frank explained, "There isn't a prosecutor or lawyer in the state that would put someone in a [transitional] program on a panel. That's just the bottom line."

"When I got out of Walpole prison in '65, I was under the impression, as we all were, that we were second class citizens. It was ten years before I learned that I could vote, that I had choices, that I was part of America."

Getting past such misunderstandings is a big personal challenge. "When I got out of Walpole prison in '65, I was under the impression, as we all were, that we were second class citizens—couldn't obtain a passport, couldn't vote, and that was it. And I was a Navy veteran, and I was pissed," Jim said. "My self-esteem was dashed to the ground. I had acrophobia, I had a lot of other phobias that had to do with the insecurity that I felt. I was devastated. I was smashed. In more ways than one, I might add. I was also an alcoholic. Bay Rum Jimmy is what I was known as in the South End. . . . It was

ten years before I learned that I could vote. I registered to vote and . . . I had choices, I was part of America, part of something bigger than me."

This took me by surprise. When I showed up for the interview, I was expecting to hear about the effect voter registration could have on political discourse, but it hadn't occurred to me that it could have such a profound effect on the voters

themselves. Jim not only recognized this, but used it in his outreach.

"This is part of my spiel," he said. "And we've registered more than 300 homeless people. And they can expect an impact, a dramatic elevation of their self-esteem. . . . And you know, they're all watching the news and reading the papers. And this is an election year."

At this point it hit me that this is more than just an ordinary voter


registration drive, out to increase civic engagement or partisan advantage. This is a valuable service. And already, over 300 people have been reached.

"We had a guy that was 55 years old," Frank recalled. "[He] had never registered to vote, and he came out and voted. He also attended a meeting that we had with Representative Petricelli. He spoke to him on the issue that was important to him, that he had finally exercised his right to vote, and how he felt about that.

These kinds of stories seem endless. One man Frank has registered has been a legal alien for 30 years. Not only will he vote in this year's election, but he's decided to become an American citizen.

"We have guys that are literally running down the ramp when the mail comes in, because they've got the thing from the elections committee telling them that they're now a registered voter in the state of Massachusetts. And that's rather unique, because some people take it for granted. Sometimes we forget that those things are unique, the rights that we have. These people see it as a huge step. And it is, it truly is, because now, for the first time, they're actually taking something back. They're actually becoming part of society. Whether it's a small step or not is irrelevant—it is a step, and for them, it's important," Frank said.

The new voters they have reached may be just the tip of the iceberg. Interest in the project has spread so much that Jim and Frank were confident it would continue even if they walked away from it—something they clearly are not about to do. Instead, they are planning a major registration event, scheduled for July 22 outside the Christian Science Center in Boston. This event, tentatively called "Cast Your Vote," hopes to draw people from many local shelters, enabling Jim and Frank to reach more people than they could going from shelter to shelter on their own. It will also be an anchor for similar events held nationwide that day, organized by the National Low Income Housing Coalition and the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

Given the enthusiasm for the project that has spread throughout the community, perhaps this marks the beginning of a broader movement towards improving conditions for homeless and low-income people. But for now, the team is focusing on getting today's job done. As Jim put it, "We're not thinking beyond November. This is an election year. This is a moment. . . . This is bongo drums, marijuana, popping wine, Bob Dylan, this is right out of the '60s, the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life. . . . Even if only two people come to this event, it's the effort, it's the journey. It's a noble cause. So whether or not it's a success, it's a pissah. Want to get involved?" 

If you want to get involved in the Homeless Voter Registration Project, contact Pine Street Inn at (617) 482-4944. The project was recently recognized for their efforts with an official resolution sponsored by Boston City Councilor Felix Arroyo.

4th of July To-Do List for Real Patriots

What is a patriot?

It's a missile. It's a football player. The dictionary definition is "One who loves, supports, and defends one's country." A Google search finds 3.5 million entries, the first a copy of the U.S.A.P.A.T.R.I.O.T. Act, a law that threatens so much there is to love about this country. George Bush's personal definition probably involves shopping and SUVs.

In my book, patriots are those dedicated to making the promise of our nation a reality. What's that promise? "Liberty and justice for all," is how the Pledge of Allegiance puts it. Here are some suggestions for "real patriots" on the Fourth of July.

1. Register voters at fireworks celebrations. All it takes is clipboards, pens, and voter registration forms—the latter available at your city hall and the Secretary of State's office.
2. Join the American Civil Liberties Union (www.ACLU.org), the nation's leading defender of the Bill of Rights. Send in a contribution and get active locally with the Civil Liberties Task Force, a project of the ACLU of Massachusetts.
3. Leave a note for someone with a raggedy flag on his or her car. Tell 'em they should be ashamed of themselves!
4. Write a letter-to-the-editor criticizing the U.S.A.P.A.T.R.I.O.T. Act. Call on your members of Congress to support repealing the Act. For more information, visit the web site of the Bill of Rights Defense Committee, www.BORDC.org.
5. Put a sign supporting same-sex marriage in your window. Contact Mass Equality (www.MassEquality.org).
6. Contact your state legislators in support of a bill allowing immigrants to pay in-state tuition at public colleges and universities. For more information, visit the Massachusetts Immigrant & Refugee Advocacy (MIRA) Coalition web site, www.MIRACoalition.org.
7. Organize an event with Veterans for Peace (www.VeteransForPeace.org). As veterans, they speak about war with unmatched credibility, wisdom, knowledge, and fervor.
8. Use colored chalk to write, "Dissent is Patriotic" on the sidewalks of your neighborhood. It's fun and it'll get more notice than a bumper sticker.
9. Hold a yard sale to raise money for the Boston Social Forum (www.BostonSocialForum.org). The BSF is bringing together progressives the weekend before the Democratic National Convention—and they could use the money!
10. Stand alongside a busy street with a sign that reads, "How many soldiers per gallon does your vehicle get?"

— Eric Weltman

Eric is a Cambridge-based writer, activist, and patriot. Please let him know how you're spending the Fourth of July at eric@ericweltman.com.



Instead of going out and doing something fun when he finished his article, Seth graciously offered to sweep the floor of the Whats Up office instead. It's a lot easier to work around here now.