ANDY NURSE SEEMED TO HAVE LOST WHAT
tolerance she once had for long meetings.
Even though the basement of the DeKalb
Library in Brooklyn was air-conditioned
on an especially sticky July day, and even
though the meeting’s agenda was only partly fin-
ished, she told the handful of other eco-activists
there that she was sorry, but she had to go build
some compost bins, and she left.

Nurse never really looked all that happy in
meetings. As one of the earliest members of
Occupy Wall Street’s Direct Action Working
Group—as well as one of the last—she attended a
lot of them, including a lot of quite horrible ones.
She could often be seen sitting at the far end of
the oblong circle, away from the fray but guid-
ing it nonetheless with her formidable evil eye.
Where she would come alive was in the streets,
leading marches through the winding canyons of
the Financial District or tricking the cops with an
unexpected reversal of course to get the march to
where it wasn’t supposed to go: Wall Street.

Nurse, now 29, is tall, strong and accustomed
to being in motion. Her father was an engineer in
the Navy; she was born in Panama and graduated from high school in South Korea, with stints in a sequence of world capitals in between. Before Occupy, she organized relief shipments to Haiti with the United Nations' World Food Programme, and she was studying toward a master's degree in international affairs. But by the time a friend suggested they check out the protest that was happening on September 17, 2011, she was aching to do something more hands-on. She found it in the occupation.

“I like all the different working groups,” she told me in an interview that fall, “but I’m more about action.”

It was in the work of building the occupation that Nurse met Zak Solomon, a social worker from the West Coast with an imposing stature and an earnest manner. They collaborated on actions and made money when they needed it by doing bicycle deliveries. As even the most resilient strands of the movement were dissipating this past spring, Nurse came up with an idea for an organizing project that could also be a business, BK ROT. The idea is to employ teenagers in the poorer quarters of Brooklyn’s Bushwick neighborhood to pick up compost from the doorsteps of subscribers and deliver it to urban gardens.

While setting up BK ROT, Nurse also completed a women-only construction training program and is now taking a course on how to audit buildings for energy efficiency. She loves this stuff. As the second anniversary of Occupy Wall Street approaches, she says, “Zuccotti Park feels so far away. Honestly, it’s like a blur.” But it’s also too close for comfort.

Those of us whose social media networks swelled at the height of Occupy Wall Street have been inundated for more than a year now with a discouraging topic of discussion. Is Occupy dead? Where did it go wrong? Will it rise again? What happened to Occupy?

One hears these questions, too, among people on the outside, especially those who supported Occupy in its heyday but now wonder where it went. They recognize that something important and necessary (while perhaps misguided) happened in the fall of 2011, but they’re waiting to see what will happen next.

In late July, Nurse pleaded on her Facebook wall, “Does everything have to be called ‘Occupy’? Come on, y’all.” A commenter on a similar post a few weeks earlier put the matter succinctly: “Burn Occupy on a funeral pyre and move the fuck on.”

Sandy Nurse, a familiar figure in Occupy’s direct actions, now runs a composting business that employs teens from Bushwick’s poorest sections.

Justine Tunney works for Google. Every day that she feels like it, Tunney goes to a playgoundlike office in Chelsea in Manhattan and eats her meals from the free gourmet rooftop cafeteria. She does her job and little else. On the beach in Puerto Rico this summer, at the wedding of two fellow Occupy veterans, she was working so hard on an algorithm designed to replace the architecture of cloud computing that she ended up with tan lines from her laptop.

“They basically bought my soul,” she says. But Tunney doesn’t seem to mind. “Google is the one company I don’t hate. I think Google is actually doing things that are making the world a better place.”

With Google, 28-year-old Tunney has a hand in building the groundwork for the future Internet. Her main task involves a system for managing the vast array of top-level domains Google has bought. As the creator and administrator of Occupy Wall Street’s most public-facing website, OccupyWallSt.org—known by insiders as “Storg”—she’s the one who put the slogan “The only solution is World Revolution” on the main page. But Google lets her be part of a revolution that’s not so far off. She can only hope it will come before the now publicly traded company succumbs entirely to the whims of Wall Street—or, for that matter, the National Security Agency.

The day after Adbusters issued its July 13, 2011, call to “#occupywallstreet,” Tunney registered the Storg domain. She’d recently cashed out of a tech company she helped start and moved from Philadelphia to Washington. But on weekends, she began coming up to New York for the General Assembly’s early planning meetings. Almost from the outset, she found herself global finance is no longer interested in you, you need the skills to continue living—and that doesn’t involve freaking Google.”
at odds with the tumultuous assembly, which had destroyed its own initial website and wanted control over hers. She refused and was labeled an authoritarian by many as a result.

“Just another geek trying to help out with the revolution” was how she described herself to me in the occupation’s early days, while she was checking the Storg server’s vitals with her laptop and monitoring police radios on an earbud. As she puts it, “I was in the shadows.”

Tunney lives in a shared apartment in Stuyvesant Town, a campus of postwar brick apartment towers on Manhattan’s East Side. A robot the size of a snare drum occasionally cleans the floor. Her contribution to the walls of the windowless living room is a cardboard sign above the doorway that says Give Class War A Chance, with a circle around the word “A” to make an anarchist symbol. She still helps maintain Storg a few hours a week, but it doesn’t take much.

“There hasn’t been a lot of stuff going on in Occupy these days,” she’s noticed. “Now it’s mostly bickering on mailing lists.” Occasionally she jumps into these debates with an act of provocative trolling or a treatise denouncing the folly of consensus. She gets impatient. “We shouldn’t just try to create an anarchist society that’s free. We should create a society that’s ten times better,” she says, echoing Google co-founder Larry Page’s goal of making the company’s products ten times better than what they replace.

Tunney also tinkers with her software experiments, like a sophisticated poetry generator and Celeb Dial, a website that lets users make prank calls using celebrities’ voices. She’d stopped playing World of Warcraft because of prank calls using celebrities’ voices.

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was an effort to create a more functional structure called the Spokes Council, but an onslaught of opposition succeeded in thwarting it. Future attempts to try again met a similarly ugly fate.

The old-guard organizations of the left, meanwhile, were unable to pick up where the bulldozed occupations left off. In some cases, it was because Occupiers actively chased them away, fearing co-optation. In others, the organizations had neglected to raise a new generation of leaders, so the disconnect between them and the young Occupiers was too wide to bridge.

Micah White, the Adbusters editor largely responsible for the #occupywallstreet meme, has left that job and now offers “boutique activist consulting.” He issued a press release on July 25, declaring that “Occupy Wall Street was a constructive failure” and proposing the formation of a new “bottom-up” political party.

For Bill Dobbs, a member of the Occupy Wall Street press team, the past two years have been spent putting a friendly spin on the movement’s unfolding story, but he seems to be done with that now. “The 1 percent is winning, and the population is increasingly frozen,” he says. Having seen several waves of movements come and go, Dobbs knows that even in the worst of times there’s some background level of activism. “We’re back to the background level,” he says.

BK ROT’s first employee was Miguel, a high school junior with a round face and a quiet voice (who requested to be identified by a pseudonym). He grew up in a village near Puebla, Mexico, and moved to New Jersey at age 11. He’s been in Brooklyn for only a few months. Eventually he wants a job caring for animals in the wild. On the day of his first compost pickup, he wears a pink bandanna on his head.

At the first stop, Miguel and Sandy Nurse get off their bikes and root through a cluster of trash cans to find the green biodegradable compost bags. As they pick up the bags, Nurse grimaces at the smell, and Miguel laughs. Neighbors standing together on the sidewalk watch in silence, and Zak Solomon records a video of the scene on his smartphone.

According to Nurse, Solomon recognized that Occupy was losing steam before she did. “I was still kind of in the midst,” she says. “But he’d been through this a couple of times.” Having seen movements come and go, he knew it was time to get out of this one. He saw how corrosive the activist culture was becoming as people turned against one another and turned away from society’s real crises.

Not that he is out of it yet. Solomon continues to fight felony charges resulting from the New Year’s Eve protest party in Zuccotti Park more than a year ago. He is trying to go back to school for a master’s in social work, but no school has admitted him yet. In the meantime, he’s doing an internship, coaching a youth football team and driving a moving truck. “I’m in a holding pattern right now,” he says.

Among other things, Nurse and Solomon share an analysis. They see a contradiction between organizing among people who see issues like predatory lending and police brutality as abstractions, as do many activists in Occupy, and the fact that those who confront these issues every day are too burdened to be able to organize. The two have gradually drifted out of activism and into developing practical skills that can help people around them survive. They endured the bitter arguments about race and governance that rattled the Strike Debt group throughout the winter and spring. They’ve since broken their last ties to Occupy-affiliated projects, which seem to be falling apart one after another.

“We all came from the same traumatized network,” says Nurse. “People were very raw.”

One thing she likes about BK ROT is its sense of accountability, which never seemed to be there in Occupy. She has to be fair to the teens who work for her, to her subscribers and to the organizations that let her build compost bins on their land. She’s also glad to be doing something direct and useful, with her hands and legs. In Occupy, she says, “practical things were always put on the back burner. The abstract stuff—the big, the visionary—always pushed them to the side.”

Even so, she says, “I feel like I was a part of history, with others. I feel really proud of what we did there. I’m even proud of the mistakes.” Something like Occupy will come again, Nurse believes, and in the meantime she is trying to take care of herself so she can be ready for it.

After delivering the compost to handmade boxes in a cramped churchyard, Nurse gives Miguel his...
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first check. He’s happy that he’ll be able to buy more minutes for his phone. After he leaves, Nurse smiles at Solomon. “We’re in the same boat,” she says—just trying to keep up with minutes.

In the tradition of better-known step programs, Bill Moyer’s system offers a circular remedy for despair: learn about the steps. Because then you’ll know that even in the middle of Stage Five, the Perception of Failure, you may already be in Stage Seven, when your movement’s message has swayed the majority of public opinion. And that is just one step away from Stage Seven—Success.

Could this be the case with Occupy? Within weeks of its genesis, polls suggested that a majority of Americans supported the movement. More recently, President Obama’s second term has witnessed a renewal of rhetoric about income inequality. New Wall Street prosecutions are making headlines, and the Justice Department is taking steps to adjust drug sentencing practices to overwhelmingly harm poor people of color. None of these count as revolution—each is glaringly superficial—but they’re wins that can be chalked up, in part, to an Occupy-induced mood.

The fecundity that has always been part of Occupy presses on, though in a less breakneck manner. The movement’s chief finance pundit, Alexis Goldstein, appears on national television from time to time, such as in a recent episode of Real Time With Bill Maher alongside Barney Frank. A controversial new “Occupy Card” is soon to appear, offering a slick quasi-alternative to conventional banks. Many onetime Occupiers have continued their work with quieter, deeper kinds of organizing: resisting police brutality, setting up worker cooperatives, helping small towns resist the expansion of fracking and oil pipelines. They’ve also been filing reports from the trial of Bradley Manning, traveling to occupied Gezi Park in Istanbul, facing arrest in North Carolina’s Moral Mondays protests and occupying the Texas Capitol to protect abortion rights.

The movement has even maintained a fledgling presence in New York’s Financial District. A few Occupiers were arrested in late July for falling asleep in Zuccotti Park, and several blocks south the movement’s symbolic nemesis, the Charging Bull statue, is still kept in a protective cage of NYPD barricades.

Moyer and his eight stages strike a tone that’s alluring, and maybe too good to be true. “Although movements in the majority stage appear to be smaller and less effective,” he explained, “they actually undergo enormous growth in size and power. The extensive, seemingly invisible involvement at the grassroots level gives the movement its power at the national and international levels.”

No prosecuted banker or presidential talking point, however, seems to undo the pessimism about the fate of Occupy among those who created it. Most of them are simply trying to figure out how to survive.

Justin Tunney grew up on food stamps, the son of a teenage mother with an upper-middle-class extended family. Tunney and her mother moved a lot from school to school, through a marriage and a divorce. She came to understand herself as transgender at 16, though she didn’t start taking hormones until her early 20s. She was bullied and beaten. It was only when the family got its first computer, while Tunney was a teenager, that she felt like she was good at something.

“I did a lot of mischievous, evil stuff,” Tunney remembers. She learned to fiddle with AOL and made money building software for hackers. Her grandparents helped support her new hobby, and she continued to teach herself programming and then took business classes at a community college. She became an expert in Internet security. She dressed goth.

“When you’re trans, you’re one of the people thrown away by society,” she says. “I try to distract myself from the loneliness by focusing on work and revolution.” It has to be in that order these days.

By the middle of last year, Tunney found herself adrift, running the most popular website of a less and less popular movement. Then, a checkup at a low-cost LGBT clinic turned up a suspicious mass. It turned out to be cancer.

There’s no health insurance for people who pour their lives into Occupy Wall Street. At first, she looked around for a free or affordable way to get treatment, but there was no good option. And without the right kind of insurance she could end up deep in debt. As if in the nick of time, a recruiter contacted her and set her up with an interview at Google. Eighty hours of studying and seven interviews later, she got the job and the insurance that came with it. The tumor was removed, and the ordeal seems to be over.

“I suppose I pose less of a threat to the system,” Tunney says. “But I don’t have to worry when I walk into the office. I don’t have to think about money.”
In late August, while many models were hustling from casting to casting in hopes of landing gigs at New York Fashion Week, a handful were gathered in an auditorium elsewhere in Manhattan, listening to supermodel Anne Vyalitsyna recount her dicey, unsupervised years as a teen model. After being plucked from Russia at the age of 15, Vyalitsyna says, she was tempted with “partying, alcohol and men” and was asked to pose nude. She feels it is easy for young models to go the “wrong way,” but she is one of the lucky ones: “My story is an exception, I feel like; it’s not the rule,” she insists, having landed covers of Vogue, Elle and Glamour and been featured in nine issues of Sports Illustrated. Perhaps most impressive, she is still working as a model at the ripe old age of 27.

Vyalitsyna is a member of the Model Alliance, a nonprofit group trying to rein in the largely unregulated labor practices of the cavalier business of fashion modeling. The Model Alliance’s main objective is quite simple, and it just might be the group’s most difficult challenge: to give models a voice while educating the public to view them not as privileged preternatural beings, but as workers who have wage and health-and-safety needs like everyone else. “The modeling industry has a lot of problems, like any other industry,” Vyalitsyna told her audience of fellow models. “But the regulations are very important.”

FASHION MODELS ARE WORKERS, TOO

Defying stereotypes, the Model Alliance rewrites the rules of fashion.

by ELIZABETH CLINE

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