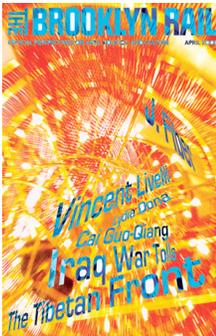


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Food Not Bombs

by Shell Fischer

Fighting a slight breeze, Rob Freeman, Teresa Theophano and Sarah Hanks, all dressed in black, set up a folding table and covered it with hot containers of homemade vegetarian food—steaming split-pea broccoli casserole, vegetable soup, stuffed cornbread and multigrain bread—which they'd schlepped all the way from Ditmas Park via the subway.



Photos by Michael Short.

After taping half a dozen "Food Not Bombs" flyers to the edge of the table (trying unsuccessfully to stop them from fluttering) they used a red Sharpie to draw a small sign that read "Free Food."

Then, for the next several hours, they waited.

Although it was a sunny afternoon, traffic on the sidewalk was light. People passed by with their dogs. A gray-haired gentleman strolled past the group's table at least seven times, but couldn't seem to work up the courage to stop. A few others paused to accept flyers, but passed on the offer of food. A heavy-set man who said he hailed from "Eastern Europe" helped himself to a bowl of vegetable soup, but didn't seem to know what the group was up to, or care.

Scott Cody, a Clinton Hill resident, said he knew exactly what the group was up to, and was shocked to learn that there has never been a Food Not Bombs group in King's County—until now. "I would think it would be a natural fit in Brooklyn," he said.

In Manhattan, a Food Not Bombs group has been serving free vegetarian fare to people in Tompkins Square Park almost every Sunday for the past 15 years. During the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, volunteers from that group were among the first to serve hot meals to rescue workers. According to the movement's website, there are more than 400 grassroots chapters around the world, half of which are active outside of the United States. Late last year, a group was formed in Staten Island.

Ethan Shoshan, 27, the "head chef" and oldest of the 50-member Manhattan group, says volunteers feed between 30 and 100 people in the East Village each week. "There are a lot of homeless people that we've connected with," he said. "They don't completely rely on the food, but they appreciate us being there and make an effort to come out. Then there are



Food Not Bombs will be holding a bake sale to raise money for the new group on Saturday, April 12 at 2 p.m. at the Fort Greene Strategic Neighborhood Action Partnership (SNAP), at 324 Myrtle Avenue.

some low income people who come who have a place to live, and it's nice for them to know of a place to get food when they don't have money." He said some of those people are now also regular volunteers.

Leah Blanchard, another Manhattan organizer, says most of the group's food is donated by Integral Yoga and Perelandra Natural Food Center in Brooklyn Heights, though she says some volunteers "bring in the results of their own particularly fruitful dumpstering expeditions."

"Dumpster diving" is a common practice among Food Not Bombs groups, which sometimes salvage the grub before it hits garbage trucks, closely examine and wash it, then prepare it for public consumption. As much as possible, though, most try to convince groceries, bakeries and markets to donate slightly ripe, bruised, or un-salable vegetarian food that would otherwise go to waste.

On March 22, the free fare provided in Fort Greene Park was purchased and prepared by the Brooklyn volunteers, who are still trying to find local businesses willing to donate provisions, and a church or community center to offer a space where they can prepare it. "I think we'll find alternatives to dumpster diving," Freeman said. "I don't know about the quality of the food, and I don't think we're going to have to."

As the name implies, the movement's premise is that if governments and corporations around the globe spent as much time and energy feeding people as they did on war, no one would go hungry. There is enough food in the world to feed everyone, volunteers say, and much of it is wasted as a direct result of capitalism and war. By sharing free vegetarian food in public places, the movement hopes to call attention to the violence of poverty and homelessness, as well as the violence against the environment inherent in the production of meat.

"This is a violent city in a violent state in a violent country in a violent world," Freeman said. "And in a lot of ways, that violence doesn't just manifest itself in things like war. There are a lot of different forms of violence, and absolutely, poverty and hunger are two of those forms."

Freeman, 32, who has been involved with activist groups since high school, is a Volunteer Coordinator for the HOPE Program, a non-profit organization that helps homeless and poverty-stricken New Yorkers find jobs. According to a 2007 report by the Coalition for the Homeless, there are over 35,000 homeless in the city's shelters, an increase of 11 percent; the number of homeless families in shelters rose by over 17 percent; and the number of homeless children increased by 18 percent to over 14,000.

Theophano, a 32-year-old social worker and holistic health counselor who has colorful tattoos that adorn most of her arms and shoulders, said she learned about Food Not Bombs in the late 1990s while volunteering with Riot Girl New York, a feminist movement that meets at ABC No Rio, a community center for the arts and activism in the Lower East Side, where the New York Food Not Bombs has been meeting and cooking food since 1993.

Several months ago, Theophano and Freeman started talking about forming some sort of activist group in Brooklyn, and agreed that Food Not Bombs seemed to encapsulate much of their shared ideology. "I mean, it seems so ridiculous that anybody should go hungry in this country, let alone in this city, where there is so much to go around," Theophano said.

The movement started in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1980, after a group of friends protesting the nearby Seabrook nuclear power plant began spray-painting anti-war and anti-nuclear slogans on buildings and sidewalks. One of their favorites was "Money For Food, Not For Bombs," which was shortened to "Food Not Bombs."

Soon after, the group chose to put their choice catchphrase into practice, and at a meeting of wealthy bank executives financing nuclear power projects, started handing out free food to a crowd of about 300 homeless people. The action was so successful, the group began doing it on a regular basis, collecting surplus food from grocery stores and preparing it as hot meals.

Today, the movement's mission is hard to pin down, as each autonomous chapter is made up of volunteers networked only by a common desire to cause non-violent social change through direct action. According to Freeman and Theophano, what that change will look like in Brooklyn is open for discussion.

"We want to make sure that people are voicing their needs and getting their basic needs met," Theophano said. "But that can encompass so many different things, and what we really want is for this group to keep shifting and addressing things as they come up, instead of becoming 'we're here to feed people and we're against the war.' We want to make sure that the community is involved and that this becomes a project in which people are looking forward to empowering themselves, not just going along with what we decide."

"Everyone has different issues," Freeman added. "Food Not Bombs in Australia is not going to look like Food Not Bombs in Brooklyn, which is not going to look like Food Not Bombs in Ohio. I would be perfectly happy if, in a year from now, it wasn't even called Food Not Bombs, but something completely different. That would be totally fine."

Shoshan says he expects to lose some of his fellow volunteers to the Brooklyn group, since many reside in the borough, though the vast majority (mostly teenagers and students in their early twenties) commute from New Jersey and Long Island, and even Pennsylvania and Connecticut.



"It's kind of unusual," he said. "You would think that people in New York City would want to be a part of it, but I guess a lot of them tend to be busy with other things."

Theophano says the new group plans to serve free food in Fort Greene Park every Saturday from 3 to 5 p.m. "I think if we become a regular presence in the park, people are going to grow more and more interested in what we do, and hopefully get involved."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shell Fischer, a writer who lives in Park Slope, has recently given up her bicycle.