

Hightower discovers genuine heroes across our country

Swim against the current folks! (Even a dead fish can go with the flow)

SUSAN DEMARCO AND I WANT TO GIVE YOU LOWDOWNERS A SPECIAL PREVIEW of our new book, for it personalizes the positive grassroots message that the *Lowdown* keeps hammering. Titled *Swim Against The Current: Even A Dead Fish Can Go With The Flow*, our book encourages people to break away from conventional wisdom and live their progressive values. We've written it by telling stories of more than 50 individuals and groups all across the country that are showing the way for all of us.

These are commonsense people who are choosing to buck the system and make their escape from the given order in such areas as business, politics, health care, food, banking, and religion. None are Einsteins, heirs to Rockefeller fortunes, or people who just got lucky. They're regular Americans who've decided to exit the corporate interstate, define success for themselves, and do exactly what the established powers want you to believe can't be done—forge new paths toward richer lives, happiness... and a better world.

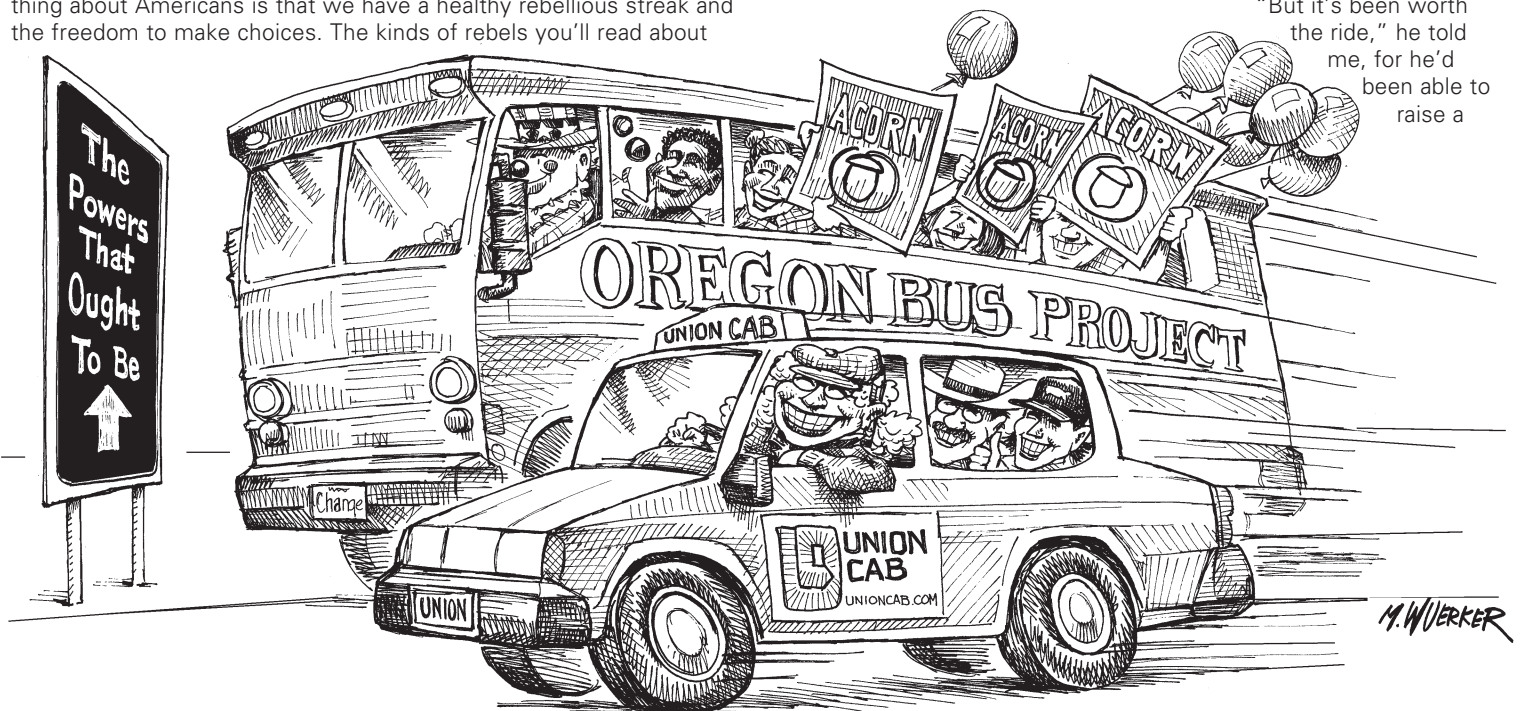
The institutions of power use everything from the lure of money to punitive threats to keep us hitched to their plows, but the wonderful thing about Americans is that we have a healthy rebellious streak and the freedom to make choices. The kinds of rebels you'll read about

in our book are the great hope and true leaders of America. Here are excerpts from the stories of just a few of these folks.

Call me a cab

I first encountered Union Cab Cooperative one morning in 2000 when I asked a Madison hotel clerk in Madison, Wisconsin, to call a taxi. On the ride to the airport, I struck up a conversation with the driver, who proudly informed me that I was riding in the car of a worker-owned company. He said he'd been one of the founders of the co-op and that they'd come a long way, enduring lots of struggles.

"But it's been worth the ride," he told me, for he'd been able to raise a



“Made in China” has become a warning label. Look out—toxics in toothpaste, arsenic in shrimp, lead in toys!

The shocker is not that Chinese-made toys are laden with lead, but that America’s Consumer Product Safety Commission employs exactly one inspector to oversee the safety of all toys sold in the U.S. Likewise, the Food and Drug Administration has licensed 714 Chinese plants to manufacture the key ingredients for a growing percentage of the antibiotics, painkillers, and other drugs we buy, but provides practically no oversight of these plants.

An even bigger shock is that our consumer-protection laws are so riddled with loopholes that unsafe products can legally come into our country. Take phthalates, chemical additives in plastics that are suspected by scientists here and in Europe of inhibiting testosterone production in infant boys. Yet, Mark Shapiro, author of *Exposed: The Toxic Chemistry of Everyday Products*, reports that while the European Union has banned the use of phthalates in products for children under three years of age, our government has refused to act.

Thus, China has factories that manufacture two lines of toys—one without phthalates for European countries, and one with phthalates for export to our children.

The problem is not with the Chinese, but with our own corporate chieftains. They’ve moved their manufacturing to China specifically to get these kinds of low-cost shortcuts in production, while simultaneously demanding that Washington cut back on regulations that protect us consumers.

family, send his kid to college, and live a modest, middle-class life.

It started when a group of drivers in Wisconsin’s capital city got fed up with the situation at Checker Cab, where they were being paid only 40¢ an hour, with no benefits and no rights. In July 1976, they took their first rebellious step by trying to unionize. Dave Everitt (still with the co-op) approached the Retail Clerks union, an organizing committee was formed, 75% of Checker workers signed certification cards, and union representatives and potential new members were invited to a general meeting.

It was a disaster. When the union reps arrived, they found a roomful of spirited cabbies deep into several cases of beer, with sweet-smelling herbal smoke billowing out the doors. Shortly afterward, the union said, “No, thanks,” leaving the drivers fearful of losing their jobs. But they held firm, reached out to other unions, and in the fall signed an agreement to join the Laundry and Dry Cleaners International Union (LDIU).

The what!?! It might seem like an odd fit, but one of the cabbies knew Tom Kiesgen, the organizer of LDIU, and Kiesgen took a sincere interest in representing the group. “Here were people with ability, intelligence, and good hearts who were willing to help each other out,” he said. “They were left hanging, and we moved on it.”

The anti-union boss at Checker promptly trumped up reasons to dump anyone who’d been on the union-organizing committee. Then, to test the resolve of the workers, he stalled contract negotiations for months. In September 1977, the cabbies went on strike, and 99% walked off the job. Four days later, Checker signed.

With this success, the members really bonded, which is not easy for taxi drivers since they’re mostly alone in their cabs and vying against one another to get the best fares. “Now, suddenly, we were working as a unit,” said one of the drivers. However, in September 1978, the owner walked away from negotiations on a new contract. This led to a second strike that brought three months of confrontations and anxiety. But the strike also generated a growing camaraderie among the members, and they came up with some clever labor actions (for example, when the owner tried to bring in scab drivers to make airport runs, the

union chartered a bus, drove to the airport, and offered free rides into the city as an alternative to taking a scab cab). Again, nearly 100% of workers supported the strike.

Then, just in time for Christmas joy, news came that the owner was bailing out and shutting down Checker Cab, leaving the cabbies with a union but no jobs. That’s when many of the discarded Checker drivers asked, “Why not start our own cab company?” After all, who had done the driving, dispatching, maintenance, book-keeping, and all the other chores involved in running the company? Not the boss—they! They figured that within their ranks, they had enough expertise to be successful. Later, one admitted, “Our desire to form a cab company was greater than our realization of how difficult it would be.”

In January 1979, five of the cabbies decided to form a worker-owned company, stepping off the cliff and fashioning their wings as they went. The founders split up the tasks of finding a lawyer, applying for taxi permits from the city, getting an FCC radio license, making financial projections, and so on. The one who was best at numbers drew up a business plan, calculating that the group needed \$150,000 to start up. But who was going to front money for a bunch of unemployed cab drivers?

At first, no one. While scrambling for capital, they decided to organize not merely as a worker-owned company, but also as a cooperative, for this both reflected their values and opened up brighter funding prospects. The original five, plus a couple of others, raised money from friends and family members; after a community appeal, the people of Madison put up a few thousand dollars in donations of \$25 each; and a city-sponsored development fund came through with a loan. This loosened up other loans from the Small Business Administration and a local bank, giving the organizers the lift they needed. On October 29, 1979, Union Cab Cooperative opened for business with 11 used cars and an average wage of 80¢ an hour.

Then trouble started for real. Union Cab did not yet have a listing in the Yellow Pages, gasoline prices were spiking, the co-op lost \$35,000 in the first three months, and the bankers got fidgety. But from out of the darkness, Lady Luck suddenly smiled, casting three rays of hope upon

the endangered co-op. The first came in February 1980, when the Madison city council, recognizing the unexpected financial squeeze caused by fuel prices, allowed the city’s two taxi companies to boost their rates. Ten weeks after that, the second ray of luck shone down when the other taxi company closed, a victim of a community backlash against its truly horrific service. Then, just one week later, the brightest beam radiated from above: Madison’s bus drivers went on strike. Grabbing the opportunity, the co-op quickly added five more cabs and enjoyed a three-month bonanza, giving the company the financial strength it needed to keep moving forward.

In the early 1980s, Union Cab was doing well. It moved into expanded facilities, added new services (such as parcel deliveries and airport limousines), and brought in new members to the co-op. With rapid growth, however, came dissension. “Size dictates some changes,” said former general manager Steve Krumrei. “When you have over a hundred people, you can’t have the same intimacy as you can when you’ve got a group of twenty or thirty people.” The founding cohesiveness was waning, and internal conflicts flared.

In such times, a family needs to reach out for help, and Union Cab did. From its start, the co-op had benefited from the advice and support of other cooperatives in the area, and the board now turned to them and to a national co-op for assistance in reorganizing management structure.

Today, Union Cab Cooperative is the largest of three taxi companies in Madison and the third largest in the state. It still has ups and downs, but the co-op is now firmly rooted in the community and bearing fruit for all involved, with annual revenues of \$6 million. Equally important, Union Cab has retained its cooperative spirit. Its slogan is “Democracy in Motion”—and yes, T-shirts are available.

Connection: www.unioncab.coop

Get on the bus

Then there is politics. Yes, American politics are a mess, but they don’t have to be. You are a citizen, and if you really want America to be a self-governing nation, then you have to take responsibility for making it so. *Self-government* means just what it says. The selves are you and me—and you and you.

Look what happened when a loose group of politically frustrated young Oregonians gathered at the Rogue Brewery in Portland in 2001 to talk about fomenting a little rebellion in the politics of their state. These young folks were not "political" people in the usual sense—none held office, worked in politics, or were politically connected. But they were concerned that Oregon, with a long tradition of progressive policies and politicians, was suffering from a bad case of creeping right-wingism. They wanted things to change, but what could they do?

One guy seemed to have the closest thing to an actual plan. Jefferson Smith, a twenty-something lawyer, had done the political math. He reported that although Republicans dominated the state house by a margin of 35–25 and the senate by 16–14, a significant number of the GOP lawmakers came from suburban and rural districts where they were winning elections by margins as slim as a few hundred votes.

"Let's get out of Portland!" Smith exclaimed in a Eureka! moment. What if hundreds of young volunteers were to go to these swing districts to help progressive candidates? Flip a couple of seats in the senate and six or so in the house, and the whole state agenda would change.

Yeah, let's go! But where? How? To do what? "None of us knew what we were biting off," Smith admitted later. Still, they pushed ahead.

Funding is always short in these grassroots ventures, so an ability to scrounge is essential. The initial group kicked in some funds, hit up some friends and family members, and soon got a reputation for throwing cool parties to raise cash.

From the start, everyone agreed that to engage young volunteers, the effort had to be different... and fun. This led to the notion of the bus. It began as a mundane discussion on how to transport volunteers to the districts. "We'll just rent a bus," said Smith. "You know," chimed in Charles Lewis, "you can buy one a lot cheaper than rent one."

Okay, our own bus! Cool. Where do we get one? Turns out Smith's dad, Joe, knew a mechanic who knew a guy out in Spokane who sold used buses. Joe made a call, flew out with a mechanic friend to kick the tires, loaned the group \$11,000, and drove back to Portland in a 47-seat 1978 charter bus.

Now the group had both wheels and a name: Oregon Bus Project. Just quirky enough to grab people's attention and give them a symbol connected to the inspiring history of Rosa Parks and the Freedom Riders (with maybe a little Ken Kesey and Willie Nelson thrown in). Plus, it provided a big, visible, mobile presence, physically representing democracy in motion, while also offering the Project a snappy slogan: "Get on the Bus!"

This was politics that did not seem off-putting, intimidating, hierarchical... dull. "We knew that most of our friends weren't spending their time going to political-party meetings," Smith said. "We needed to make politics a piece of people's social lives."

Caitlin Baggott, who was one of the first trip organizers, said, "A question we're asked all the time is 'How do you do it? How do you get these young people involved?' And I think the answer is really simple: You ask them!" The Project was not about a political party but about values and ideas, engaging young people to make a difference

in moving Oregon and the country in a progressive direction. It was welcoming, fun, idealistic, and important—elements that appeal to people of all ages.

The Project contacted a couple of senate candidates in suburban districts who said, "Yeah, if you can bring us a few kids to go door-to-door with us on Saturday, that'd be swell." Project organizers recruited volunteers from activist groups, circles of friends, and colleges. They also made use of something new to politics—email—and created the first political email list in the state. "We had no idea if this was going to work, whether we'd get ten people or fill up the bus," said Baggott. She got to the staging area at seven in the morning, hung the big "Get on the Bus" banner, put out the coffee and doughnuts—and hoped. A car arrived, then another... and eventually more than 150 people rolled in.

The only ones more pleasantly surprised than the organizers were the candidates. "They didn't really expect us to come through," Baggott said. The Project quickly gained some serious political buzz, and candidates began to call them, putting up a few bucks for gas money and supplying food. On a typical trip, the bus and accompanying caravan of cars pulled into a school parking lot in the targeted district and were greeted by the candidate and a throng of local supporters. Garrett Downen, now the managing director of the bus, said that the local folks usually erupted in cheers "because here comes the cavalry."

Making trip after trip into numerous suburbs, down the coast, into the hard-hit timber communities, out to Deschutes County, and elsewhere, the Bus Project brought thousands of new people into politics, knocked on tens of thousands

Since the last two elections had voting problems ranging from malfunctions to malfeasance, how do we know that, this election year, our votes will be fairly and accurately counted? Especially untrustworthy are the paperless, touch-screen electronic voting machines sold by such infamous outfits as Diebold, Inc.

I call these systems "faith-based voting," for you make your choices on the computer screen but get no verifiable evidence that your vote is registered as you meant it to be. The electronic machines are vulnerable to hackers, prone to hardware and software crackups, and have been known to "flip" votes mysteriously from the candidates you chose to their opponents. Yet, about 40% of American voters presently cast ballots on touch-screen machines, which means the votes of millions of citizens might be lost or altered, once again bringing the integrity of a presidential vote count into question.

Rep. Rush Holt has proposed the "Confidence in Voting Act" to provide \$500 million so counties can replace disreputable electronic machines before November's national election. It calls for the use of ballots that voters mark by hand, and it provides another \$100 million to set up independent audit committees in each county to conduct public hand counts of three percent of all ballots that are cast.

Rush Holt's reform is not perfect, but it's a huge advance over the "trust me" machines now in use. You have some ideas on voting integrity? Call Holt's office at 202-225-5801.

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SUBSIDIZING MANURE LAGOONS

Washington is about to pass a humongous farm bill, and it's full of crop subsidies for large agribusiness operations—while 60 percent of family farmers get not a dime. However, there's another agribusiness subsidy stuck in this whopper of a bill that gets little media coverage. Under the guise of environmental improvement, it provides about \$180 million to huge corporate entities that run industrialized hog and cattle operations. These factory farms keep the animals confined, feeding and medicating them in an assembly-line process.

Having hundreds of thousands of animals crammed in these factory facilities creates a special problem for industrial agriculture: waste. Hogs and cattle defecate and urinate. A lot. What to do with this excrement? Agribusiness channels it to lined ponds or "manure lagoons."

In 2002, as these massive-scale livestock operations were spreading across rural America, corporate lobbyists quietly changed a farm conservation program to make these outfits eligible for funding—and to declare that manure lagoons could be paid for with government funds as a "conservation measure."

How ironic since these lagoons are notorious for leaking into groundwater, overflowing into nearby streams, and fouling the air for everyone downwind. The factory operations also are squeezing small, sustainable farmers out of business.

For years our nation's environmental laws were based on the ethical precept that the polluter must pay. Now that's been perverted to the unethical notion that we must subsidize the polluter.

of doors, and had an impact that those who had met in the Rogue Brewery six years earlier would not have dared to imagine.

In the 2002 and 2004 elections, the Project focused on the senate, targeting a total of ten races. *Project candidates won nine*, taking control of the senate out of right-wing hands. In 2006, the Project turned to the house. Focusing on ten swing districts, *Project candidates again won nine*, moving the house out of right-wing control, too.

But the impact goes beyond legislative realignment to the personal. The Project's approach empowered ordinary people to be the difference makers. It bought no ads, hired no consultants, and did no mass mailings. It was all volunteer power—face-to-face, doorstep politicking—and enormously invigorating for the volunteers because they could truly sense that their individual participation mattered.

Connection: www.busproject.org

Acorn

Not all effective participation has to be aimed at candidates. George Wiley, the smart, charismatic founder of the National Welfare Rights Organization, realized in the late 1960s that very-low-income people were destined to remain a small minority with limited power in the American system unless they could forge an alliance with those living a rung or two higher on the economic ladder. To give this broader strategy a try, Wiley dispatched a young, savvy, tireless, and talented organizer, Wade Rathke, to Little Rock, Arkansas.

All Rathke had to do was to unite such disparate constituencies as black welfare mothers and low-income Southern whites in a state

that was deeply divided racially. At the time, this seemed as impossible as trying to herd cats. However, *anyone who says you can't herd cats never tried a can opener*. Rathke's can opener was the notion of the common interest.

Thirty-seven years after its Arkansas start, ACORN has become America's largest neighborhood-based group fighting for economic justice. It has some 350,000 members in 110 cities in 39 states.

While the establishment media has largely ignored it, ACORN has been a key member of coalitions that have passed living-wage laws in 140 cities and dozens of states. Like the churches and unions that are also integral to the success of the living-wage coalitions, ACORN has the institutional staying power to keep pushing.

William Kyser and the ACORN chapter in Albuquerque show the importance of this staying power. Kyser's family joined in 2004, and the next year they became heavily involved in the group's campaign to raise the city's minimum wage to \$7.50 an hour. By then, William had become the host of ACORN's talk show on the local public-access television channel, and he interviewed economists, city-council members, and minimum-wage workers from such outfits as McDonald's to inform and energize the community. "I'm not Merv Griffin," William said, "but I like talking to people."

The whole Kyser family helped ACORN gather 33,000 signatures to get the wage increase on the ballot. It was a tremendous organizing effort, but business interests dumped a truckload of cash into the fight, and the initiative lost by a narrow margin.

In too many progressive battles, that would have been the end. Volunteers would be discouraged, money would dry up, and the coalition would disperse. With ACORN, however, a loss can be seen as a learning experience and a building block for the next step. "We've got people talking about the wage increase now," William said buoyantly, just after the 2005 vote. "We've learned a lot. I think we know now how to pass it." And they did. ACORN came back in 2006 to win in Albuquerque, and in 2007, it got New Mexico's governor to extend the pay raise statewide.

Connection: www.acorn.org

Where you live

Such stories abound throughout our land, getting little or no media attention. Our book covers a wide range of these mavericks—the women of the Lusty Lady Theater, for example, along with Peace Coffee, evangelical environmentalists, Organic Valley, the Granny Peace Brigade, Fighting BobFest, ShoreBank, Wellstone Action, Patagonia, and the Feral Cows of Cheeseboro Canyon.

The power elites don't want you reading about these stories, and they certainly don't want us learning from each other. But DeMarco and I have found that such rebels are not uncommon at all—any given city has enough of them to fill a book of its own. We hope that learning about even a few of the people we consider true heroes can encourage each of us to turn loose the same rebellious, uproarious, glorious human spirit that is in all of us and that can finally free this country from the suffocating power of those who believe that they should decide for us.

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