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Albuquerque and Chicago Heater Blocs

The Final Straw Radio
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Zachariah Jazz distributes alcohol jet heaters with ABQHeater-Bloc in so-called Albuquerque, NM, and talks about their efforts to help keep folks living on the streets safer from the elements through mutual aid.

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I said, there's a lot of info in the Doc too, about fuels and stuff like that, which can be helpful, but I'm sure these videos run through the whole process pretty quickly. It might be easier for people to learn from.

TFSR: Well, thanks a lot for taking the time to have this conversation. I appreciate it. And thanks for doing that work. It's been really awesome. This is The Final Straw Radio and you just heard Tom from Chicago Heater Bloc on constructing inexpensive alcohol heaters for houseless folks as temperatures drop.

you know, everyone has been very receptive of them if you just come up and give them to them and explain it. I actually just got a nice torch. I saw one of the Instagrams, they had it. They are lighting them much, much faster. I had some issues with that, just trying to show them how it works and not being able to get it lit because it was cold outside and windy. Then one of them took it in their tent and was like, “Oh, yeah, this is cool.” But if I had that torch there would be like, “There you go. You see what to do. You can do with a lighter, it just takes a little longer.”

But yeah, as far as the bulk stuff goes. So you can get a lot of this, the copper tubing is common in refrigerator type stuff. They were actually almost out the first time I got it, so you might have to go to a couple stores or something. They had a 10 foot coil, which is not too expensive. I think it might have only been like \$10 or something. I found it online for like 25 feet or something that was a little better. If you can do bulk, you can save money, but there's still not too expensive. If you just have to buy enough to make a handful or something.

The plates too. I haven't quite tested them yet, but I just got some super cheap aluminum ones that are a little bit flimsy, but they're not the foil ones. They didn't seem quite as good as I thought they'd be. I was thinking I might throw some caulk in one and smush two of them together and see if that comes out better, because the plates can be expensive. If you find them at a thrift store or something that's cool. But if you buy new plates, they are nothing fancy or anything, but they still can be kind of pricey.

TFSR: You mentioned a few resources like that Google Doc and that there are Instagram pages for groups in different parts of the so-called US that are making and distributing and teaching about these. Are there any other resources that people might find useful if they're going to be doing this? Do you want to re-shout out any of those projects in Philly or elsewhere?

Tom: I do. I heard Philly and I think Spokane on a podcast. It doesn't look like Spokane has an Instagram. Then of course, I mentioned Heater Bloc NYC, they're the ones that I got the Doc from. It's also in the Heater Bloc Chicago bio now as well. I don't exactly know what to call them, but I guess you just call them the alcohol stove, or burner, or something, or alcohol jet burner. I saw that somewhere. You can buy them online and if you look that up. There's quite a few videos on how to make them. Like

ABQ Heater Bloc

Zachariah Jazz: I'm Zachariah Jazz I use he/him, they/them pronouns. I'm located here in Albuquerque, New Mexico, down in the southwest. I'm affiliated with ABQ Heater Bloc as one of their main distributors. I am founder of my own Mutual Aid project called 'Hope 4 Tha Hood.' I'm the host of my own YouTube channel called 'Its Controversial!! with Zachariah Jazz' That's pretty much it.

TFSR: What kind of content do you cover on the YouTube channel?

ZJ: I cover a lot of social issues, social justice movements, specifically more of the ones down here. I cover a lot of racist topics, a lot of my work that I've done with my friends who live on the streets and my Hope 4 Tha Hood project, and stuff like that.

TFSR: Is Hope 4 Tha Hood a neighborhood based Mutual Aid project? Is that how it would be described, or how would you describe it?

ZJ: Yeah, that's the best way to describe it. I started it to try to get more resources for my friends who live on the streets, right? Like hoodies or hand warmers, or any basic things... harm reduction, safe & clean needles for them to use, safe pipes, anything like that, condoms, anything that they need, female products, any any of that stuff. I'm trying to emulate a lot of the other local organizations who didn't have the capacity to reach out to other parts of the city. So just trying to do it here for my little corner of the city.

TFSR: So just kind of filling in the gaps in the net?

ZJ: Yeah, pretty much. You can say that.

TFSR: Cool. Well, what sort of work does Albuquerque Heater Bloc do? Can you talk about, within the context of that, what houselessness in Albuquerque is like more broadly?

ZJ: Absolutely. Well, ABQ Heater Bloc started after we saw what everybody was doing out in Portland and Philadelphia and stuff like that. Ultimately, I was working at the Speedway and I came to them, and a friend of mine told me a story of being out in like a field, I guess, and it was freezing and he looked around and he said that, “I don’t see a way out of this. I don’t know how I’m gonna get out of this.” I hit me. I was like, “Damn.” There’s a need, that’s reality. That’s what it is for him and many others.

So, I came back to my friends who who make the heaters and I told them, “there’s a need out there. We got to do something about it.” And it just so happened that we were able to find Portland Heater Bloc out there and Philly. So they sent us a PDF file of how to build them. Then we started getting donations, and we started a money pool of our own, just putting in our own money at first to get the supplies needed. Then started getting in donations from other local orgs and just random people who believed in it, who saw it as a good thing.

They started putting the heaters together, and they just started handing them out to me. I started with four, passed them out. That was probably the most rewarding part, was the first time I gave somebody one. And they looked at me and they said, “Well, how much man?” I said, “What do you mean?” He’s like, “What do you want for it?” “Nothing, man. It’s free.” And then [he was like], “Wow. Wow. Really?” Like “yeah, man, here. Take it. It comes with an instruction manuals. They come in English and Spanish.” That’s pretty much how it how it started.

They couldn’t believe it because they’re so used to being homeless and on the streets, not only here, but anywhere in general. You’re used to having to always pay for something. No matter if it’s a cigarette, it’s a lighter, or it’s something that you need, a necessity, whatever the case may be, you have to pay for it in some way or another. So, the relief of having for once in their life not to have to pay for something in any way was rewarding for me in general. Every time I encountered somebody, that’s how it was and that’s still how it is today. This is the second winter that we’re going to be able to do this. And it’s still.... new people I’ll give a heater too... it’s the same reaction.

Being homeless out here is getting worse, it’s getting harder. because everywhere people will get comfortable at are constantly getting swept. Everywhere. They can’t sit outside the gas station, for obvious reasons, right? They can’t be in the communities, or in the neighborhoods, because the people in the neighborhood are assholes. They’re just going to kick them out anyway, force them out, or call the police, whatever. So

says tent safe but this isn’t looking so great.” But then once it burned off a little bit, it was much more reasonable, more of what I expected.

So I learned that you don’t want to stick those in too far. Although with the taller jars, bigger jars, it’s less of an issue, because you don’t have to fill it quite as full. Not that you have to, but again with the eight ounce jar, it probably would only burn for four or five hours or something especially if it’s not all the way full because you put the copper in too far. So you have to be a little careful with that.

TFSR: **It’s okay if you don’t have an answer to this because I just thought of it. I’ve been listening to a recent episode of “Live Like the World Is Dying” which is a podcast that Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness does, it’s a project that Margaret Killjoy’s involved with. She was talking at one point about candle heaters that people were promoting, which was some idea of basically making a lid with a pot over a candle and the idea that the candle heat would then be radiated more equally. Once it hits that clay surface instead of just going mostly up, it would radiate out to the sides more. She was talking about how it was definitely not safe for tents. Also the idea that it was amplifying somehow didn’t make sense with thermodynamics, but have you heard about those sorts of devices? Are people talking about those?**

Tom: No. That’s interesting. It does seem like there’s just not enough fuel there to really heat it enough. Off the top of my head it seems a little strange. But I do think if you heat up a pot it will radiate heat in the same way that these do. So, you know, maybe?

TFSR: **Let’s see... I know that you were able to construct a few of them at a time and you’ve been talking about getting better bulk supplies of ingredients for them, have you had much luck with distributing them? Or do you have any notes for folks who maybe don’t live in a city that has an Instagram page that’s called Heater Bloc, or if someone’s living in a place that gets cold in the winter and they maybe have the resources and the time to devote to something like this and maybe them made a couple of friends can make these? Do you have any suggestions on how to get them into people’s hands?**

Tom: I’ve only given them out to a couple encampments. I would say that’s something I struggle with. I’m just not a very outgoing person. But

Tom: Yeah, that's true. I have a little backpacking aluminum stove that runs on denatured alcohol that is pretty cool. So I can attest to that burning very hot. It's weird. It's totally a clear flame in the daylight. It's kind of freaky because you don't even know it's burning.

TFSR: Do you have a sense of how many hours of burning denatured alcohol or rubbing alcohol you could get off something like that?

Tom: Yeah, this doc is actually very thorough. All this stuff is in here. I can't say I've read every word of it or anything, but there is a lot of information here. I think they tell you to use eight ounce jars in this, but I think most of the other Heater Blocs that I follow on Instagram... I started the Chicago one, it's just Heater Bloc Chicago, Heater Bloc Dallas, Heater Bloc NYC, Philly, stuff like that. I think most people have started making it with the 16 ounce jars. I think it says on here that an eight ounce one can burn from six to eight hours or something in that ballpark. It might have even been a little less. I want to say it seemed like it wouldn't necessarily be a full night. So maybe it would be better to use a bigger one. But you know, the bigger jars are just as easy if not easier to find. I think. So I think it's around seven or eight hours.

TFSR: Are there any lessons that you've specifically learned while doing this? I think you said at one point that you had made your own tools that were kind of specialized for the curving of the copper, right?

Tom: A little bit. Yeah, I think that one needs a little work. But it's just a dowel. A couple of them screwed close together so that you can get some leverage on it and you have the right size piece right there. I made a little thing for the lids of the jars to put something on top of it and then the holes are setup so you know right where to drill it. I haven't gotten around to it, but I do plan on posting pictures to the Instagram account if anyone wants to see what I'm talking about or copy it or whatever.

The first ones I made I stuck through the jar lid a little too far. I was using the wider and shorter eight ounce jars and I had them full of the alcohol and I think if the copper sticks down too far it starts sucking out liquid a little bit. I think it creates a vacuum in there. The first time I lit it I was like, "Oh, cool it's working." Then all of a sudden the whole top of the jar was on fire and I had done it inside and was like, "Oh no" and I took it outside. I was talking to my roommates and was like, "Yeah, I mean, it

they have to hide, they have to hide away. Out of sight, out of mind. It's constantly like that. But then they do that and they might be arrested for trespassing wherever they may be. So it's like, nobody's gonna be happy or satisfied until all these people are arrested, in jail permanently, that's the language that they use would allow me to assume that they just want to lock people up forever. Obviously, they can't do that.

The other solution is housing. That's just not even available. We have a Gateway Center here that has so many restrictions and rules and regulations. To even be able to get in you have to be clean for like three weeks and people don't have the resources on the street to be able to get clean or have the luxury of having a safe place to even get clean to be able to gain access to the potential housing that the city is attempting to offer. So, it's hard for them to navigate, it's difficult. Half of the people, they don't have IDs, identification, they don't have birth certificates, social security cards, or anything like that. There's ways to be able to get that. We will be able to get their IDs without having a birth certificate or even an address, but that's still hard for people to do because a lot of them don't have phones to be able to do interviews. Healthcare For The Homeless, out here they'll give ID vouchers if you're getting Medicaid through the State. You can use your Medicaid card as proof of ID to be able to get an ID. But they can't even do that, because they don't have the resources to be able to fill out an application or even a phone to take the interview. So, it's really hard for people to navigate this the system that is constantly working against them.

TFSR: That echoes what I hear about here in Asheville and what I've experienced on the West Coast when I lived out there too, as far as resources available (or lack thereof).

Does Albuquerque, as a kind of a liberal city present itself as like, "look, we have these available resources. It's not up to us to force people to take advantage of these resources," but still not have the very entry level things... Like you said with the Gateway Center, if there are limitations to people being able to get in to take advantage of the resources that are there, does the city just sort of say publicly, "Well, we have the resources available," and just cut off the conversation at that point?

ZJ: Yeah.

TFSR: So listeners to this episode, are going to hear our chat with someone behind the Heater Bloc Project in Chicago, where winter storms amplified by Lake Effect frequently bring temperatures below zero degrees Fahrenheit. But many listeners may be surprised to hear of a need like this in Albuquerque, you may think, “Oh, it’s in the southwest. So it’s therefore going to be warm year round!” But can you talk a little bit about like local climate and temperature ranges for folks throughout the year there?

ZJ: Absolutely. The weather is kind of all over the place because we are in a desert, but at the same time we are at the very end of the Rocky Mountain range. We’re in the Sandia Mountains and that’s just right at the bottom of the Rocky Mountains. We do have a river here. It’s almost drying up because of climate change and all those other things. But it gets extremely cold here during the winter. The past four or five winters we’ve had week long blizzards and snowstorms where you get snow coming all the way up to your knees. It can be that bad. It gets extremely cold here. It’s reached easily the low 20’s. Probably even lower than that. I don’t always check but it gets extremely cold here. Cold enough for even the little bit of water from the sprinklers or something to freeze. So, it gets extremely cold here and you’d be surprised how chilling this desert can get.

These heaters have been very helpful for people. Because it definitely doesn’t stay doesn’t stay too hot year round. If that was the case, maybe we need to find a way to have makeshift some some air conditioners for people to take around with them.

TFSR: You were saying that when you started out you started with four heaters that you were distributing. If you had your druthers and just had a constant supply, about how many do you think you’d be able to distribute? Out of curiosity, do you think there’s such a thing as a saturation level with heater distro, like a point where you would get enough of them handed out that people just wouldn’t have need for them? Or do they get destroyed during the sweeps or are broken or stolen?

ZJ: That’s probably the number one problem is that they they do get broken a lot. The jars break, the flowerpots break, the cages gets smashed, because honestly they take a lot of space. People who have to carry a whole bunch of stuff already as it is, having to carry something else is cumbersome. It can be inconvenient but people who who will prioritize that, they

TFSR: Like a pixie stick!

Tom: Yeah.

TFSR: So overall, could you give a guesstimate of if someone gets this method of making it down pretty well what it would cost to create one of just one of these devices?

Tom: That is on the Google doc. I think it’s about \$7, but that can vary certainly. Inflation will affect that and as well as your local prices, or if you’re able to buy in bulk too. I was looking at the bigger roll of the metal mesh and it was like \$87 or something. Which is kind of steep, but obviously you would get a lot out of that. That is like the most effective way to get the most out of your money there. So it just kind of depends what you’re what you’re able to put into it. But I think seven was the rounded answer there.

TFSR: It’s just like rubbing alcohol? Or what kind of alcohol would you have to put in it?

Tom: Yeah, Isopropyl alcohol. You can get like 70%, 80%. I’m not 100%, it seems kind of weird, but I guess the rest of the 10% or 30% or whatever it is just like water. So if you keep refilling that there will be a little bit of water that doesn’t burn and you have to empty that out of the jar. You can even use hand sanitizer. I think the lower grade there is or if there’s some type of scent in it or something, it’ll cause more soot. As they do, they get a little bit sooty. You should wipe them down after they cool off.

You can use denatured alcohol which burns very hot. You can cook over them too. It would probably be better with denatured alcohol. Those flames can get a little crazy. I think if you know you’re going to use that you can drill a smaller hole in the copper and it works a little better that way. You probably won’t know if you’re going to use that. That’s a little harder. Not hard, but I think it’s more expensive and like a little more specialty than some type of rubbing alcohol.

TFSR: You could probably just have a couple of different coils that you would use for different purposes potentially. It’s like way cheaper than a camping stove.

TFSR: So, it's got that little clay pot on the top of it that heats up and radiates. It sounds like a small open flame that's involved in this, that I imagine is somewhat protected by that flower pot, but is there much chance of burning or setting fire to a tent or something like that?

Tom: I think the worst thing that could happen would be burning yourself on the pot, or melting part of a plastic tent or a blanket or something. The pot does get very hot. If it tipped over the flame would go out. I don't think the pot would be so hot as to ignite a flame, but it would certainly burn you or probably melt something. So you do have to be kind of careful.

On the plate, you just make a weird sun shape with caulk just to keep everything from sliding around too much. I've thought about ways to hold it down on the bottom, but you want to be able to lift the pot from the metal part because that doesn't get too hot. The pot is very hot. So if you have to refill it or put it out, you'd want to take that off and then you could grab the jar.

TFSR: Does it take experience or any special tools to work on the copper? Did you have any experience before?

Tom: Not particularly. I have some experience in metalworking. It can be difficult to bend the copper around. You have to have some leverage to it. It's much easier if you have some tools and a vice. But I didn't have super easy access to that kind of stuff the first time I made them and I was able to make 12 or so. I've been trying to make some light fixtures and stuff to make it a little easier.

The copper is kind of tricky. If you just Google "alcohol jet burner" you can find them. It's kind of interesting they have a different twist in the copper tubing. Which in theory, you could use a little bit less material and therefore get more out of whatever you buy from the store. But I made one like that and it wasn't really working. Copper is not that hard to bend, but it's not like super easy either. I've had to help with some pliers to really twist it and get it tighter around whatever you're using to bend it around. It's supposed to be about an inch so if you find something that's an inch in diameter you can use that.

You have to be careful not to kink it. Part of the directions is filling the copper with salts and taping off the ends because that will keep it from kinking.

will carry them around or they'll stash them somewhere where they know they can come back and get them in there will still be there.

I'd say from February to the end of winter we handed out 10 dozen heaters total. And this winter we've already started with 10 dozen, we've already passed out 10 dozen and we're reaching the end of our supplies. We haven't been able to bring in any more donations so far. But, I think with all that being said, and the reality of how fragile the heaters can be, I don't think there will ever come a point where we can stop, where there won't be a need to pass them out anymore. They do get broken in sweeps, they do get broken just from moving or even just being there, being clumsy or something they do get broken.

If people were able to hold on to them, or even just some of the components would make it a whole lot easier for us to be able to get supplies or even save. If people were able to hold on to them, it would be a whole lot easier. That's just not something that's within possibility. It's just too difficult out there.

TFSR: Yeah. The ingredients that put these together in bulk, like making 10 dozen, it sounds like a lot of money, but if each individual one is not that expensive, at least replacing them, and especially if folks are getting together collaboratively to make those replacements and distribute them then that takes a lot of the weight off of it.

So yeah, we started talking about this because y'all are doing that fundraiser and I was hoping to hear your experiences with this sort of work especially as the temperatures start dropping, but also to help you sort of like amplify the the fundraiser. Can you talk about like what kind of goals you have for the fundraiser and what amounts of material or how many you think that that initial fundraising goal would would make? Or is it just kind of raise what you can and do what you can with it?

ZJ: Yeah, raise what we can to do what we can with it. I'm not the ABQ Heater Bloc handler, I just work as the distributor. They haven't set an actual cap for donation amounts I guess. Basically get what we can and work with it. If you break them down, they come down to \$11 a heater. All in all it's not very expensive. It's pretty inexpensive. That's how we were able to make so many and push out so many last winter alone in such a short amount of time, and how we were able to put out the same amount in just as short amount of time this winter so far.

TFSR: I'm gonna put it in the show notes and link to your your social media presence and YouTube channel and also the ABQ Heater Bloc - But do you happen to have offhand the information about where listeners can donate in case they're just listening to this?

ZJ: So you can donate to our Venmo at [@ABQHeaterBloc](#)

TFSR: Where can people go to learn more about these projects and find your YouTube channel? If they're in the area, are you looking for folks to get involved in either of those projects? Either in the neighborhood Mutual Aid project or in the Heater Bloc?

ZJ: Oh, absolutely. So you can find ABQ Heater Bloc on Twitter: [@ABQHeaterBloc](#), you find them on Instagram: [@ABQHeaterBloc](#). You can find my YouTube channel: It's Controversial!! with Zechariah jazz. I'm also on Facebook: It's controversial!! with Zechariah jazz. That's also where you can find my Mutual Aid Project: Hope 4 Tha Hood. Anybody in the area who's listening... we could definitely use more people that want to get involved. More feet on the streets equals more heaters were able to get out to people. We put together build parties when we do have the funds to be able to hold them. That's how we were able to just make 10 dozen heaters this winter in such a short amount of time. Yeah, we have built parties. That's pretty much it.

I could always use help personally with my Hope 4 Tha Hood project out here because it is just me in that project. I'm not very good with social media outreach, all that stuff. Getting donations has been a mountain to climb as it is. I think I've gotten like one \$15 donation so far. So it's been kind of rocky still even then, I do what I can on my own with my own funds. Even then just if I'm not able to provide the things that I want too, just a cigarette here and there, \$1 here and there, give them a free drink at the gas station or something. It means everything to them. So any help anybody in the area wants to provide is more than welcome.

TFSR: Well, thanks a lot, again, for the short notice and being willing to chat with me and share this information with the audience. And good luck.

ZJ: Thank you so much. And I appreciate you having me. I couldn't be more grateful.

Chicago Heater Bloc

Tom: I'm Tom, He/Him is fine, and I'm from Chicago. I live on the north-west side, sort of

TFSR: I was excited to ask you about this project that you've been embarking on, which is the construction of small, portable, and inexpensive heaters. I wonder if you could talk a bit about them, like what they're made of and what inspired you to get involved in creating these?

Tom: Yeah, so I just saw it on an Instagram post that someone had shared to their story. Actually, the headline said, "Anarchists are building these heaters for homeless people." And I was like, "Okay, I can I can do that. That sounds cool." Thankfully someone had linked it, I done think the poster had it yet, I believe it was Heater Bloc NYC who has a link in their bio to a Google Drive document that outlines everything about them.

They're just little heaters that run on alcohol. There's a ton of info in this Google Drive that you can find pretty easily. The good thing about alcohol is that there's no dangerous fumes, in that sense, they're very good for tents. Basically it's a jar with a little copper coil coming out of it. Then that is surrounded by a wire fencing mesh to hold up a ceramic pot, which will get very hot and radiate heat. Then all of that is just on a plate.

They're pretty safe if you turn them sideways, if they fall over or something, they go out. The way it works is that the copper heats up and then it... I don't know if atomizers is the right word, but it makes the liquid alcohol into a gas and then that comes out a little hole in the bottom of the copper coil, which lights and then kind of continues the whole process itself.

So that's how you light them. It can take a while but you just hold the lighter to the copper until it starts vaporizing and comes out the hole, and then it'll continue that process.