

On the curb in NYC: Trash tells an anthropologist how people live

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Robin Nagle, a New York University professor (right) who is also the anthropologist-in-residence for the Department of Sanitation of New York, puts some discarded refuse into the truck as she accompanies sanitation worker Joe Damiano (center) during his morning rounds, Aug. 12, 2015, in New York City. AP Photo/Richard Drew

NEW YORK, N.Y. — New York City's garbage collection department has its very own anthropologist-in-residence. She studies garbage along the curbs of the nation's biggest city to look into the lives of its 8.5 million residents.

"What does trash tell you about us?" asks New York University professor Robin Nagle.

She frequently goes out on trucks with garbage-collection crews in search of an answer.

As an anthropologist, Nagle studies how people live.

Too Little Time, Too Much Stuff

So what does she see in the nearly 3.5-million-ton pile of trash collected by New York's Department of Sanitation each year?

"We're a throwaway culture that's going too fast," she says.

Modern New York, she says, tends to treat just about everything as something to throw out, including furniture, electronics and clothing.

People in New York assume that they do not need to "waste time" taking care of everyday objects. They can just get rid of them, she said.

Garbage Good Enough To Eat

The city's apartments are also mostly small, so residents are constantly tossing out stuff to make more space. Nagle considers this trash a gold mine for garbage pickers.

Many residents furnish their homes with other people's garbage. Some dig for food that's never been cooked, such as bagels, rice and pasta. Meanwhile, a whole wardrobe could be filled with rejected clothing, shoes and jewelry. People also grab sofas, beds and even paintings that have been thrown out.

"The quantities of trash that New Yorkers throw out are dazzling," Nagle says. "And the quality of goods they put on the street because they're done with it," she adds, and it's "discardable is also very impressive."

From Heartbreak To Happiness

Sanitation workers get to know the rhythms of the people on their route from their garbage. Nagle calls it "the physical record of our daily lives." If a marriage breaks up, they might find photos of the former wife or husband thrown out. If someone has had a drinking problem, it's reflected in the bottles. Disposable diapers appear when babies arrive.

Nagle, 54, kept asking sanitation officials for two years to be named anthropologist-in-residence, so she could study the movement of garbage regularly. They gave her the unpaid position in 2006. Her research has led to several books, an online lecture, a New York University course she teaches called "Garbage in Gotham" and a personal campaign to get manufacturers to use more recyclable materials.

Dirty Hands And Bear Hugs

But Nagle has not been merely a university scholar. She got her hands dirty, literally, by going through the sanitation department's training, learning to drive the trucks and working for almost a year as a regular, salaried garbage worker.

"She's part of the family," says Keith Mellis, the assistant chief of the sanitation department.

Her biggest contribution is in raising spirits of people in a job that is often overlooked. The city has 6,400 sanitation workers. Nagle talks with new ones. She spreads a message of pride that the 134-year-old department nicknamed "New York's Strongest" is "the city's most important uniformed force." The department clears streets of the garbage that would otherwise breed rats and disease, she says.

"I love sanitation," Nagle says at a Department of Sanitation garage as she exchanges bear hugs with men reporting to morning roll call. "I get to work with people who make a difference every single day."

Elliot Belnavis, a 27-year-old newcomer, notes that while members of the police and fire departments are treated as heroes, "we're invisible." Nagle's introduction to his new job left him with a greater appreciation of his role, he says.

"I now definitely feel like sanitation workers are the most important workers that we have in this city," Belnavis says. "If we don't pick up the garbage off the streets, if we don't take care of the snow, nobody can move. It starts with us, and when we do our job, everybody else can do their job."