

What Are We Thankful for in 2021?

Jay Watts:

Hello everyone. This is the Non-Toxic Environments podcast, I'm your host, Jay Watts. In this installment of our podcast, I have the pleasure of interviewing Peter Samuelson. Peter is president of the Los Angeles based non-profit organization EDAR. EDAR stands for Everyone Deserves A Roof. If you're a regular listener to our podcast you know my co-host Andy Pace and I focus our discussions on how to build a remodel home or office helpfully. But what if you don't have a home to remodel? What if you don't even have a home? For over two decades? Andy and I have helped clients who are suffering from what is known as environmental illness. In the most challenging situations clients aren't able to live in their homes due to building products chemical exposures. In essence, they're homeless. It is devastating and debilitating. This is the connection I make in our interview. I know Peter's story will inspire you as it did me. So let's listen in, as Peter gives us his backstory and explains the EDAR concept.

Peter Samuelson:

Well, this began at a moment where I realized I was ashamed. I came out of a restaurant after a business breakfast in Beverly Hills and there was a man too close to me, smelly, tall with his hand out, poking me in the chest and he never spoke. Actually I never spoke either, but he was there for a handout. He was unhoused. He was homeless. And I dug in my pocket and I pulled out a couple of dollars and I put them in his hand and I sort of escaped as one does to the parking lot. And by the time I got to the car, I was feeling not good about my myself. How can I at the top of my game at this point in my life, be intimidated and bothered and flustered by a destitute homeless guy who has nothing? So it didn't sit well with me.

Peter Samuelson:

One of the things that's worked for me in my career as a film producer, but also just generally in life. And I have taught my kids to do it is when you are scared of something, if it isn't going to kill you, just push through it, do it. You know the Nike thing "just do it." So I decided that I didn't know a thing about people who were unhoused. So I got on my bicycle on a Saturday and I went off and I started interviewing homeless people. Men, women, occasionally teenagers and I ended up doing over a series of weekends. I did 65 interviews and I asked them two broad areas of questioning. How do you get money? And where do you sleep? And the epiphany and I do think life has, if you're lucky, if you're alert to opportunities, life has epiphanies.

Peter Samuelson:

The thing that wax you in the face and you think, oh my God, I need to pivot because of this. I questioned an old lady on Santa Monica Boulevard near the San Diego freeway. And I said to her, where do you sleep at night my dear? And she took me by the sleeve and she led me onto the Caltran's [California Transit] land next to the freeway. And there in the bushes was a huge cardboard box. It must have been almost six foot tall and it was disgusting. It had a piece of blue plastic over the top. It had been raining, it was smelly. It was just awful. And she said, "this is where I sleep." And on the side of the box in foot high letters, it said "Sub-Zero." And what hit me in the face was I have the refrigerator, this poor lady has the box and what's wrong with this program because maybe we each go to sleep. Me and my comfortable home, her in her box. What, three miles apart?

Peter Samuelson:

So one of the things about being a film producer is you sort of hurdle yourself at challenges and you don't give up until the walls fall in front of you. So my first thought was, well, I will build a building. So I got an architect, I got a budgeter and I got a space planner and we costed building with a hundred beds for homeless folk, including buying a little piece of land somewhere not too expensive. And it was \$5 million and \$5 million got you a hundred beds not to run it, just to buy the land, build the building, kitted out \$5 million. So divide \$5 million by a hundred and that's \$50,000 for the generation of each bed on average. Well, there's a hundred thousands unhoused people and that's just LA county, roughly two and a half million nationally.

Peter Samuelson:

But no one really knows because they're not easy to in the census, but let's just be modest. I thought, okay. A hundred thousands in LA county, \$50,000 per bed, ah, that would make \$5 billion. Now, I'm very good at raising money. I raise it commercially for my films. I raise it for my other non-profits. I have no idea how you raise \$5,000 million. That's like bigger than your head.

Jay Watts:

Oh yeah.

Peter Samuelson:

So I thought, all right, well we have to, that door is closed. We have to go around the back. There will never be taxpayer will to spend \$5 billion in extra taxes. The politicians therefore will never do anything about this. All measures that the politicians take will be a drop in the bucket

and will die before any measurable dent has been put in homelessness, which was awful before the COVID and is now twice as bad.

Peter Samuelson:

All those single ladies with two children who used to have a job as a waitress and then the restaurant closed and then they became unhoused. And now they're living on the street et cetera. So the doors closed. I went off to the Pasadena Art Center College of design. I met with Dean Kosecki and I said, have you ever run a competition to design a pro bono, a pro-social a volunteering thing, an object. And he said, well, what is it? And I said, well, in my head, which is not really spatially, terribly clever, but I think in the daytime, it's about the size of a big Costco shopping cart, but a completely different shape. And you push it around and you put your stuff in it and you do your recycling or however you get money. But at night significantly you put the brakes on, you park it somewhere safe and you let the front down and the back down.

Peter Samuelson:

And what you now have is a seven foot long cot. Raised off the ground because a doctor in the emergency room at UCLA said to me that the principal cause of death in their late thirties, early forties is usually of homeless folk is pneumonia because they lie literally on the ground and they get bugs in their lungs and then they get pneumonia and then they die. So he said, we would do that. We've never done it, but we would do it. I put up a little prize and all the Students few hundred of them at the Pasadena Art Center, college of design competed to build cardboard maquette for a kind of unfolding, caught on wheels that folded up to be the size of a supermarket cart. And the day mode, the night mode and the winners of that competition, Eric Linderman and Jason Zaza.

Peter Samuelson:

We then found a metal shop and we said, could you build us some prototypes of this? And we went through, I think about eight or nine prototypes. And we had a lot of fun sleeping in them and throwing them down flights of stairs and blasting fire hoses at them and so forth. And we finalized it. We ordered 50. Jeff Skull put up the initial money to pay for 50. And then we got the Rand Institute to give us student researchers to measure whether it was any good. And the answer was, yes, this fills a need. On a scale of 10, if a cozy apartment is a 10 and the old lady's cardboard box is a zero. Well, we would never claim to be better than a five, but we are a million times better than the old lady's cardboard box.

Peter Samuelson:

The other thing that dawned on us is that this is almost immune from NIMBY, Not In My Backyard, because what we say to the clients is this is your property. We're giving it to you as a gift. If anybody gets mad at you, close it up, takes about 30 seconds from being fast asleep to walking away, apologize back over your shoulder, go find somewhere where they don't shout at you, that you can park it. That is better and less objectionable to the neighbors. So it's an enormously different concept than what you see under a freeway. Overpass crappy old tents and cardboard boxes and big piles of garbage and so forth because its mobile and its single user. It's turned out extraordinarily well. We raised money. We got a factory to make them for us. They are \$800 each, edar.org is the website. You can sponsor one, you can get one and give it to a homeless person. And it's a huge success.

Peter Samuelson:

It is not a solution to homelessness. I like to say and sometimes I do say, when I meet with the city council on the day that your functionally house in brick and mortar housing, the majority

even, not even all, just the majority of the homeless in your city, I pledge that we will collect up all the EDARs. We will crush them. We will recycle the aluminum and the steel, and we can all join hands and dance in a circle. And won't that be grand? I'm not packing for it. I don't believe it will happen in my lifetime. So, that is EDAR, edar.org and it's a winning proposition. It doesn't bother the neighbors because it can go away. And it gives a sense of pride ownership. We have the sweetest things. The clients, some of them call it the hobo condo. We have an old lady down on skid row who is so, Brenda, who is so house proud.

Peter Samuelson:

I mean, you could eat off her EDAR. It's always the bed is always made. The thing is always spec and span. Veterans love them because it looks a little bit like something that the Marine Corps might give you. I have an ambition which we've never been able to find a way to do it, that we could maybe sell limit a profit to FEMA or the forestry service, somebody like that, or maybe Big 5 Sporting Goods for recreational urban camping. And we could mark them up for that and then take those profits beyond our cost and throw them into, obviously they have to be donated always to the unhoused folk who are our clients, but that's EDAR. It's my baby charity. It's going very well. I have great colleagues in it. And you've promised me now, Jay, that you are going to bring some down to, we'll donate a sample to you if you can get somebody to come pick it up.

Jay Watts:

I promise you I'll be able to do that. I'm involved in now enough and I've got enough connections in town that I'll be able to do that. And it was one of the thoughts I had when I first discovered you and went on your website, looked at the units and was really impressed with the design concept. As you were speaking, I was thinking what is it offering? It's offering

you security. It's offering mobility. Knowing what I know about the homeless population and there's so many different segments of the population, right? There's the segment of the population that's got mental challenges and they're really not functioning. And then there's a segment of the population that just wants to be left alone. Don't talk to me. I don't need it. In fact, I wanted to ask you about that. I know you've kind of vetted your clientele, give me a little background. How do you decide that's a person for an EDAR?

Peter Samuelson:

What we do these day, I mean, originally it was me with an assistant in a pickup truck driving up to an unhoused person and saying, this is an EDAR would you like it? And where that idea fell down is that we had really, we were not trained as social workers and we never quite knew what to do when there was some kind of problem that emerged in their life. Whether to do with mental health, which by the way is overstated. I think it's just from my own sample of hundreds unhoused people. I think it's no more than 10% or 15%. I think the other 85% are just as same as you or me, maybe more in my case. So what we do now, because it just seems to be better in all ways is we try to partner with entities usually nonprofit that have longitudinal services.

Peter Samuelson:

They've got the social workers, they have the security, they've got the safe place to park it and so forth. That could be a church, a mosque, a synagogue. We've done some of each of those. It could be a mission. Union Rescue Mission has. Midnight Mission has on skid row. Volunteers of America have some, it works really well. It could be a drop in shelter, a soup kitchen, someone who will be able to understand and be there for the end user if they have some kind of crisis or many crisis, or if they just need an arm around the shoulder. When we now give them out to

people who are going to take them away and use them somewhere on the street, on the sidewalk or in the bushes or whatever, we try to do it through let's say a mission where they say, okay, you absolutely, this belongs to you.

Peter Samuelson:

Here's your certificate of ownership in case anybody says you've taken it, stolen it, whatever this says that it belongs to you and it's got a serial number and the rest of it. So congratulations, please come back to the mission. Can we say every Tuesday, would that be okay? And you'll have a shower. You'll wash your clothes. You have lunch, you meet with the social worker and then you can go away again with your eater. Would that be okay? And mostly it is. The other thing things that we never thought of that have really come up roses. One of them is that people who've got a little bit of a mental health challenge. So for example, volunteers of America in New Jersey, they had a guy who would not come into their building. They even had a bed for him and he just wouldn't come.

Peter Samuelson:

So they said, well, how about this? On the far side of the parking lot in the bushes, why don't you live there in your EDAR. A few weeks later they said, it might be safer and better if you parked it still outside, but up against the wall of our building. So he did that. And then they said we can bring it indoors. You could still use it. You're familiar with it. It feels safe to you. It's your private space, but bring it in through the loading dock at the back. And we'll find you a place in the warehouse area and you just live in it and you did that for a few weeks. And then they said a bed is opened up nice fluffy bed. Do they, the whole thing, you might want to let someone who needs the EDAR more than you use it. And we've got this bed for you. And he did that too.

Peter Samuelson:

So as transitional housing, it seems to work and it's very low cost. This is not \$50,000 per individual solution. It's 800 bucks. In the scheme of life is so much less expensive and also so much less of a mortal blow to the value of our civilization. Why Jay? What is this civilization? What is the point of having a government? What is the point of having a civilization? If we've got old ladies and children and people sleeping, rough down the road from where we are sleeping in a bed? I think it's kind of like a chain and the strength of a chain is the strength of its weakest link. And I think maybe this is one of our weakest links that we've got 2 million people nationally sleeping, rough. What the hell does that say about us? You and me and everybody else. We have to deal with this.

Peter Samuelson:

I think there are basic human rights. One of them is shelter, and we have to do something about this. And this is our modest, but apparently very successful thus far. It's not a solution. It's not a permanent long term solution, but it is a humane way of getting an old lady off a damn sidewalk where she shouldn't have been in the first place.

Jay Watts:

I completely agree with what you're saying, Peter, and we have 10 Bills of Rights. I think we should have an 11th one and EDAR is the 11th bill of rights, okay?

Peter Samuelson:

God bless you. Do you have the ability to pull that off?

Jay Watts:

I don't know we got to codify it somehow.

Peter Samuelson:

Well, can you get two thirds of the states? I think that to sign on that. I think that's what it might take.

Jay Watts:

We need to get some political here and see if we can run it up that flag pole. I think that's amazing. So I wanted to ask you how many are on the streets?

Peter Samuelson:

A little more than a thousand its infuriatingly challenging to count them. One sees them all over the place, up here in LA and there they are. But in order to count current use, you would need to be able to find them, right? And it's quite tough to find them after they've sort of gone off to do their business. I have to just tell you had a most hilarious thing. So just recently I was talking to a group of homeless folk in a church here, actually in Malibu. And when I finished and I had the EDAR there and I demoed it and the whole thing, and I said if anyone would like to use one of these, you'd come up to me and talk to me and we'll make it happen. So this guy comes up to me and he says, I would really like one.

Peter Samuelson:

I think I would be a very good ideal user for it. If you were kind enough to give me a one and I said, it's yours. We're going to give it to you. Tell me where you're going to use it. He said, no, I could never, I can't tell you that it's a secret. And I said, well, you have to tell me where you're

going to use it. Because I need to ask you so that I know that you're not going to park it in the middle of the road or in the doorway of some restaurant where you'll get into trouble. I need to know where you're going to use it. He said, I can't tell you it's a secret. I said, I think I can't give it to you apart from anything else, where are we delivering it to you? He said, oh, I'll give you an intersection of two streets that you can deliver it to me at.

Peter Samuelson:

And I said, no, you got to tell me where you're using it. I need to make sure that you don't bother the neighbors. And he said, all right, I'll whisper it to you. He says Forest Lawn Cemetery, it's on a hill at the top there are the bushes. I'm in the bushes and that's where I will be using the EDAR and I'm telling you, I don't bother the neighbors and they don't bother me.

Jay Watts:

I don't think so.

Peter Samuelson:

That's where we delivered it. As far as I know, he's still there. So God bless.

Jay Watts:

That is an incredible story. Any backlash, blow back from the community? Just wondering if people, are you, how do I say this? Is it? Are you encouraging the problem by giving them a way to stay on the streets?

Peter Samuelson:

Well, I think that's two questions.

Jay Watts:

Yes.

Peter Samuelson:

No. There's no one in their right mind who given the choice of sleeping in a building or sleeping in an EDAR, would sleep in the EDAR. So no, we are not encouraging homelessness. Anyone in an EDAR who was offered an apartment, I'm sure would take the apartment and give back the EDAR. And occasionally that happens not very often, unfortunately, but the first question have we had any issues? Depends on jurisdiction. I remember when he was mayor of Santa Monica, Richard Bloom, he's now a state Senator. He invited me to his house. I took the EDAR with me in a truck. I had him in the EDAR. He thought it was the most wonderful thing. And I remember he fed me an omelet for breakfast.

Peter Samuelson:

He said, the only thing is here in Santa Monica, the only way we would let you bring these and have them here would be, if you could have those special wheels that they put on the supermarket carts. And in this case, it would be that you could leave Santa Monica, but you could never push them back. And I said, well, what are you doing? I said, how many homeless people have you got? He said, well, we think about 3000, 3,500. And I said, so how many beds have you got in shelters? He said, oh, about 400. And we're building about another 75 a year. And I said, so you and I will be long dead Richard, before you put a dent in your problem. He said, well, yeah. But I because of the gentrification and so forth, I just don't think. So there are jurisdictions where we get nowhere, Pasadena, Beverly Hills, Santa Monica, some of Orange county.

Peter Samuelson:

But then there are other places where you have an absolute right to be a human being and to stand lie down, sleep, sit and live your life. It's not illegal to be unhoused. And EDAR is just a more elegant neater, tidier, less, much less objectionable way of existing on the street and hoping for better times. And at least it gives people their dignity. It's got a place to put your belongings. It has a sense of privacy. That was the one advantage that you didn't say in your very good otherwise list earlier. Privacy, if let's say you are a woman, and either you want to change your underwear, or you want to change the diaper on your small child, how you do that on the street? We don't think of these things. The other thing we had not realized, but it's happened is that missions and places like that use them for extra capacity.

Peter Samuelson:

So like the Union Rescue Mission, one Christmas when they had, they were turning away hundreds of people a night and it was cold. They pushed all the pews in their chapel up to the front. And they filled the whole back of the chapel with women and children not only in EDARs. Each with their own private space. And they put the men, they have a big wide central corridor and they put them all the way down one side and they already had security there. They already had social workers there and suddenly they had an extra, I don't know, 40 beds or something, which put a big dent in their challenge. So it's quite flexible. We've had them on flat roofs. We've had them in underground parking.

Peter Samuelson:

I'm talking to the city of Miami at the moment about them piloting because of the COVID. And because people are working remotely and probably will continue disproportionately working

remotely. The cities amongst us are realizing that they've got an awful lot of multistory municipal parking garages that are going to be just empty. So that's perfect for EDAR. Either you can leave them in a grid on the fourth floor and they've already got a water fountain and a toilet there, or you can bring those things in and you could even if they needed the space for parking in the daytime, it really does take about 30 seconds to go from night mode to day mode. You could in five minutes, you could move 50 EDARS away from the parking bays and against the wall. And there they could stay until all the commuters go away in their automobiles. And then they could be brought out to sleep in. Very flexible.

Jay Watts:

Yes. Sounds like it. I was just thinking, as you were speaking, our new mayor, Todd Gloria is very much wanting to work on the homelessness problem here in San Diego. So I think there's avenues here in our town. And my intention is to share this podcast with as many people as I know at the city level, and then make some personal outreach to some of the people I know personally who are working with the problem and get some EDARs into San Diego because I think what you're doing is amazing. I wrote in one of my little notes to you, when one suffers, we all suffer for that's how I think of it. And you said it brilliantly in earlier on. How can we possibly continue to go on as dignified human beings when we have our fellow human beings sleeping on the ground? That's not right.

Jay Watts:

With an abundant country Like we are with all the wealth that we have and all the ingenuity and creativity we have, this is something we can deal with. We can do something here. That me makes a difference. Peter, I really appreciate you coming on the show. And it's been a short meeting. We're going to be talking again, you and I, for sure, I think everyone that's listening to

the podcast today will find this really illuminating. And I hope they, that everyone listening gets energized by Peter's mission. I'm energized. The city of San Diego is going to get energized. Everyone deserves a roof and that is true.

Peter Samuelson:

And if anyone would like to either get one to give to an unhoused person or donate so that we can give one to an unhoused person, it's edar.org, edar.org, and I'm Peter Samuelson and I'm peter@edar.org. Let's do it. And as far as the mayor of San Diego goes, send in the podcast. Send in the four page explainer, which I already sent you and let's do this. We'll put a Zoom together. Hello, I'll get in the car and come down.

Jay Watts:

So isn't that far. Yeah. Come down to San Diego. We could go see in person.

Peter Samuelson:

I know.

Jay Watts:

Thanks again, Peter, for being on the show today. Folks, all of Peter's contact information, the website, his personal email address will be on our show notes. So until next time, we'll talk again soon. Enjoy yourself. Be well, take care of one another.

Peter Samuelson:

Thanks Jay.