

Buy Nothing Day

Consume Less, Share More

Greg Gerritt

Fifteen years ago a few members of the Green Party were having a discussion in the basement of the Rochambeau library on Hope Street in Providence. We wanted to do something to commemorate Buy Nothing Day (BND), an event created by Ad busters to deconstruct consumerism on the day after Thanksgiving, traditionally the biggest shopping day of the year, and the day retailers figure out if they are going to make any money for the year—Black Friday.

We maintained no illusion that we would stop consumerism, though we would love to, but we wanted to do a different kind of commemoration. We wanted something that would draw clear attention to the message of how destructive consumerism is to communities and our planet, but we did not want just another protest. We needed something community affirming, so we decided to collect winter coats in a public place near the mall (or rather where they were going to build the mall) and give them away to everyone who wanted or needed them. We thought of it as transferring winter coats from those who had maybe more than enough to those in the community who did not have enough and therefore called it the Buy Nothing Day Winter Coat Exchange. If you follow the recycling hierarchy, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, we were somewhere in the reuse category while asking for everyone to reduce.

BND began with a minimum of publicity, one press release, one person calling talk radio and a few flyers. On the Friday after Thanksgiving in 1997 about 10 community activists, advocates for the homeless, and passerbys put a plastic sheet on the ground where GTech is now, collected approximately 250 coats, and gave them all away. We all agreed it was a good day, but there was no thought of doing it again.

In the fall of 1998 we began to think about doing it again. I tried to find someone to lead the project, but it ended up back in my lap. With even less effort and preparation we collected about 500 coats on the brick patio on the city side of the state house grounds, next to where the mall was being built. This time it was obvious that I was going to have to organize it again, and it became a permanent part of the Rhode Island calendar. We only move from the state-house lawn in wet weather, at which point we set up in the Cathedral of St John's on North Main Street.

In the 15 years since it began, it has become among the most amazing things I have ever been a part of. Year by year its reach expands, friends bring the idea to their community, people hear about it on the internet and start

their own. For myself and the other gnome that provides the impetus and spirit to pull it together, Phil Edmonds, it is an event that is nearly the perfect conjunction of activism, community and message. Yearly we write essays that are widely broadcast about the relationship between poverty and ecological destruction, about war and violence that leads to poverty while enriching the arms merchants, about greed and how it is insane that in the richest country on the planet people have no place to live, nowhere to be warm and safe in the New England winter. About how inequality is in and of itself one of the drivers of ecological destruction. People still find a way to collect and bring winter coats to the event. We have found a way to affirm community—it puts winter coats into the parts of the community that need resources, while at the same time presenting the radical message that you must take care of the community and ecosystem simultaneously to solve problems.

It happens that winter coats are one of the easier things to collect. Only people who spend a lot of time outside and do physical labor wear out winter coats quickly. The average adult should only need to purchase one winter coat for each of the specific types of winter weather we experience and mix and match with layers. Clothing like this lasts 20 years, but coats are often replaced well before it. People buy new



People gather on the lawn of the state house for the Buy Nothing Day coat exchange.
Photo: Meg Kerr.

coats because styles change. Or grandma passed away and she would have liked her coat to go to someone who could really use it. This is America and retail therapy is prescribed for whatever ails us. Go shopping to prove that what ever travails befall our communities, shopping is the American way. Result: Peoples' wardrobes are way too full. We give people an interesting place to take it, a way to remember community values amidst the chaos of late fall and an opportunity to clean out their closet for the next thing they do not really need.

It is hard to describe the event. My home on BND is the Providence event, which in some ways is still the lead event in Rhode Island. The Providence event collects enough winter coats, nearly all in the 5 hours we are on site, to provide coats for hundreds of people walking in and still send three community agencies that further distribute coats to homes at the end of the day with a full van. The project collects about 60 volunteers each year, many long time participants, many first timers. People come for coats and stay to help. One of the mainstays each year is the men from the Minority Alcohol Program (MAP). The event blurs lines in the community so that sometimes it is hard to distinguish the people streaming in with coats they collected in the community, from the volunteers, and from the people who come to get coats for their families and themselves. It is a fast-paced crazy day. My favorite job is meeting the cars and walkers bringing coats to the event and taking the coats to those who get them up on hangers. One hard issue is that sometimes small business people come seeking to stock up on things they can sell. If it is egregious, we try to stop it, but on a small scale, it is another way of getting resources into the communities that need more resources, and a little commerce on the streets is a good thing. Some of the volunteers who live on the edge economically self-police the policy of "for your family or community" and those of us more privileged try to stay out of it.

Over the years the volunteers have tweaked the setup so that coats are moved efficiently and those putting the coats on hangers and racks have a bit of room to do their work. The racks have also been much improved, with a substantial set of racks that go up and break down with a minimum of fuss.

In Rhode island, all of the other sites are inside and some are much more low key. Pawtucket is set up in the Blackstone Valley Visitors Center on Main St. They collect coats for a month at drop off sites all over the community and give away much fewer coats the day of BND and many more through local agencies. Arthur Plitt has built an incredible network in Pawtucket for the event. St. Paul's in Newport gives away very few coats on BND, but keep what remains to have available all winter for folks coming to their soup kitchen. In Wakefield, in two short hours they collect

hundreds of coats, and complete the exchange in the Rhode Island community by bringing them from the suburbs to the city for distribution.

Ted Loebenberg, formerly of East Providence, became involved in the coat exchange 1998, and helped grow the event for several years. When he moved to Kentucky he brought the project with him, and as of 2011, Kentucky had 5 sites scattered around the state. A friend in Utah has been running an event for several years, and last year folks in Oregon began collecting and distributing coats after seeing it on the web. There are rumors of sites popping up in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. It has gone viral but everywhere twines its roots in the community.

No one really knows how much clothing ends up in the landfill each year, but it is a considerable amount. Both the clothes made of real materials and those created from petroleum create greenhouse gases in the landfill and take up considerable space. Better to give them a new home and to keep someone warm. We, the hundreds of people who put on winter coat exchanges in all of their various forms around the world, do just that and build community.

I doubt without my work on the Buy Nothing Day Winter Coat Exchange that I would so fully understand the relationship between ecological destruction and poverty, between ecological healing and prosperous communities. I doubt that the slogan of my consulting practice would be "You can not heal ecosystems without ending poverty, you can not end poverty without healing ecosystems" if not for my work with Buy Nothing Day. May it go on until we have a verdant planet with peace, justice and prosperity and no longer need it.

~Greg Gerritt works for the Environment Council of Rhode Island and is coordinator of Buy Nothing Day.



Hundreds of coats are donated for those in need. Photo: Meg Kerr.