

WASTE NOT

The politics of poverty and waste management

BY HELEN HILL
STAFF WRITER

It was while working with the homeless population in her hometown of Portland that Taylor Cass Talbott started the collaborative series of art exhibits and workshops called "Live Debris," using trash art to highlight the value of waste and the people who survive from its recovery.



PHOTO BY HELEN HILL

"This practice we thought was so ecological (paper recycling) is exploiting cheap labor and weak environmental regulations in other countries. We have to fix our material culture so it isn't dependent on exploitation at every corner."

TAYLOR CASS TALBOTT

The exhibits explore "art committed to understanding the confluence of material culture and social exclusion," said Cass Talbott, who has organized similar events in Washington, Brazil, India, Bhutan, Myanmar, Thailand and Japan.

Cass Talbott manages the capacity development of waste picker organizations for Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing, or WIEGO, an international advocacy group focused on poor working

women. Waste pickers are people who collect household or commercial waste — from bins, dumpsters, landfills, waterways, streets or other areas. They may collect items they need for personal use or that they will resell or repurpose, or they might work in a waste-management capacity, according to WIEGO's definition. What they all have in common is that waste picking is a means of survival that helps them support themselves and their families.

Cass Talbott's work on improving the health and wellbeing of waste pickers in Pune, India, earned her the Rotary International Champion of Peace award in 2017. The program manager for the Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative, she spent a year working for the Indian waste cooperative Solid Waste and Collection Handling, or SWaCH. And her project developing waste reduction systems in Bhutan received a national award for innovative approaches to solid waste management.

Closer to home, she organized and painted murals to beautify and winterize the tiny homes at Dignity Village and has

worked as a medical interpreter at Outside In — she speaks Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, French and some Hindi in addition to English.

Street Roots recently sat down with Cass Talbott to discuss the connection between throw-away materials and the people our culture can also treat as expendable.

Helen Hill: *What brings you back to Portland after your extensive global work?*

Taylor Cass Talbott: I'm networking around the idea of developing a waste picker cooperative here. What I mean by waste picker is anyone who is collecting materials to sell for recycling or consume for themselves. We are talking survival-based collections. It could be anyone who picks materials out of a dumpsite or garbage can all the way to an organized cooperative of informal waste pickers that are contracted by a municipality to collect materials door to door.

H.H.: *What do you mean by informal?*

T.C.T.: The informal economy essentially means economies that are not regulated or protected by the state, but this definition changes with time, especially as countries see a rise in informality. My employer, WIEGO, does a lot of work with the International Labor Organization to update this definition and advance policies and organizations that better protect these workers. Sixty percent of the world's workers are informal, and that number is growing. To understand degrees of informality, it helps to ask: Are you a temp worker? Do you have health care? A contract? A future doing what you are doing? We call it a "gig economy" here in the U.S.

H.H.: *Like Street Roots vendors?*

T.C.T.: Street Roots vendors are absolutely an example of a gig economy.

H.H.: *How would a waste picker cooperative in the Global South compare to one here in Portland?*

T.C.T.: Waste picker cooperatives are gaining attention worldwide, especially in the Global South, where cities that are growing really quickly are not able to collect all the waste produced. At the same time, you have people living in extreme poverty situations who, as a form of living, are collecting materials for recycling. If those workers organize into cooperatives or associations or unions, then they can be contracted to fill the gaps in municipal waste collection.

WASTE PICKER

Waste picker, a less derogatory term than scavenger, was adopted at the First World Conference of Waste Pickers in Colombia in 2008.

GET INVOLVED

Taylor Cass Talbott is organizing collaborative meetings with all waste picking stakeholders in the Portland area. To participate, you can contact her at livedebris@gmail.com.

Visit the websites of these organizations for more information on waste pickers:

WIEGO: www.wiego.org

SWaCH Pune: www.swachcoop.com

Obviously in Portland, we don't have a lot of gaps in municipal waste collection. Probably the city would say we have 100 percent coverage, although I would say we don't have 100 percent coverage because we have a lot of camps of folks without homes who are not receiving waste management services.

In the Global South, you have these really strong economies around collecting and recovering waste materials. And because so much of it exists in the informal sector, you also have scrap dealers or facilities where you can sell materials, whereas here we have deposit depots like bottle drops, but we don't have accessible places where you can go and sell other types of materials.

We also don't have a strong domestic recycling market here so a lot of our materials don't have any value and you can't get any money for them even if there were a depot. Decades ago the U.S. completely rewrote our recycling laws and privatized its waste management and recycling systems so that many materials are not legally available or accessible to people the way they are in other countries.

We don't have a waste management system where the workers themselves are incentivized to actually reduce waste. We also have a waste management industry in the U.S. that is controlled primarily by big wealthy businesses and generally white men. I see this as very concerning because in the West, we tend to push a lot of these infrastructures and models onto so-called developing countries, as though we have figured it out and this is the way they should be operating. Of course these municipalities are happy to have somebody come from another country and say, "Here is our magic fix: Install this incineration facility or mechanize your entire waste collection process," without taking into account the labor and job opportunities that will be lost when you formalize these systems too quickly without integrating informal workers.

H.H.: *Is it hard to go from municipal waste pickup to a waste picker-based informal economy? Might people view that as going backward? What are some of the points of entry for a waste picker cooperative to start organizing and sustaining itself in Portland?*

T.C.T.: I don't necessarily believe in breaking the system and restarting it. I think that what you need to do is look at where needs overlap. There are still a lot of waste management needs in our city, such as providing waste management services to houseless communities and camps. That could be a midrange goal.

Some of our more immediate entry points involve improving segregation and waste management in multifamily housing. That's a really big problem in Portland. Laura Kutner of Trash for Peace does a lot of work around this issue, and we are exploring how a waste picker cooperative might be possible in Portland. I could see it being very much like waste pickers cooperatives in Canada. There is one in Vancouver called The Binners Project. They have contracts where they provide waste segregation services to multifamily-housing facilities. Oftentimes those people who are providing the segregation services actually live in these affordable-housing facilities.

Another entry point would be providing waste management and segregation services at big events, potentially being subcontracted by event managers to provide those services and separate out cans and bottles for deposit, and also be paid for their services. And thinking beyond waste, I could see a cooperative providing zero-waste services like reusable dishware and dishwashing services at events. We have to move past disposables, and I think it's poetic that waste picker cooperatives are so often the ones introducing zero-waste concepts to communities.

H.H.: *We talk a lot about bottles and cans, but Street Roots, as you know, is a weekly newspaper, so I have to ask: What is the fate of recycled newspapers?*



PHOTOS BY BRODIE CASS TALBOTT

Above: Scraps are collected for recycling in Pune, India. Left: SWaCH waste pickers in Pune ask that for safety, sanitary waste (diapers and pads) be wrapped and marked with a red dot, indicating hazardous waste.



often being sent to other countries like Vietnam. They might recycle some portion, but much ends up in open dumps. Ultimately, we are poisoning poor people in those countries. This practice we thought was so ecological is exploiting cheap labor and weak environmental regulations in other countries. We have to fix our material culture so it isn't dependent on exploitation at every corner.

H.H.: *So where does our fiber go?*

T.C.T.: A lot of it is being landfilled. Some of it is being stored with the hope that another outlet will appear. Now we see China opening new paper recycling facilities in Vietnam. People believe the paper market will return in the next couple of years, but it's expensive and pollutive to run paper mills, so I would be surprised to see that market move domestic.

H.H.: *Could you talk more about extended producer responsibility (where original producers are responsible for recovery and recycling)?*

T.C.T.: The bottle bill is a great example of extended producer responsibility. In Oregon, we have the only privately run bottle-bill system in the country. What we've been able to do in Oregon is actually invest in changing the waste recovery system back to what it used to be. Instead of crushing the glass, we are starting an actual bottle reuse system. So there are a lot of opportunities for improving extended producer responsibility and using that as a model for other materials.

T.C.T.: We are at an interesting time in the United States right now because our recycling systems have effectively collapsed. With the shock from China not accepting materials anymore, one of our biggest problems is fiber, which includes newspaper and mixed paper. Because we live near the coast, we had such easy access to ports that took these materials to China. So we closed down a lot of our mills, and now we don't have a lot of local recycling options for these materials. That is a major problem for waste management right now, trying to find markets for fibers and most plastics.

That is another strong motivation for organizing a cooperative of workers from low-income and no-income communities who are invested in the subject of waste; there is a lot of thinking that needs to be done, to try to push more progressive policies.

Our waste materials need to be monetized if we are actually going to reduce them. Also, we need to have extended producer responsibility for all single-use materials, or better yet, we need to have no single-use materials at all.

If you have the participation of the people who rely on the sale and collection of these materials, they will really push these issues forward and will put a human face to the issue of waste, which I feel we have lost here in the U.S.

H.H.: *We sent our paper and cardboard to China? We don't recycle paper here?*

T.C.T.: At one point we processed it here, but a lot of the mills in this area got closed down, in part because of the dioxins going into the river. Even now, so many of the materials we think are being recycled are