

## OneBlock Employs Men Impacted by Homelessness to Help Clean UWS

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By Lisa Kava

**OneBlock**, an organization that allows Upper West Siders to “adopt” one neighborhood block to clean up twice weekly, has experienced incredible growth and evolved from an all-volunteer group to one that is currently employing three men who were homeless.

Through a contract with The Association of Community Employment Programs for the Homeless (ACE), a nonprofit that helps provide support and job training to those impacted by homelessness, OneBlock hired the men to pick up trash on Amsterdam and Columbus Avenues and Broadway.

“The men are now receiving a full set of services through ACE and have access to a 401K and health care through this job,” Jake Russell, OneBlock’s founder wrote in an email to West Side Rag. But OneBlock needs funding in order to continue to employ the men and is counting on the Upper West Side community to help, Russell said. The story of OneBlock began in August 2020 when Russell, a Texas native-turned Upper West Sider, noticed he was constantly stepping over garbage when walking around the neighborhood he now calls home. Determined to change this, Russell set out to mobilize his neighbors to pitch in and regularly clean up trash from just one block each. Upper West Siders jumped at the chance to help. The number of volunteers grew at lightning speed, increasing from 70 at the end of August to 1,600 as of October 24th.



Early on, OneBlock caught the eye of an influential go-getter, Douglas Elliman real estate broker, **Ann Cutbill Lenane**. Lenane, whose nickname is “Annie Gets It Done” is dedicated to taking swift positive action. Intrigued by Russell’s idea, she reached out to him privately after joining the OneBlock Facebook group.

“I loved Jake’s idea and I wanted to help the community that has been so much a part of my life,” explained Lenane. “I’m focused on action and getting things done. Jake and I met for tacos that night and it has been ten weeks of getting things done.”

Lenane and Russell are now partners in OneBlock. Together the duo designed T-shirts and hats, secured trash bags and organized group clean-up days to pick up trash and foster team building.

Russell and Lenane noticed that 98% of OneBlock volunteers had adopted streets that ran from east to west, missing the avenues, which “had been hit hard with trash.” Realizing there was an opportunity to fill in that gap and help those in need of work at the same time, they reached out to ACE. Through this partnership, OneBlock has been able to assign the clean-up of Columbus Avenue, Amsterdam Avenue and Broadway to their three new employees. “We wanted to give those who have experienced homelessness good jobs, while cleaning up the streets on the Upper West Side,” said Lenane. “It is a win-win.”

Lenane is covering the salaries of the three men for their first month of employment (October.) Additional funding is crucial to ensuring the long-term viability of the program. Lenane and Russell have launched a fundraiser which they hope will enable OneBlock to continue to employ the men.

For one of the men, this is his first job in over twenty years, Lenane told WSR. “He said he feels welcomed by the community and is inspired every day to keep sober and his job.”

“To make these jobs sustainable and know that the Upper West Side will stay clean, we need Upper West Siders to make regular commitments,” Russell said.

OneBlock can be found at [www.oneblockuws.org](http://www.oneblockuws.org); on [Facebook](#); and on [Instagram](#).