



ROLL YOUR OWN

The L.A. Burrito Project delivers to the homeless

ILLUSTRATION BY IVAN MINSLOFF

>> A row of bicyclists rides by Staples Center, lit bright purple for a Lakers playoff game. The cyclers carry sagging backpacks, filled with foil-wrapped bean and rice burritos. They are riding with the Burrito Project, an anonymous volunteer group that gathers one night a week to make inexpensive, healthy meals to distribute by bike to homeless people downtown. Nearby, signs advertise parking for \$25 — enough, it's been remarked, to pay

for 100 burritos.

The evening begins at a house west of downtown rented by Burrito Project co-founders Chris and Darren (not their real names). Darren plays bass in a touring rock band, so the walls are lined with concert posters and photos of jazz legends. Volunteers who have gathered fill backpacks with burritos and roll out at 9 p.m., waiting until homeless people have settled in for the night. They split off

into three groups, each taking a different route through downtown. Afterwards, the riders converge for a post-giving drink at Bar 107, an old tranny hangout with stuffed animal heads on the wall.

The project is made up of a group of eight core volunteers, supported by a rotating cast of part-timers referred to as friends. "We've had rock stars, graffiti artists and deadbeats," says Chris. "One of our loaner bikes belongs to a member

of Guns N' Roses." One regular is working on his doctorate in urban planning at UCLA. "The one thing we have in common is doing something good for the community," says Darren. "And we all ride bicycles."

THE FIRST BURRITO

By day, Chris teaches high school to emotionally disturbed boys at a lock-down facility. He credits his altruism to his

parents — a principal and a teacher who worked to make ends meet in the Inland Empire. "I was raised in a good home, an Eagle Scout," says Chris, "but I also had a rebellious streak, drawn to things like skateboarding and punk rock music."

Chris stole the idea for the Burrito Project from a group of kids in San Francisco in the late '90s who sold mix tapes and used the money to hand out burritos in the Mission District. He decided to focus on the downtown area after reading Mike Davis' *City of Quartz*. "It made me start thinking about downtown L.A., how unfriendly it is. I thought it would be good to get people involved there."

In 2001, Chris began driving to parts of L.A., Pasadena and San Bernardino to distribute burritos. "I had a friend who lived in Hollywood. We'd make them there, pack it in coolers, drive downtown. That's back when there were homeless people on Pershing Square — now that's all been gentrified. Los Angeles [Street] from 4th to Pico used to have tons of people too. [Police have] been pushing them further east and south."

Chris and Darren were already riding bikes together when, in early 2006, Chris proposed the

idea of making burritos for homeless people. "I would have felt guilty if I'd said no," says Darren. "It was inexpensive and not too time-consuming." They began discussing the project with fellow regulars at Bar 107, and the volunteer pool quickly grew from two to 15 people. "It's only still going because all these people are coming to help," says Darren.

"I'M NOT GOING TO TELL YOU ABOUT JESUS"

Response from downtown residents is mainly positive. A typical early response came from Andre, a homeless man who's now a friend. When he was first approached, Andre said, "Why do you want to give me a burrito? What do you want? What church are you from?" Chris immediately made it clear: "I'm not going to tell you about Jesus or how to live your life; I want to ask if you want something to eat."

Though most homeless people appreciate the burritos, some get defensive. "I had a woman tell me that she's not good with getting asked questions. How could I be so rude to just come up and ask questions," says Chris. "We ask everybody if they're hungry. Some people think it's a racist thing, that we're marginalizing them. Some people say, 'Fuck you. I'm a grown man. I don't need your food.' Sometimes we don't get out until late, wake somebody up. You might think you're doing an amazing, great thing, but at the same time, you're being intrusive."

"I'M NOT GOING TO TELL YOU ABOUT JESUS OR HOW TO LIVE YOUR LIFE; I WANT TO ASK IF YOU WANT SOMETHING TO EAT."

A key tenet of the Burrito Project is the anonymity. "It's the purest way to have any kind of charity," says Darren. "We're not asking for anything in return, not even recognition. We try to keep personalities and egos out of it."

"It's not my project," says Chris. "I've put a lot of thought into it, but it's not something for someone to own. It's not for personal gain. It's to take some time out of your week and do something for someone else, form community, make bonds with the people you're serving and riding with. ... It's not legal and [anonymity] adds to our mystery, makes us look a lot cooler than we really are," he adds jokingly. The Los Angeles County Department of Health requires a permit to distribute food, and the Burrito Project doesn't have one.

To participate, volunteers are asked to donate \$5, which goes toward beans, rice and canned salsa. Pure Luck, a vegan restaurant in Hollywood, regularly contributes tortillas. People can also donate water, juice boxes and fruit. There's a strict one-burrito-per-person policy, with so many people to feed.

So far, the group has been a success. The Burrito Project received the 2007 MySpace Impact Award, fueled by the vocal support of +44 and Travis Barker of Blink 182. As a result, people became inspired to act worldwide. There are now Burrito Projects in cities like Denver and Tulsa, plus the Baltimore Sandwich Project and the Falafel Project in Syria.

Chris gets regular MySpace requests to join the group, but he's never said yes. Instead, the web page offers instructions on how to start your own project. They hope people will take it upon themselves to start their own, maybe delivering on other days of the week or offering other, much-needed products. "There are lots of other services like soap and tampons that nobody really thinks about," says Chris. "We're not solving anything by handing out food, but it shows people we're thinking about them." **NA**

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