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# One Woman's Quest to Rescue the Trash of the Lower East Side

“I accept the fact that I am funding my obsession.”

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<https://www.curbed.com/2022/09/lower-east-side-vicki-rovere-free-store-scavenging-trash.html>



Vicki surrounded by her books and the things she's collected from the trash. Photo: Thomas Prior

On a Thursday night, Lauren Gold, a cashier at the Trader Joe's on the Lower East Side, picked up a black ceramic electric cooking pot with a glass lid from a battered stoop on Ludlow Street. "I walk to work a different way every day, but on my way home I always come up Ludlow to see what's out," she says. "Some days it's a gold mine." The 67-year-old has been making this trek for more than two years. Over the next 20 minutes, an employee from a nearby taco spot came by on her break and selected two pounded-copper Moscow Mule mugs from the steps. "I'm going to use them for ice cream," she sheepishly tells me. A man in tattered clothing carrying a plastic cup filled with coins grabbed a deodorant stick and stuffed it into his pocket. Two women in their mid-20s wearing fedoras with skateboards tucked under their arms riffled through a stack of books and walked away with Japanese texts on anatomy and Buddhism. On the metal grate behind the books, the mugs, and a dozen other items spread out on a stoop hangs a small handwritten sign taped to a clothes hanger: "The Ludlow Street Free Store."

Most of the people picking up items or passing by on their way to the bars in the area will never meet Vicki Rovere, the 78-year-old woman who has been running the free store for almost two decades. She starts setting up around 9 p.m. on any night it doesn't rain, schlepping bags of salvaged goods from her small one-bedroom apartment down five flights of stairs and arranging them on the stoop. Plenty of New Yorkers put toys or scratched-up kitchenware out on the sidewalk, hoping that someone else will find them useful. But most of Vicki's curbside items are salvaged from the garbage piles of the Lower East Side. And there's a lot of it.



Vicki sets up her free store in front of an empty storefront on Ludlow St, next-door to her apartment. Photo: Thomas Prior

A free store doesn't need her to stick around and monitor what's taken, so Vicki goes about her life — she eats dinner, calls friends, sends emails, and goes out scavenging. Around 3 a.m., she returns to pack up anything that remains and send what seems unlikely to be adopted — a shredded pair of shoes, a dish-drying rack — back where it came from, bagged on the street with the curbside garbage. After all these years, she's seen what's fallen out of favor and what still moves: “Frying pans were popular; now they're not. No one wants toasters. Pens are good, pencils are not. Electric cables and wires go, as do electronic gadgets — even old broken laptops.”

A recent knee injury and poor circulation in her left leg means she takes it slow going back up to her apartment, where she has lived for 49 years. “You would not know it from looking at me now, but my official adult height is five-foot-ten,” she says. “I'm now something like five-foot-six.” She's pretty sure she knows why: “The only thing I can think of is carrying bags on my shoulders all these years and going up the stairs with them.” But then she laughs it off. “It's not really a problem. I'm used to being tall, and now I'm not as tall.”



Vicki at home on Ludlow St. She's lived in this apartment for 49 years. Photo: Thomas Prior

On her near-daily scavenging runs, she spends a couple of hours retracing that day's recycling or garbage pickup route (a schedule she knows well) with a wheeled suitcase. Using the intuition she has honed for years, she will lift a garbage bag, loosen its knot, poke, peek inside, and remove what seems useful. A mattress on the curb or kitchenware in the recycling are clues that someone is moving out — that the building should be revisited in the coming week. Books often make their way to the bottom of recycling bags. Opaque trash bags that are soft to the poke may be clothing but should be opened with caution — they could also contain dirty paper towels or diapers. A pile of garbage won't look any different after Vicki has gone over it (she always repacks and reties bags), but it will be lighter.

“I used to be ashamed when I first started,” Vicki tells me. “I would keep an Ikea bag folded and hidden away until I found something worth taking.” But it's become a full-time occupation or, as she herself admits, something of a compulsion. There are the occasional gems — a first edition of *Little Town on the Prairie* (worth \$120), a well-seasoned cast-iron skillet, a floor-length faux-fur poncho (although very hard to rehome in the summertime), a rideable children's tractor with a wrecking ball. But Vicki spends the same energy and time saving a stack of cans of creamed corn as she does a pile of fur coats. Like many of her peers who came to the Lower East Side as punks and artists and squatters, Vicki is trying to live by the environmentalist and pacifist ideals she's held since she was younger. She hasn't strayed far from her childhood upbringing — raised in Flatbush by communist Jewish parents, she tagged along to her mother's union events as a child and attended progressive summer camps. She went to her first demonstration at 14, a Washington, D.C., rally for racially integrated schools, and at 25 was [arrested in Moscow's Pushkin Square for handing out leaflets](#) against the Soviet Union's invasion of Czechoslovakia. But she found antiwar work disheartening: “I have been spectacularly unsuccessful at saving the lives of my fellow human beings. But it turns out I'm somewhat better at saving *things*.” So for the past several decades, her energy has mostly focused on the ten-block radius of her neighborhood, doing just that. If one adds up what she has gathered from the trash over 16 years, she may have diverted the equivalent of an entire five-story tenement filled floor to ceiling from a landfill.



Vicki dumpster dives on Ludlow St. between Delancey St. and Rivington St. Photo: Thomas Prior

Typically, her haul doesn't go straight to the Free Store; first, she drags it up to her apartment, where she sorts and repairs items. Then she puts some of the more valuable finds up for resale; books get posted online, while nice clothes, paintings, tchotchkes, wallets, and the like get sold at occasional sidewalk sales or on the neighborhood secondhand circuit: The Strand, Buffalo Exchange, Beacon's Closet, Academy Books and Records, Video Games NY. A recent find of discarded fur coats and feather boas has netted her \$500 so far. She also makes some income from the sale of her self-published books. Her first was a 1993 guide to thrift stores and flea markets titled [Worn Again, Hallelujah!](#) (Tips include how to use a long skirt pulled up to your chest as a kind of makeshift personal dressing room when shopping.) Vicki also sells political buttons, mostly at demonstrations, where she sets up a table or wears an apron covered in ones with slogans like: "SEMITE, ANTI Israel's War"; "Islamophobophobe"; "Pick Trash, Not Fights."

All of these small ventures together give her enough income to stay afloat — enough to cover rent, subway and bus fare, nutrition supplements, health care, and credit-card bills. After that, there isn't much left. But, Vicki explains, "I don't have much else to spend money on. I don't have a food budget, I don't have an entertainment budget." Scavenging is her entertainment, and she salvages enough food to feed both herself and one of her neighbors. Seltzer water is one of the few indulgences she regularly buys.

This piecemeal labor also helps her stay off the IRS's map. Vicki is a [war-tax resister](#). As she explains, she doesn't want "to participate in giving money to the tax collector to be added to the military budget." Previously, while working as a computer programmer for 24 years, she used various techniques to hide her income from the government. When tax-law changes in the late 1980s made that impossible, she made the transition to making a living completely off-the-books.

But her near-daily practice of rescuing garbage from the streets has overwhelmed her ability to store it. Four years ago, when I first visited Vicki's home, tote bags of cast-offs were stacked around the apartment — organized by the type of object: kitchenware, shoes, drugstore items, hardware and electronics, pet care, toys and games, and so on. Once a bag had acquired critical mass (holding several pairs of shoes or enough kitchenware), it went to the free store. For a time, Vicki could sleep on only half her loft bed because the other half was being used to store the large paintings and canvases she had rescued from the street. She was quick to point out that half the bed was more than enough for her.

My first visit happened to be on the heels of two separate eviction proceedings that had been issued because of the accumulation of clutter (yes, you can be [evicted for clutter](#)) in and outside her approximately 300-square-foot apartment. In the first instance, her landlord tried to evict her for storing things in the hallway outside her apartment. At that time, Vicki said, “In my mind, I was entitled to break the rules — *I’m doing all this good work* — I couldn’t get it through my head that it was not acceptable.” The second instance was initiated by a city official whom Vicki had invited into her home to investigate a hole in her ceiling that a worker installing a window in the apartment above her had accidentally punched through. The official was so alarmed at the state of her living space that he posted the eviction notice on Vicki’s door himself. She was ordered to declutter — clear access to her fire escape, ensure adequate light and ventilation — and was only allowed in her apartment during daylight hours to get the apartment back in shape. In the meantime, she had to “floor-surf” for 11 months, crashing with friends, staying in an artist studio in her building or at the Catholic Worker house in the East Village. A [2005 short documentary](#) by filmmaker Josh Raab captured her home in this era. Her neighbors are generally supportive, though Vicki recalls one former neighbor who “was a light sleeper and had problems when I was rustling bags in the hall late at night *and* was terrified I was bringing in bedbugs.”





Vicki built a false floor to store more things she's found. Photo: Thomas Prior

The answer to her eviction troubles was organization and storage. Vicki got everything up off the floor and organized it into taxonomies: yarn and craft supplies, a tin of cookie cutters, a box of travel souvenirs to be given away as gifts. But when there simply wasn't enough space, she created more: Under the carpet in her living room, there is a false floor that she had built herself. Four inches high and covering the entire room, it consists of plywood panels that can be removed to access button-making materials, boxes of photos, and canned goods. Though years later, Vicki admits that even she can't recall everything that is tucked into the narrow storage space.

But a false floor was not enough. Vicki now rents six storage units ten blocks north of her home. The combined storage space of more than 1,000 square feet is filled to brimming with bags of clothing, books, (mostly) non-perishable foodstuffs, appliances, and even an old collection of chewing-gum packets from a late neighbor. She attempts to organize — bags of books are labeled with the date she listed them for sale online and stored in chronological order — until the scheme fails (a many-year backlog of yet-to-be-listed books is piled up in various storage units).



Vicki searches for a book she sold someone for \$24 among bags labeled by date stacked on a wheeled bookshelf in one of her storage units. Photo: Thomas Prior

Her storage costs —\$800 a month — are more than what she pays in rent or what she makes selling what she salvages. At this point, she is essentially living in the red in order to honor her convictions. Normally, she can cover the costs, but there was a time when her storage fees forced her to take out multiple loans from friends and even prompted a neighbor to start a GoFundMe for her (it raised a small sum). Vicki explains, “I understand that these things have value to me beyond what they would have to a normal person.” She adds, “I accept the fact that I am funding my obsession: working to avoid the destruction of the planet.”





One of the storage units Vicki has at a facility on 10th St. to store some of the things she's collected from the trash.

Walking down Houston one afternoon, I watched a man in well-fitting jeans and a colorblock T-shirt get up from a bench to wrap his arms around Vicki in a deep hug. Vicki smiles but is nonplussed; it happens all the time. He tells me his name is Christopher S but goes by the name Hollywood Homeless, “because people would never know that I was homeless by the way I dress.” Christopher S, who’s been living on and off the streets of New York for 14

years, has been coming to Vicki's free store since 2009. He had previously asked Vicki to keep an eye out for size 30 pants for him, and that afternoon Vicki told him that she'd found a couple of pairs and was holding onto them for him — a pair of charcoal-gray Levis and one in blue. "Do you know how many people I have brought over to that store who are newly in the streets? Who didn't know anything about where to change, where to get clothes?" he says. "They are like, 'This is free? For real?'" He adds, "She serves *justice* in the neighborhood ... more than the law enforcement."

Not everyone approaches Vicki with a hug. Once, while she was scavenging in the garbage, a stranger threw a bottle at her head. But with her characteristic bright-side-ism, Vicki tells me, "What I'm really impressed by are the people who see me doing this and react to me as a human being." It's more common for people to mistake her for someone unhoused. While I was talking to her one night, a well-dressed couple staggered toward us on Ludlow Street. One of them asked in slurred speech, "Are you homeless?" and held out takeout containers of food. Vicki politely said no, and the man's partner shoved him playfully, as if to say, "I can't believe you *did* that." For everyone who tries in vain to offer her money, she is ready with her business card, which reads: "Vicki Rovere: Environmental Scavenger."