

**Anything But Helpless**  
**By FRED MAYER**  
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In this day and age, it is not uncommon to witness crises, but what happens when that tragedy is our own? Seven years ago, a group of women gathered together in the basement of a church in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia to confront their demons, to turn crisis into opportunity.

It started with one common question: How can we raise our children in this unforgiving environment? Amid the abandoned, dilapidated, former centers of industry at “C” and Indiana streets where they lived, welfare and drug dealing were the two main sources of income.

Cheri Honkala was one of these women, a woman whose divorce left her destitute and seeking help, though in actuality she was anything but helpless.

As a single mother, without a job and the resources to pursue further education, she vowed to devote her time to raising her son in an environment that appreciated and recognized the dignity of the low-income, unemployed and homeless residents in her area. She was determined to help not only herself but those around her meet the basic needs of shelter, clothing and food at a time when these things aren’t guaranteed.

From her determination, and the unity of those seven women, the Kensington Welfare Rights Union was born. The organization now is affiliated with the National Welfare Rights Union, which Ms. Honkala co-chairs.

“We began organizing primarily for issues that impacted on children — fighting for a community center in the area, those kinds of things,” says Ms. Honkala. “People call here and they don’t know how they are going to pay their rent.... We receive no money from the city, state or the federal government, so we have to be incredibly creative!”

That creativity has led to actions called Projects of Survival, which provide for people’s immediate needs. At first, the union served only the local Philadelphia community but now works statewide. “So we do things like take over abandoned houses and move homeless families into them. We identify where there is surplus food and do major food distribution,” Ms. Honkala says.

The organization also has a Free Store, where people in need can pick up clothes and furniture, and a Human Rights House, where homeless families can live while learning about their rights and the workings of the government. They’ve also secured 450 properties for families who, by conventional standards, would have had to wait at least 10 years on a list for affordable housing.

Although its approach may seem unorthodox, the union has won the respect of community groups, social service professionals, legislators and public officials. In fact, many social workers refer people to Ms. Honkala out of what she terms “a moral choice,” since it is against municipal government regulations to do so. Even representatives from other countries, such as Argentina, have expressed interest in forming a similar community movement, she said.

In the end, Cheri Honkala makes no apologies for the sometimes extreme lengths the movement will go to, as in the case of abandoned housing “take-overs,” which involve homes owned by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. After all, she reasons, the purpose of government should be to serve people.

“We break the law,” she said, “but I believe there is a higher law — humanity.”

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