

Goodwill hutching

How the Alberta Free Hutch went from being just an unruly free box to keeping the spirit of guerilla activism alive

BY EMILLY PRADO
STAFF WRITER

Between the brunch lines and boutique stores that have taken over Alberta Street stands a vivid roofed structure filled to the brim with clothing, tchotchkes, books and more, all open for taking and eager to find their new homes. Known as The Alberta Free Hutch, the entirely pro bono project was founded by Joseph Drushal and Lydia Grijalva in 2014. With the help of a team of volunteers, the Free Hutch houses a rotating selection of donated goods as a form of resistance against the gentrification of the neighborhood and as a means to destigmatize need.

When we meet to talk, Drushal and Grijalva are proud to note that the sturdy wooden pillars of the Free Hutch have recently received a fresh coat of paint.

"One of the things we did a while ago was choosing to use really bright colors to go against the minimalist Scandinavian design that has come to be synonymous with gentrification," said Grijalva, who uses they/them pronouns. Plus, the lime green and sherbet hues of pink remind them of their Mexican heritage.

Although the pair moved here separately in 2013, they both came to Portland ready to apply their urgent sense of activism – reinvigorated by the nationwide Occupy movement – into their new community. The two became acquainted while living in an alternative higher education program called Community Supported Everything. The CommuniVersity was a self-directed residency in which mentors guided students in moving from ideas to actualization in the pursuit of community-based endeavors.

Grijalva worked on self-publishing a zine called Füdizine that compiled resources and stories about accessing food for people experiencing poverty stemming from their own experiences growing up poor. While Drushal researched alternative economies like gifting circles and time banking, an exchange based on hours of service in which everyone's skills are ranked equally.

"About halfway through the program, (the mentors) really encouraged me to do something hands on and less conceptual," Drushal said.

Around the same time, the neighborhood free pile on the corner of their street had grown increasingly out of hand, so Drushal decided to solve the problem head on by



PHOTOS BY EMILLY PRADO

Above, a customer checks out the wares at the Alberta Free Hutch, for years a community treasure on Alberta Street. At right, the curators for the hutch, Lydia Grijalva and Joseph Drushal.

building a structure to keep items organized and safe from inevitable rain damage. After gathering the donated materials, designing a layout, and working with a carpenter friend to build it, the Alberta Free Hutch was fully installed and functioning by July 2014.

As it turns out, the set up was only the beginning.

"I didn't consider how much more stuff would come through [and] how much more work it would be on a daily basis," Drushal said. "Living there (made it) really easy to maintain because I would leave the house and fix it up, and come back and fix it up, and everyone there was actively involved too. I didn't think about how much stuff we'd have to recycle or throw away. It was a learning experience from day one: Like OK, now I have to design a recycling program and sorting program. Do I have storage capacity? All of these new questions."

When the lease at Community Supported Everything expired and Grijalva and Drushal moved to the St. John's neighborhood, they simply couldn't handle the twice-daily commutes necessitated by the Free Hutch's upkeep. The pair somberly hung up a simple goodbye poster thanking the community for their support and announcing that their time had come to an end. The community, however, wouldn't accept defeat without a



fight. After all, where else could one snag the complete Lord of the Rings audiobook on cassette or a giant stuffed panda at no cost?

As neighbors and Free Hutch enthusiasts pleaded for Grijalva and Drushal to reconsider, the pair put out a request for volunteers only half-expecting it to work. Almost overnight, nearly a dozen folks offered their time. A year and half later, they have a team of 10, "people in the neighborhood who are committed to coming once a week or more and cleaning up," said Grijalva.

"It makes me so happy," said Grijalva,

"because we almost closed down and didn't exist. But people were like 'No. You cannot do that.'"

Like many nonprofits, the Alberta Free Hutch is creating the infrastructure as they go along. They've since secured a car, which has significantly helped in simplifying the time-consuming recycling process. It was instrumental when a recent major sorting effort allowed them to donate a total of 500 pounds of clothing to local shelters. They're now under the umbrella of The City Repair Project and are working on to secure grants to further support their project.

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