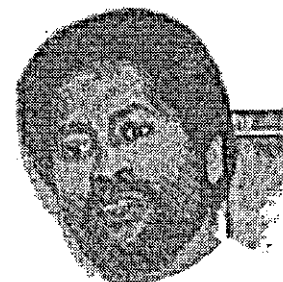


A survivor, a fighter:

RONALD CASANOVA'S STORY



Homeless organizer Ronald Casanova has fought for survival since childhood: out of an orphanage, on the streets, in prison, and in Tompkins Square Park in New York. Inside is his story as told to the People's Tribune.

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A Survivor

This pamphlet was put together in hopes that other people of poverty and homelessness will see that unfortunately the only way I got to where I am (KCMO Union of the Homeless) was to go through everything you will be reading in this pamphlet; I had to go through all of it. It was not a choice. How else could I now fight as hard as I do to (even now) hang on to the little bit we have. Had it not been for all of the above, NYPD and the Parks Department, HUD and the homeless in Tompkins Square Park, I never would have learned the need to fight to survive or realize that poverty was not my way of life.

We (all of us who choose) have another chance to make a difference in our lives. Once I made that choice I've never been hungry again. If I got cold or wet from the weather it was my choice and not the government's. Myself and all who are active in the struggle are better off because of the struggle and the refusal to accept dying in the streets. Life for me and mine in 1992 is getting better, but only because we choose to fight and choose also not to be silent when there is an injustice.

FROM AN ORPHANAGE TO THE STREETS TO PRISON

I started living in the streets of New York when I was eight years old. When I was about three my mother died, and my father wasn't around.

I stayed in an orphanage on and off until I was about 17, but I started running away when I was eight. I stayed in parks and with different people I knew and in the hallways of my friends. I turned myself in to the orphanage for the winter and I came back out in the summer.

I didn't know how to let out my frustration and anger, so I started to perform epileptic seizures. I watched epileptics having seizures and I decided I would do the same thing. I got out a lot of anger, but it was too convincing to me — I wasn't putting on an act anymore.

When I was 16 or 17, I used to deliver groceries for supermarkets, but that wasn't enough for money in the pocket. I started committing burglaries at big appliance stores, and that way I ate most of the time. Finally I was arrested for burglary and I was sent to Cossackie Correctional Institution.

They thought I was an epileptic so they put me in a ward instead of a cell, and they put me on phenobarbital, Dilantin, and Librium. They gave me so much medication that I was constantly in bed sleeping. I wouldn't talk to anybody, so a lot of the guys thought I was antisocial.

They put this correctional officer on the ward and the other inmates used to instigate him into making me do things. One night he came to my bed and told me to start measuring the beds. I was in no shape to deal with him so he slapped me and I hit him with a chair and the guards came and beat me up and threw me in a cell.

While I was in the cell this same officer and his buddy would come by and call me "nigger" and "spade," "spick" and "faggot," on a continuous basis. I couldn't take it no

more and I finally told him to get in the cell with me, and he came in and I hit him with my bowel movements.

They beat me up and poured medicine into my open wounds and it would sting and burn. They put me in a strait-jacket and tied me to the bed with a straight sheet. I was in that bed for maybe two weeks and I had to go to the bathroom in the bed.

BEATEN, DRUGGED, DEHUMANIZED BY NEW YORK STATE!

With me tied to the bed in a straitjacket, they kept sending a psychiatrist to see me. He didn't do anything. I decided the only way I could get out of the straitjacket was to really act insane so they would do things differently, maybe send me to a hospital.

That was a mistake. What they did was put me in shackles and handcuffs and drive me to the Matawan State Hospital for the criminally insane. Going in the door was an experience in itself because just walking in there you got beat up.

I especially remember the cell at Matawan, because after I got out I saw a newspaper article that supposedly showed a cell there with a bed with a spread and a lamp and chairs. This infuriated me because there was no such thing. We had nothing except a torn mattress on the floor and a pot for the bathroom. At Matawan they put all the food in the same bowl; bread, beans, beets and coffee, all in the same thing.

The use of drugs was intensified. I couldn't eat and I was getting weaker and weaker. They put me in a wheelchair to take me to the medical ward instead of the insane ward. Because of my weakness and the overdose of drugs, I couldn't keep my head up. All the way to the ward they kept punching me in the stomach to keep my head up, saying, "Keep it up, keep it up."

Eventually they put me in a bad ward with really sick peo-

ple. One brother used to sit on a chair and go to the bathroom in the chair. Then he would eat it and the security guard wouldn't do anything about it.

The cops then killed a lot of people while I was there. They took one guy and dragged him under the bed and killed him. Another time they killed this dude who was going to get shock treatments. You're not supposed to eat anything before shock treatments, but they made him eat a couple of bowls of cereal and coffee. He refused to go to the treatment, so they took him in the office and stood on his neck and killed him. All this time the doctors were reporting these deaths as heart failures and the families were so naive and scared they didn't check. This is the kind of stuff that went on at Matawan.

CASANOVA WINS BATTLE FOR HIS SANITY IN AN INSANE SYSTEM

When I think about Matawan, I remember the movie "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." It was a good story but it wasn't factual. I watched it and I said to myself, "They are not telling it all."

Once I was reading a book called "Tropic of Cancer," which at the time was banned in the United States. An officer saw me and snatched the book and slapped me. Like a fool I challenged him to a fight and got put in a straitjacket.

At Matawan the guys that were really insane would kill themselves by jumping through the window of the recreation room to the balcony. I used to watch them and I decided to do the same thing — only I had no intention of killing myself. I just wanted to get out of the straitjacket. When I jumped out of the window I did it with a twist and only nicked my neck. This got me out of the straitjacket, but they put me in a padded cell. Even that was preferable to the strait jacket because after a week in the straitjacket, the excruciating pain itself would drive you insane.

I was one of the lucky ones — someone was watching over me. An officer named Mr. Chavez was the head of the ward. When I was in the padded cell he would come over and read to me and talk with me. He would help me keep a sense of reality. Mr. Chavez talked to people about getting me back on the ward. He told them I wasn't crazy, that I just needed to be left alone. He got me back on the ward and he got me a job cleaning up and so on, so I was able to keep my head above water.

I had been at Matawan for two years and ten months. I had two more months left in my sentence, and they had to send me back to Coxsackie Correctional Institution unless they could prove I was insane and had to stay at Matawan. Fortunately there were people at Matawan like Mr. Chavez who thought I wasn't crazy and they were able to get me out of there.

CASANOVA SURVIVES IN NEW YORK CITY

At the time of my release from Matawan and Coxsackie I started going down to Greenwich Village in New York City. I started living with a lady and had two kids with her. At the same time, I was getting introduced to the drug scene.

I had never experienced drugs other than what the doctors gave me. I was very naive, even though I was about 19 years old, because I had never experienced being a kid. So one night I did some dope and I was very proud of myself. I didn't understand exactly what I was doing. For example, once I took some acid that got me so paranoid that I asked someone how to come down off it and was introduced to heroin. I had to support that drug habit, so I did a lot of muggings, and had mugging on my record twice.

I went to jail again in 1971 for armed robbery. Before that I was going to rap sessions at a community called Contact, affil-

iated with the Educational Alliance.

When I went to prison they stuck by me and talked with the parole office so when I got paroled I had a job waiting for me with Educational Alliance as a drug and alcohol counselor paraprofessional.

The parole officer I was seeing was not concerned with me, just with keeping records. He would come to the center with a gun on his side, which made it obvious that he was a parole officer, or he would throw his manila envelope on the table and whoever was there could see my records lying all over. Eventually I just stopped going to the parole officer. I went back to my old pattern from when I was a kid. I'd stay out for a good many years; then I'd get tired of ducking and turn myself in. I finally got fed up with the whole system, and I went back to prison to finish my sentence. I ended up doing three years total but not all at once. I haven't committed a crime since 1975 or 1976, and I have no more time to serve.

The last time I got paroled I had married a woman in Indianapolis. Welfare gave me an apartment there and I was also working for the building as a superintendent and taking care of security. My wife was in the Army and she went over to Germany to an Army base there. The FBI came and got me in Indiana, so I had to come back to New York and do more time, and my wife and I ended up losing each other.

LETTERS TO HIS WIFE TAKE CASANOVA TO WISCONSIN

In Germany this army officer, who was the chaplain's assistant at the base where my wife was stationed, used to get the mail. Finally he decided to answer my letters because my wife wouldn't do it. I started writing directly to him.

His house back in Wisconsin had a basement apartment, and he wrote me that I could come live there. I wrote the dean at the University of Wisconsin and told him who I was,

where I was, and said I would like to be a student there. The dean wrote to the parole officer and said I was accepted. My friend wrote to the parole officer, and so did the prison officers. So I was paroled to attend the University of Wisconsin.

I've done most of my learning on my own. I like to read — even in the joint I did a lot of reading. But nobody in my family had gone to college, which should have told me I wouldn't be able to finish.

Twenty years before my time there, there was a curfew on black people in Elkhorn, Wisconsin. No black people were allowed on the streets after eight o'clock. But I was working with the kids, and most of the kids were favorable toward me so that the town was all right. Then Mr. Reagan made all those budget cuts. Since I was the last one hired I was the first one fired and when I tried to apply for different work in that same area, the prejudice came out all over again so I didn't get any work.

When I came out of jail I still had a lot of abuse to get rid of, and when I lost my job I became a lush. I was beyond reason. So instead of trying to fix things up with the man who was renting to me, I ended up leaving Wisconsin, figuring I would go to Florida or some other warm sunshine state.

'HOME' IN AN ORANGE GROVE ... A SHIPPING CONTAINER!

I went to Florida with another guy and when we got there the oranges were frozen on the trees. I was out of the frying pan and into the fire. I stayed in Florida picking oranges a while, but it got to be real bad. The situation of a laborer

'I was paroled to attend the University of Wisconsin. I've done most of my learning on my own. I like to read—even in the joint I did a lot of reading.'

there picking oranges is deplorable. For places to live what they did was take these big containers and set them in the ground and cut a window and a door and rented it out. There were rats in the ceiling, that kind of thing. That's what I was living in.

One morning I got fed up and remembered I was on parole in New York. The only way to get back to New York without any money was to turn myself in. So I did.

When I got out of prison I ended up going to Camp La Guardia, a shelter for men in Chester, New York. I worked as a ticket puncher and the staff got to know me fairly well. I was there for about a year before I was offered a job as an institutional aide.

When I got off work I'd go back downstairs and paint. It's not that I am antisocial, but I wasn't into partying all the time. I painted the walls and I used to paint T-shirts and greeting cards.

Eventually, I couldn't deal with the pressures and the jealousies. So it was back to New York City and the Bowery Mission and Tompkins Square Park.

CASANOVA PITCHES A TENT IN TOMPKINS SQUARE PARK

After leaving the Bowery Mission I ran across a friend of mine and we ended up pitching a tent in Tompkins Square Park. After a day, a friend of ours pitched a tent next to us. Within a week we had almost ten tents; we called it Tent City.

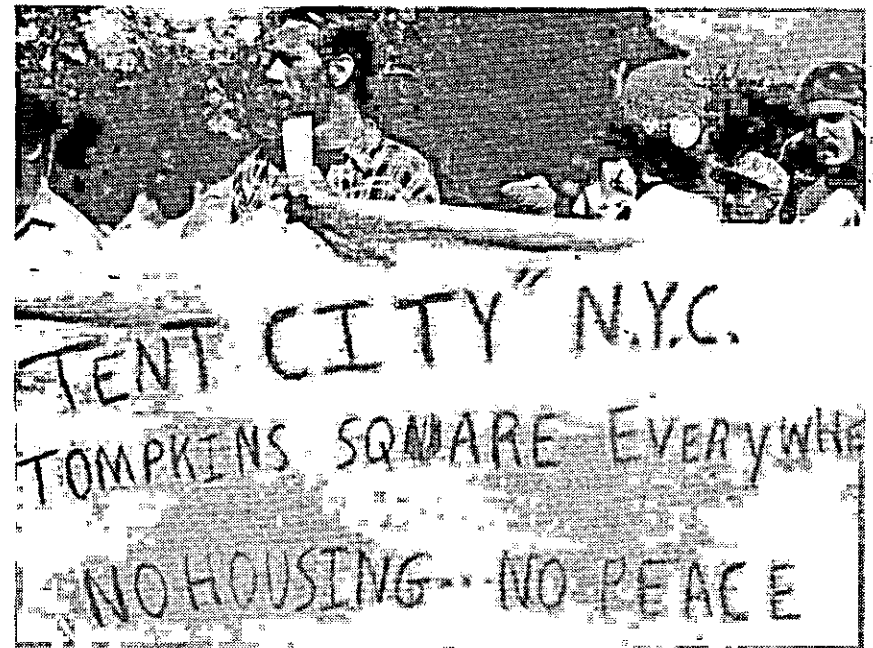
Since 1965 I've done a lot of staying around Tompkins Square Park. My first daughter was born in that area and my kids still live there. My brother died of a drug overdose nearby and my friends froze to death on benches there.

Tent City began as a combination of squatters, anarchists, activists, and homeless people. In the beginning it was fantastic. We had one communal campfire where we fed people

throughout the neighborhood. We got a cook named Artie. People became aware that we were feeding the homeless and anybody was welcome.

One reason we would rather stay in the park than in the shelters is they can't even control feeding people in the shelters. People fight constantly in the lines, jumping the lines, getting stabbed. In Tompkins Square Park we fed people three or four times a day without the incidents you have in the shelters.

People in the neighborhood were becoming involved with the idea of the homeless community. They would get food and put it in the kitchen. People distributed clothes in the park and anybody was free to take the clothing that was hung up on the fences. The neighborhood stores donated



Group from Tompkins Square Park Tent City at the Housing Now! march in 1989 in Washington, D.C.

toothpaste and soap and we distributed it to the people in 'he park.

We had our Tent City community going for quite a while until the cops started harassing us.

THE BATTLE FOR TOMPKINS SQUARE PARK BEGINS

The cops let us create structures all over Tompkins Square Park, knowing they were going to come and destroy everything.

On Saturday, August 5, 1989, they came, hundreds of them, regular police and Parks Department police in riot gear. The skinheads in the area wanted to destroy the tents and chase people out. The cops did nothing to prevent this. When the skinheads started raising hell, instead of the cops trying to calm them down or walk them out, they let it go on and on.

Everybody from the tents was there with sticks and pipes, ready to do business. That's when the cops finally started dispersing the crowd. When the skinheads saw the crowd of homeless people with clubs and bats, they backed off.

But later that evening, Parks Department police came in riot gear. They cleared out the other shacks in the park and then they came to the Tent City area. One police officer said, "If you don't take your stuff and leave, pretty soon we are going to come in and people will get hurt." I wanted to stay where I was, but we were outnumbered by the uniforms and weapons, and I didn't want anybody to get hurt. So we split and went outside the park to the street. Then the real demonstration started.

The cops barricaded all the entrances so nobody could get back into the park. We blocked the streets and started a bonfire in the middle of the block. Some people got arrested and beat up. After about eight hours they decided they'd had

enough of us being in the streets and they let us back into the park.

After that we must have been raided by the cops 10 to 12 times. The first time they tore down our tents. I realized they didn't give a damn about me. When they tore down my tent they were tearing out part of my heart.

Last year was the first time I've gotten involved in anything political. When the cops and the Parks Department started attacking us it made me focus more on what the government is doing to people. I saw that people could be treated any way the government wants them to be treated. I started waking up my consciousness.

CASANOVA MEETS OTHER FIGHTERS FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY

The National Survival Summit in Philadelphia that summer was the first time I saw so many people of poverty together, finally coming to realize they had to do something about their plight themselves. That's what we were doing in Tompkins Square Park. There were no real alternatives. We needed housing and we needed jobs but we had no idea how to get them. And before going to the summit I thought we were alone in these troubles.

At the summit I saw the vitality of the struggle against poverty. There were people from all walks of life, all different organizations. There were Indians and coal miners and welfare rights activists and kids against drugs. We could see other people's struggles and hear their ideas and get a sense of

'When the cops and the Parks Department started attacking us it made me focus more on what the government is doing to people. I started waking up my consciousness'

unity. It gave me more courage knowing that Tompkins Square Park and Tent City were not alone.

When we got to speak at the summit, what impressed people the most was when we said that Tent City was going to build tents out of the American flag. The response to that was tremendous. Little did we know that the flags didn't mean anything to the police because they ended up tearing the tents down and throwing them in the garbage.

When the Housing Now! march came along in October, I did not go on the march because of the organization called Housing Now. I went because of the words themselves. When we went on the march it was a group of people who said, "We are going to Washington and we are going to be heard and we are going to be the ones talking. We are not going there to let somebody else talk for us."

Before the march we had a meeting in New York City of a couple of hundred homeless people. It was the first time I had seen homeless people united. When I saw that so many homeless people were aware that it was time for them to do something about their own plight, it made me more attuned to the fight.

At the meeting, I talked very much against advocates. I said, "We have got to be the ones to make change for ourselves. It's time we stop letting other people talk for us. Nobody but me can tell you why I am homeless or why I need this or if I need that." A lot of homeless people were sitting there shaking their heads in agreement. You could see they were ready for some kind of move to be happening.

When we went on the march from New York City, it wasn't only Tent City, it was Emmaus House and the United Homeless Organization and people from the shelters. A lot of them probably lost their bed space in the shelters and weren't able to get back in, but they felt it was important for them to get out there and speak for themselves.

HOMELESS NEW YORKERS WALK TO WASHINGTON WHILE THE MOVIE STARS COME BY JET

Housing Now! and Community for Creative Non-Violence got a lot of money for the march on Washington and made a lot of promises, but they didn't give those of us marching from New York anything they promised. They said they would provide the New Exodus March rain gear, but what they gave us was big garbage bags we were supposed to wear — and this was while Hurricane Hugo was happening. The shoes they gave us were old worn-down shoes, so people ended up with bloody feet. They promised us hot meals, but most of the time all we had was peanut butter sandwiches.

There were seizures and asthma attacks and people detoxing on the march. There were babies with us. Five women had miscarriages. The organizers told us there would be a mobile medical unit all the way to D.C., but they didn't provide it.

Some of the towns along the way came to our rescue. In Wilmington, Delaware, the mayor was there and they named September 26 as National Homeless Day. After all the misery this told us that people were still hearing us.

On October 7, the day of the big rally in Washington, the organizers had the nerve to introduce Mitch Snyder of the Community for Creative Non-Violence by saying, "If it hadn't been for Mitch Snyder, this march wouldn't have existed." Movie stars were up on the stage talking about the homeless fight. In the background you could hear the homeless people yelling, "The homeless have no TVs, let the homeless speak." We didn't walk all the way to Washington to hear the movie stars. We came to speak for ourselves.

I finally couldn't take watching these movie stars any longer so I went up to the front. At first they weren't going to let me up there to talk but people from the welfare rights

group and the Exodus March were getting ready to tear down the fence so they finally let me speak.

I wasn't up there speaking to the movie stars or the tourists. I was speaking to the Exodus March. The Exodus crowd wore yellow and white hats that read "Exodus." I looked at their hats and said, "No matter what anybody says, you guys have got to pat yourselves on the back. You walked all these miles. You went through all these trials and tribulations so you could be heard. If it were not for you there wouldn't be a movement. Don't let these advocates make you feel that they have done anything because if it were not for you there would be no advocates."

HOUSING SECRETARY JACK KEMP DOES A GOOD CON JOB

It was the day before the rally in Washington and we were determined to take over the HUD (Department of Housing and Urban Development) headquarters building. Our guys were raising hell and chaining themselves to the doors. As a result, myself, Leona Smith from the National Homeless Union and three or four others were able to meet with (HUD Secretary) Jack Kemp for three hours.

Kemp gave us a good con job. He gave us a letter with his commitments and promises, and promised to hold regular meetings, starting the following month, to try to resolve problems with HUD.

But all he did was pacify us because if he had done anything else, it would have been more trouble than he cared to have. Since then Kemp has totally ignored us. Every time we were supposed to have a meeting he's disappeared.

We had a meeting in Washington once with Ron Rosenfield, the financial director of low-income housing at HUD. We asked that the homeless be involved in any plan for housing — that was the important part of Kemp's letter. But Ro-



Casanova and Leona Smith were among those who met with HUD Secretary Jack Kemp in Washington, D.C. during the Housing Now! march.

senfield seemed to feel that it was beneath him even to be in the same room with us. He told us that HUD was in the insurance business and in the business of making money. He ended up leaving the meeting.

When we got back to New York, we met with six local HUD people. They said they had no vacant HUD property in New York and suggested that we talk with city departments.

We brought up Dignity House. They liked the idea of Dignity House, but said they had no housing for that purpose in New York. I even asked them about warehouses or anything

we could renovate ourselves, but they kept pushing us back to the city. I said in the beginning that they would tell us to go to the city and the city would tell us to go to the Feds. We would be doing that for a good number of years if we allowed it.

Anyway, getting some buildings is just the beginning. The next struggle would be to take care of them affordably. That would mean dealing with the minimum wage, which is nowhere near enough to live on. Congress has the nerve to talk about giving themselves a raise while giving us pennies for a minimum wage!

'GET TOGETHER, FIGHT POVERTY!'

I used to have a problem with the word communism. I was taught that a communist is somebody that wants to overthrow the government. But I believe it's time for the government to be overthrown, because this government doesn't work for the people. If that makes me a communist, then a communist I am.

We are coming to a stage where robots are replacing human beings. Bruce Parry, who writes for the *People's Tribune*, gave me the example of car manufacturing. They used to have people bolting these parts together, but now they don't need people. Now they put it on a conveyer belt and the robots do the work. People are becoming obsolete. Even in the Parks Department, people are beginning to realize that they too can lose their jobs. They too can be homeless.

The way things are going, homeless people are going to outnumber even low-income people. A person who is paying rent doesn't own his home, a landlord owns it. Any time the rent goes up and you can't afford it, you are going to get kicked out. So working-class people are going to become homeless themselves. And not everybody is going to accept it the way we have all of our lives.

What is happening now is the start of a revolution. I don't believe all of this passivity is going to work. People are scared out there, and they are getting to the point where they are going to fight. Look at the coal miners' strike or the Greyhound drivers' strike.

People have to stop separating the issues. Everybody has their own reasons for being in the struggle. One group might be fighting for housing and another is fighting for welfare rights, but we have to transfer that energy to fighting poverty rather than saying, my fight is welfare or my fight is housing or drugs. Everything that keeps us in poverty is what we are fighting against. Do you realize what could happen if everybody fought under the banner of Up and Out of Poverty Now? If we all get together under that banner and make it known that everybody is fighting against poverty, the government wouldn't know how to deal with it because they would have to deal with a nationwide movement instead of a lot of different organizations.

The longer we let these people pacify us, the more successful they are going to be in doing what they are planning. They have no intention of doing anything for the homeless and the victims of poverty. If we want to get anything done, we are the ones who will have to get out there and initiate it.

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