Founder of Kansas City group whose food for homeless was destroyed by health department speaks out

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On November 4, police and health department officials in Kansas City, Missouri, carried out a coordinated series of raids on four picnics hosted by Free Hot Soup Kansas City, a Facebook community that organizes picnics where hungry people can eat food and converse in a friendly, public environment. The Kansas City Health Department, aided by police, threw away edible food and bleached a portion of it, claiming that Free Hot Soup was an "organization" and that the picnics were "food establishments" that needed permits.

The raids followed a neighborhood association meeting that had as its first action item "Remove KC Free Soup at the park." Health inspectors spied on the group using social media to determine the distribution locations.

After video of the health department's actions went viral on social media and sparked international outrage, Kansas City officials let subsequent distribution events go forward. Nellie McCool, who founded Free Hot Soup Kansas City in 2015, recently spoke with the WSWS about the incident.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Josh Varlin: Can you describe what happened November 4? Were you at Prospect Plaza Park when the police and health department came?

Nellie McCool: I was not, I was called while it was happening and I rushed over there right after it happened. The normal crew went out to all their different sites where they like to hold picnics with their friends, and Prospect Plaza Park was met with an inspector who immediately asked to destroy the food.

We've been at that park three years, every Sunday we've gone and had picnics there, so we've gotten to really know the community. We aren't a 501(c)(3) charitable organization, we aren't an organization or any kind of establishment. We don't accept any funding or do any fundraisers as a single entity. A Facebook community is the only way we actually exist as an entity, Free Hot Soup.

There are several communities all over the country. I was involved in one in Portland, Oregon, that started in 2013, and then joined the one in Vancouver, Washington, when it started in 2014. I came back and started one in Kansas City when I moved back in 2015.

JV: You mentioned the legal issues. Would you be able to expand on what Free Hot Soup is and why it's not a "food establishment"?

NM: Free Hot Soup is a Facebook community that recognizes socioeconomic disparity. We recognize that there are underprivileged populations in certain parts of our city, in this case in Kansas City, and we don't believe that organizations can be the entire solution.

For instance, Prospect Plaza Park, which is ZIP code 64127, has a household median income of roughly $21,000, which is less than half of the median income statewide. It's 54.7 percent black, and Kansas City has an extensive history of racial segregation. Developer J.C. Nichols wouldn't allow blacks to get mortgages in certain parts of the city, so blacks and any non-white ethnic group were basically cornered into really poor-quality parts of the city. Though those laws don't exist anymore, it's obvious when you go to those parts of the city that segregation is still alive.

When you go to this public park, normally people in the community don't feel safe bringing their kids there. There was a boy who was killed in the park in spring 2017. For the short amount of time we are there, we

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bring food, we use the food to strike up conversations with people, and for that one hour, we're told, families in the surrounding community feel safe bringing their kids to this park.

It's much more than a public food service. It's an activist project taking poverty and violent crime and looking these issues in the face and saying, "What can I do to help?" There are individuals where I've set up ways for them to get their bills paid through my Facebook community, or get their homes furnished, or get their birth certificate, or take them to the hospital or shelters, or set them up for other families who would like to sponsor them for Christmas.

JV: Free Hot Soup is organizing on social media, using Facebook groups to coordinate distribution of food to people who need it. The authorities were essentially spying on these Facebook groups to do this coordinated wave of raids. What do you think about that?

NM: There are so many different communities who use Facebook groups to coordinate events among themselves. This was, I would say, harassment and stalking. If they knew where we were, why did they not have a conversation beforehand? But they came in and, in the case of Prospect Plaza Park, they came in knowingly about to bleach the food. They had the report written prior to beginning their protocol, which they didn't even follow, because they bleached baked goods, which are considered a nonhazardous food and therefore are not regulated by the Health Department. Then they left it in the park, a public park, for the general public to scavenge through. We saw people scavenging through it when we came back later with 41 Action News and other reporters to discuss what had happened at that park.

JV: What do you think about the involvement of the North Blue Ridge Neighborhood Association and Democratic State Representative Ingrid Burnett?

NM: Their first action step on their minutes was "Remove KC Free Soup at the park." Not even trying to give us permits. It's not about public health. It's absolutely, "We don't like having you here."

JV: What services, if any, does Kansas City provide to homeless people?

NM: They continue to toot their horn about the 43 organizations that help the homeless, so I guess that's their goal.

Kansas City is tearing down low-income housing projects all over the city and they're not replacing them. You've got a limited amount of shelters for single adults. Families with children get priority at low-income housing and shelters. When you tear down these huge low-income apartment complexes, those families are now going into those shelters. So, everybody else who is trying to get on their feet or needs to use the shelter is now put at the very bottom of the list.

These neighborhoods have very limited employment options. Prospect Plaza Park, that ZIP code, the unemployment rate is 46 percent. You've got tons of people who are working for Jackson County, Missouri, but they're only making $10/hour.

If they're living on the street, they are likely using public transportation, which costs money. If they want to take a shower or have a bed to sleep in, they have to pay for a motel, which costs money. Otherwise they're going to sleep at bus stops or at public parks on benches, which exposes them to theft and other types of harassment, so a lot of them will lose their IDs, Social Security cards and birth certificates and suddenly they don't have any form of identification anymore. For them to get a car or get a home or get a job if they don't have one, they are now 10 steps behind. You have people out there who are homeless and are working but they can't get to where they need to be. The minimum wage in Missouri is one of the lowest in the entire country.

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