This Land Is Our Land
Non-violent direct action is keeping people in their homes

By Z!

"My name is Ashley, and me and my four children live in a Bank of America-foreclosed home," declared Ashley Gray over a security guard’s threat of arrest. “If we didn’t live there, we would be homeless.”

Ashley and 15 other homeless and formerly homeless activists, sporting “Take Back the Land” t-shirts and holding a “Bad for America” banner, had just marched into the Madison, Wisconsin, corporate office of Bank of America. They wanted to meet with the bank’s local director.

The group refused to retreat, even when a security guard and other bank employees told them to leave and threatened to call the police. Rather, they loudly read their personal stories of how the bank had unjustly foreclosed on their homes. They made a passionate demand: “I want Bank of America to turn the house over to the community for affordable housing,” said Ashley.

Ashley, along with six other adults and seven children, currently live in a liberate six-bedroom duplex, foreclosed on and owned by Bank of America. By living there for the past nine months, they are engaging in a courageous act of civil disobedience.

Housing as a Human Right
“Housing is a human right—fight, fight! That’s what Operation Welcome Home members chanted as they walked out of the Bank of America lobby after a dignified direct action for community control over land. They were joined by Take Back the Land-Madison, an ally organization connected to groups across the country using direct action to keep people in their homes and liberate empty buildings.

March 15 was a national day of action against Bank of America. Across the country, Operation Welcome Home and other groups targeted the bank with creative, nonviolent actions, from moving furniture into bank lobbies because their homes had been foreclosed to conducting mock foreclosures of the bank itself.

In Madison, the tenants participating in the various actions and living in the liberated building with Ashley are part of a growing movement to highlight the nation’s foreclosure-housing-homeless crisis. Her building is a six-bedroom duplex, and over the past nine months 18 formerly homeless residents have found a home in the apartment for various lengths of time. Some saved up money by doing so and have moved out; others now live with friends. Currently, six adults and four children live in the duplex. They are working, saving money, taking GED tests, participating in a women’s empowerment group, and organizing for housing to be a human right.

Take Back the Land Madison and Operation Welcome Home aren’t just trying to stop the evictions. They are looking for a long-term solution and demanding that the current residents of this liberated duplex not only be allowed to stay, but that the bank turn over the house to the local community land trust so it can provide much-needed affordable housing.

Additional demands include a mora-

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torium on Bank of America foreclosures in Madison, the transfer of other vacant foreclosed homes to community land trusts for affordable housing, and for Tina Osuocha, another Madison resident and victim of the foreclosure crisis, to be allowed to stay in her home of 14 years.

Tina, facing foreclosure by Bank of America, added her voice at the protest: "I am a victim of predatory lending," she said. "I want Bank of America to turn the house over to me, because I have already paid for the house and I have [a] 12% interest [mortgage]."

Tina is not asking for something for nothing. She has already paid Bank of America more than two times what her home is worth, yet she still owes them that same amount. Although this might seem unimaginable, she is part of a significant percentage of the population, especially in black and brown communities, tricked into signing loans at such high rates of interest that they could never pay them off. Indeed, since her husband died 10 years ago, Tina has struggled in the poor economy to find a job and stay afloat financially.

"Yes, I own a house that Bank of America is trying to foreclose on," Tina said in a video message to the bank. "But I'm not leaving my house. I'm going to be in that house, do you hear me?"

Community, Solidarity

Beginning last fall, Take Back the Land-Madison and Operation Welcome Home have knocked on doors in Tina's neighborhood. Many people have responded by signing up in support, saying they would stand by Tina and others facing foreclosure. They would rather have people living in each home in the neighborhood than seeing buildings sit vacant on their streets. The two organizations have received a similar response everywhere. Their members and residents brought flowers, cookies and "Housing Is a Human Right Zone" window signs to the duplex, while educating homeowners and renters about the foreclosure crisis and the homeless crisis, and asking for their support to make housing a human right.

Tina, the other residents of the building, the community, Take Back the Land-Madison and Operation Welcome Home are prepared to defend any attempt at eviction of either home through civil disobedience. This resistance has helped Tina avoid foreclosure by negotiating with the bank, but so far she only has a temporary agreement. Everyone is prepared for the worst.

Housing organizations across the country, including Take Back the Land, Occupy and other grassroots social justice groups, have used a variety of direct action tactics to stop evictions from foreclosure. Whether it is infiltrating a bank shareholder's meeting to demand (and receive) a meeting with the CEO, "Mic-checking" the auction of a home to stop the process, barricading and being arrested at the time of a sheriff's eviction, or moving back into a home after

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A group of Operation Welcome Home and Take Back the Land-Madison activists in front of a liberated home after canvassing the neighborhood.
being kicked out, direct action has been a key tool in fighting the foreclosure and housing crisis.

Take Back the Land Madison and Operation Welcome Home are now working with the Madison Area Community Land Trust and Madison Community Cooperative to develop a plan for turning vacant, foreclosed homes over to the community. Bank of America has been forced to be part of similar redevelopment efforts in other cities, including Detroit, Chicago and Cleveland. This plan is connected to a national settlement forcing them to reduce the principal on certain mortgages and work to enable homeowners facing foreclosure to stay their homes. In Madison, the organizing of Take Back the Land-Madison, Operation Welcome Home, and other local housing and homeless efforts—including Occupy Madison—also forced the mayor’s office to consider this option.

A movement of the people most affected

Alix, the first resident to move into the liberated foreclosed duplex back in August 2011, became homeless a few years earlier when her parents kicked her out at age 17 for her sexuality. She is now an organizer with Take Back the Land-Madison and an advocate for community control over land.

The benefit of moving into a foreclosed home, Alix explains, is that it has given her a chance not only to make it through the day-to-day trials of being homeless, but also to get her thoughts together. It has enabled her to look into the future, set goals and get her life on track. “Finally, I had a safe place where I could lay my head at night,” she says. “It seems like it’s not a big deal, but it affects your whole life and your whole well being.”

She too would like to see the house turned over to the community land trust and thinks community control of land will strengthen our communities. “If communities control their own land, they are better able to hold themselves and everyone in that neighborhood and on that land accountable. I think it creates a better community; a healthier community.”

As part of the organizing to make sure that all people have a place to call home, Alix also believes that formerly homeless people like herself can often provide the best services to other homeless people. After all, they have been in their shoes. Her hope is that more affordable and transitional housing can be created using the model of Take Back the Land-Madison and Operation Welcome Home—a model where homeless people are leaders and mutual support agents lift one another up. Then, they can become powerful advocates for recognizing housing as a human right.

As more and more people are unconscionably ripped from their homes, more and more people like Ashley, Tina, and Alix are fighting back. The struggle for justice from corporations like Bank of America for the way they have treated communities across the country continues. Groups like Take Back the Land Madison and Operation Welcome Home hold tight to high visions of what is possible in this moment of unrest and transformation.

Desiree Wilson, a former resident of a liberated foreclosed home in Madison, put the experience of liberating her home into perfect context: “this is helping me right now, but it is bigger than me. This is about a movement to end homelessness.”

Z! is an organizer with Operation Welcome Home, a RESIST multi-year grantee based in Madison, Wisconsin working to address the root causes of homelessness, elevate housing to a human right, and gain community control over land. OWH is a close partner organization with Take Back the Land.
Civil Disobedience:
Not Only a Tactic, but a Way of Life
Arise for Social Justice on their history of civil disobedience

By Michaelann Bewsee

Most of the time, poor people will go out of our way to avoid the police and any occasions that might lead to our arrest, because like dominoes standing in a row, an arrest can lead to the toppling of our precariously balanced lives.

Most poor people are forced by necessity to commit civil disobedience. We crowd extra people into our apartments, trade some of our food stamps for gas for our cars when we have them, drive cars without insurance and put our utilities in other people’s names so we don’t live in the dark.

And as more and more of our behavior is criminalized, like the laws that forbid sitting or lying on public property, we find we break even more laws, because we really are living under the occupation of capitalism, where poverty is a crime.

And the only answer to that is civil disobedience.

Arise-ing for social Justice

For the past twenty-five years, demonstrations, pickets, non-violent direct action, and more recently civil disobedience, is how we have made our lives visible to the community. It is how we have put pressure on the powerful to, at the very least, acknowledge our demands for social justice.

• 1990: Going on the offensive took time to develop. In our early years, we developed the idea of the picket line, picketing the welfare office and the Department of Social Services for their removal of children from poor families. With other poor people’s organizations across the state — and sadly, most of them don’t exist anymore — we would pack the State House, carrying cardboard coffins to illustrate the effect of budget cuts on our families. In 1990, one of our members, after showing ID at the State House, was picked up on an old warrant and spent the next five years in jail. We learned to talk to people before they put themselves at risk of arrest.

• 2001: We got our first taste of organized civil disobedience when we joined with peace groups to try to stop the Iraq War. We formed an affinity group called Arise Arachnids. Armed with yarn and hula hoops, we showed our anti-war strength by forming a massive “web” and shut down intersections throughout the city. Over 100 people were arrested.

• 2003: The city of Springfield forced the closing of one of the few homeless shelters in the city. Sitting around the table in our office with a dozen homeless people who had been forced to leave the shelter the night before, we came up with the idea of a sanctuary. We scrounged up camping equipment and set up tents on the lawn of St. Michael’s Cathedral. By the end of the week, more than forty tents dotted the lawn, as people who had been sleeping on the riverbank moved up to “Sanctuary City” for safety and solidarity. In the face of intense pressure from the city and the church, we held our ground for six months, into a chilly November, until the shelter finally reopened. The city learned that it had to take homelessness seriously and it hired a coordinator to help people find affordable housing.

• 2004: Springfield had the 11th highest HIV/AIDS infection rate in the country. We led a campaign to get a needle exchange program approved as a pilot project after Massachusetts authorized twelve such programs. When our cowardly city council backed out of its agreement, we did what we had to do — we hosted our own needle exchange program. We distributed on the streets and out of our office. Our exchange was one of the best known secrets in the city; sometimes police officers would bring women to Arise, saying that the women needed to look through our second-hand clothes, have a bowl of warm soup, and take advantage of whatever else we could offer them. We operated for a year, until a hotline tip that could not be ignored brought the police to our doors with battering rams (we just opened the door for them instead). Charges against two of our members were eventually dropped in exchange for our agreement not to do it again. Around the same time, a statewide campaign to allow needles to be purchased from a pharmacy succeeded, and the need for an underground exchange diminished, or I’m not sure what we would have chosen to do.

• 2009: Our Peace and Anti-Violence organizer, Ellen Graves, is a member of the Shut it Down affinity group, working to close the nuclear power plant in Vernon, Vermont which is less than 60 miles north of our office. In the last three years, Shut It Down members have been arrested numerous times in blockades of the plant, most
recently this month.

- **2010**: For the last three years we’ve been fighting to keep a biomass incinerator from being built in our poor beleaguered city, which has twice the asthma rate as the rest of Massachusetts. We’ve mobilized public opinion, moved city council from approval of the project to disapproval, and appealed every state-issued permit—but we’ve also turned out huge numbers for rallies, picketed the governor’s office taken over the city clerk’s office. We’ve already agreed to chain ourselves to the entrance to the plant if all else fails.

- **2011**: Sometimes we act in solidarity with other organizations to stand up for our rights. Three of our members participated in an anti-foreclosure campaign organized by Springfield No One Leaves (a new RESIST grantee) and occupied a Bank of America last November.

- **Today**: On June 1, 2011, Springfield was hit by a tornado that damaged or destroyed many single family homes and rental housing. Two of the most heavily damaged neighborhoods also have the highest concentration of renters and poor people. Some of us knew, almost immediately, that the city would use rebuilding as an excuse to move those neighborhoods towards a more ‘mixed income’ approach. This would be acceptable to us if affordable housing were to be developed elsewhere. But we knew that wasn’t going to happen.

Many of us attended the “listening sessions” held by Concordia (the same group hired to “rebuild” New Orleans after the hurricane) in affected neighborhoods, but, unsurprisingly, our voices and concerns did not make it into the final plan, which has been granted legitimacy by Mayor Sarno.

One hundred of us marched on the Mayor’s office and presented him with a letter outlining our concerns about the rebuilding process and making only one demand: we wanted him to create a housing task force that consisted of at least 50 percent low and moderate income people.

Smaller groups of us occupied the hallway outside the Mayor’s office several times after that, bringing oriental rugs, camp chairs, art for the walls, kazoos and food.

This has been a bad year (are there any good years?) for poor people. We’ve been trying to fight off changes in the state budget proposed by Governor Patrick that will limit access to shelter even more than it is already, where three out of four families are denied shelter. You’d think that shelter providers would be our allies, but seeing as the shelters will stay full no matter how many are turned away, they have remained quiet during this crisis. We’ve been flyering and demonstrating at the welfare offices. If and when the changes go into effect, we intend to accompany those families denied shelter to Governor Patrick’s Western Massachusetts office in Springfield. Perhaps the Governor can find room for these families in his office.

June 1 marked the one year anniversary of Springfield’s tornado. Forty of us lined both sides of a church entrance where the Mayor was sponsoring an interfaith service. We carried signs saying, “What about us?” and “Left out of the plan.” Not only do we want our voices to be heard, we want action. What we will do in the months to come is not fully decided. We know we won’t give up. And we know we will need to become even more visible and more vocal than ever. But our lives are at stake, and that makes us bold.

We have nothing to lose.

**Michaelann Bewsee is the director of Arise for Social Justice, a low-income rights organization run by and for poor people based in Springfield, Massachusetts and a RESIST multi-year grantee.**
Dispatches of Disobedience
The timeless tactic is roaring back with vengeance

By Saif Rahman

During the time this edition of Newsletter had been conceived, written and edited, the world has changed.

It has changed because activists in Minnesota decided to defend homes which were unjustly foreclosed by locking themselves together and blocking the entrances to prevent evictions. It has changed because in West Virginia, pro-mountain activists boarded and locked themselves to a barge with a banner saying “Coal leaves, cancer stays.” Then there were the activists in northern California who took over, occupied, and started a farm on the “last acres of class one soil left in the East Bay” which was about to be sold to private developers. In Chicago at the NATO Summit, Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans threw their medals onto the streets near the summit. And in President Obama’s reelection offices across the country, young undocumented immigrants, known as “DREAMers”, bravely staged sit-ins to protest and prevent deportations.

Howard Zinn once said, “Civil disobedience is not our problem. Our problem is civil obedience. Our problem is that people all over the world have obeyed the dictates of leaders…and millions have been killed because of this obedience…Our problem is?

Civil disobedience is not our problem. Our problem is civil obedience. Our problem is that people all over the world have obeyed the dictates of leaders…and millions have been killed because of this obedience…Our problem is that people are obedient all over the world in the face of poverty and starvation and stupidity, and war, and cruelty. Our problem is that people are obedient while the jails are full of petty thieves…(and) the grand thieves are running the country. That’s our problem.” - Howard Zinn

Our grantees and allies refuse to be obedient. They refuse to be obedient while crooked banks are taking away homes from innocent people. They refuse to do nothing while giant corporations steal, mine, and poison their backyards. They refuse to stand idly by when military recruiters prey on poor neighborhoods and lie about the benefits of military service.

History tells us that all successful social movements have used nonviolent civil disobedience and direct action. In 1967, RESIST was born to support those who broke the law and refused to fight in the Vietnam War. The tactic is so much a part of us that it is reflected in our name and our founding document, A “Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority.” Forty-five years later, we are seeing grassroots groups organizing acts of civil disobedience all around us. That is why this edition of the Newsletter is dedicated to sharing the stories of groups engaging in this timeless tactic.

And though we understand times change, Mario Savio’s famous speech in 1964 reminds us that, “There comes a time when the operation of the machine becomes so obnoxious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can’t take part, you can’t even passively take part, and you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon all the apparatus, and you’ve got to make it stop. And you’ve got to indicate to the people who run it, the people who own it, that unless you’re free the machine will be prevented from working at all.”

Once again we find ourselves at a pivotal time and the grassroots groups who are courageously putting their bodies on the line are the ones at the forefront of a reinvigorated movement for freedom, justice and peace.

And quite simply, we thank each and every one of them.

Saif Rahman is the director of communications at RESIST and the editor of the Newsletter.
Continuing the Legacy of Nonviolent Civil Disobedience in the South

Since their founding in 1997, the multi-racial, grassroots organization Urban EpiCenter in Nashville-Davidson County, Tennessee, has trained and taught countless activists on the history and principles of nonviolent direct action in the United States. In April, they hosted a “99% Spring” event where more than 40 people were in attendance, many of whom were Nashville “occupiers,” community organizers, and labor union members.

Urban EpiCenter is heavily influenced by one of the architects of nonviolent civil disobedience, Reverend James Lawson. They focus not only applying nonviolent civil disobedience as a way for indigenous activists, poor, and working-class people to ignite grassroots movements, but also as a principled way of being in every dimension of one’s life.

They conduct monthly nonviolence workshops around the state and are looking to expand to throughout the South.

Support grassroots social justice organizing today.

Your contribution to RESIST supports hundreds of progressive groups across the country. Please send what you can, as often as you can. The groups we fund count on us, and we count on you.

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Donations are tax-deductible.
RESIST awards grants six times a year to groups across the United States who are organizing for social, economic and environmental justice. Below we list a few grant recipients from our most recent allocation cycle in June of 2012.

For more information, visit the RESIST website at www.resistinc.org

Center for Artistic Revolution
P.O. Box 2300, North Little Rock, Arkansas 72114
www.artisticrevolution.org

Started by activist-artists, CAR’s work is multi-issued with a primary focus on LGBTQ rights, opposing anti-immigrant sentiment/supporting immigrant communities and safer schools.

RESIST’s grant of $4,000 will enable CAR to continue providing peer support and a resource network, but also increase work with the transgendered and gender variant community, create and hold trainings for safer schools, and hold a statewide LGBTQ Summit.

NARAL Pro-Choice Texas
P.O. Box 684602, Austin, Texas 78768
www.prochoicetexas.org

NPCT believes that reproductive freedom is inextricably linked to all other social justice issues, including poverty, environmental justice, immigrant rights and transphobia and that access to the full range of reproductive health choices is a basic human right.

A RESIST multi-year grant of $4,000 will help NPCT ensure that women have the right to a full range of reproductive choices, including preventing unintended pregnancy, bearing healthy children and choosing legal abortion.

Organized and United for Respect at Vanderbilt
1901 Lindel Avenue, Nashville, Tennessee 37203
www.OURVandy.org

OUR Vanderbilt was formed by a diverse group of workers, students, alumni, faculty and community members. Vanderbilt workers have been fighting for better wages and working conditions through direct actions and have set up an “occupy Vanderbilt” encampment in front of the central administration building.

A RESIST’s grant of $4,000 will allow OUR Vanderbilt to continue building relationships with workers, students and allies.

Trans Youth Support Network
P.O. Box 7625, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55407
www.transyouthsupportnetwork.org

In 2004, TYSN grew out of community responses to violence against young transgender women of color in Minneapolis. In the past several months, TYSN has refocused its energies to work on building a powerful liberation movement led by transgender youth, especially young transgender women of color.

A $4,000 grant from RESIST will support TYSN as they promote racial, social and economic justice for trans youth, with the freedom to self-define gender identity and expression.