

DAILY NEWS

Pass the praise, please

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Give thanks - and a hearty round of applause - to New York's unruly, unsung corps of poorly paid, never-say-die activists.

They are the hot pepper in our civic stew, the tart ingredient that brings the meal together.

Here are a few of my favorites:

I first met South Bronx activist **Omar Freilla** about 10 years ago when he was an organizer at the NYC Environmental Justice Alliance, a coalition of community-based green groups. After a journeyman stint working with **Majora Carter** (a civic jewel in her own right), Freilla has launched Green Worker Cooperatives (www.greenworker.coop), an ambitious effort to create worker-owned companies that reuse or recycle some of our city's mountains of waste.

Drug-abuse counselor **Melvin Blackman** got tired of trying to treat hundreds of addicted men and women one at a time, and penned a punchy, self-published book called "Urban Suicide: The Enemy We Choose Not to See" that reads like a blunt, street-smart version of Bill Cosby's take on dysfunctional behavior in black communities.

Blackman uses the book as the basis for brutally frank talks with jail and prison inmates about the habits that landed them behind bars. Blackman's Web page is at www.urbandrugrecovery.com.

Ten years ago, when a kid in my neighborhood was killed in gang violence - and it turned out he had no family to bury him or even say a word at his wake - one of the few people to step forward with a Bible verse and an offer to help pay for a burial was **James Caldwell**, who soon after was elected president of the 77th Precinct Community Council.

Caldwell continues to lead a long, difficult fight against street violence in Crown Heights - he recently co-sponsored an anti-violence rally - and works on the root causes of poverty and joblessness as co-founder and president of Brooklyn United for Innovative Local Development, a group dedicated to making sure locals get a fair share of the jobs at the Atlantic Yards project, www.buildbrooklyn.org.

On a recent visit to a troubled housing development in East Harlem, I met **Agnes Rivera** of the Wagner Houses, a grandmother who landed in the projects while fleeing domestic violence. Rivera, although grateful for finding safety at a critical time, has become a fighter for better conditions, working with Community Voices Heard, an advocacy group, to put pressure on elected officials to fix what's wrong with public housing.

Jean Halloran of Consumers Union is leading the local push against companies that are - even after the recall of 25 million toys - selling children's products tainted with lead paint. Tomorrow at 10 a.m., in fact, Halloran is leading a hardy band of consumer-rights activists to Herald Square, where they will hand out information to shoppers about how to spot dangerous toys - and put pressure on retailers to quit selling the stuff (www.notinmycart.org).

At a time when New York's tradition of not making fine distinctions between legal and illegal immigration is under attack, **Chung-Wha Hong**, executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition, has her work cut out for her. Hong seems to be more than up to the task, representing the city's many immigrants with dignity, savvy and dry wit (www.thenyic.org).

As long as New York needs creative, determined people to push the press, the pols and the powerful to do the right thing, these folks will have plenty to do. We may not always like to hear what they have to say, but they are much-needed voices in the urban chorus, fighting against long odds to make the city better.

And for that, I say to all of them: Thank You.

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