

'Picking up' an important, dangerous and invisible job

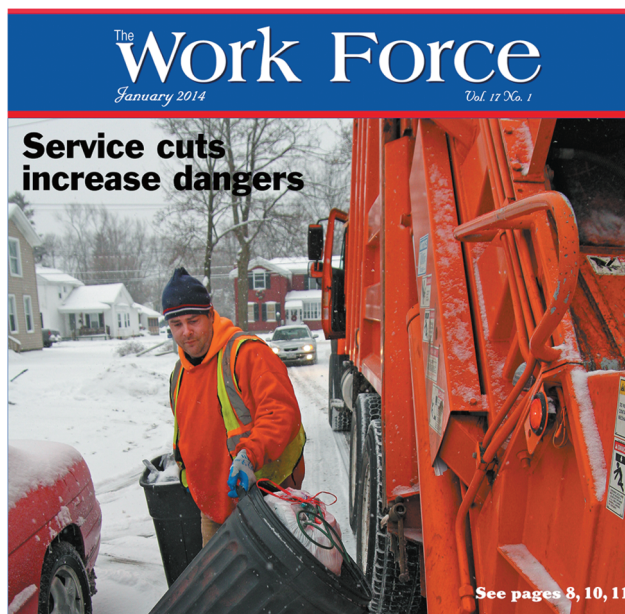
MANHATTAN — Robin Nagle loves talking trash.

Especially when it involves the men and women who pick it up to earn a living and keep us from being mired in garbage.

Nagle is one of the foremost experts of what she describes as the most important and dangerous, yet least understood or appreciated job in America.

"They don't get a lot of attention but where would we be without them?" said Nagle, a clinical associate professor of anthropology and urban studies at New York University.

Her book, an homage to these workers, "Picking Up: On the Streets Behind the Trucks with the Sanitation Workers of New York City," documents the history of trash collection in America's largest city and illustrates the reasons why their profession has gone from being celebrated to nearly despised or belittled by the public they



On Page 1, Cayuga County Local member Jeramy Hutson, a motor equipment operator 2 at the City of Auburn, picks up trash on Sheridan Street in Auburn. Collection can be particularly dangerous in winter as streets become clogged with snow, there is less daylight, and there is more trash to collect around the holidays.

serve.

"The department (of sanitation) became a victim of its own success," said Nagle.

"They were heroes"

Displaying some before and after pictures of trash-filled Manhattan streets in the 19th century, Nagle describes how trash collection has become a sophisticated and militarily precise operation over the years, despite political corruption, ineptness and public apathy.

Back then, the workers were nicknamed the "White Wings" after the white uniforms they wore and "they were heroes," said Nagle. "There were Broadway plays and songs written about them. The 'White Wings' were loved and respected."

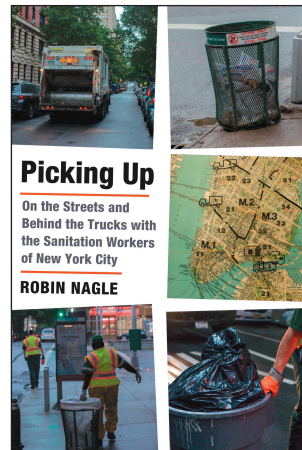
Under the direction of Col. George E. Waring Jr., commissioner of the city's Department of Street Cleaning, New York's streets went from stinky and filthy to clean and sanitary.

Before regular trash collection, preventable diseases such as smallpox and typhus were rampant and responsible for untold thousands of deaths. If not for pressure and clever framing of the trash problem by members of the elite "Ladies Health Protection Association," the mountains of trash and dung that littered the city might not have been addressed at all during the late 19th century.

Taken for granted

"Over time, it became routine and we, the public, took it for granted," said Nagle. "We knew that it was going to get done and we stopped acknowledging the importance."

Not Nagle, who had become transfixed by litter since childhood when she came across some refuse at a public park that someone



Author Robin Nagle stands with a photo of New York City sanitation workers from the 1800s, when they were known as "White Wings." Nagle's book "Picking Up: On the Streets Behind the Trucks with the Sanitation Workers of New York City," documents the history of this vital public service, and how sanitation workers across the country have largely become invisible to the communities they serve.

had carelessly left behind. But writing about trash collection from an academic standpoint wouldn't satisfy her research so she joined the department and became part of small but growing number of women in the department.

That's when she discovered "how much fun it is to operate a mechanical broom." "There's a real grace to those machines," said Nagle. "You don't drive it, you operate it."

She also marveled at the sight of a clean block, the precision and teamwork involved in cleanup operations, and also the seemingly lackluster way the public treated her and co-workers.

The minute she put on the green uniform, she became invisible to many people. "I was an object to move around, not a human being to acknowledge," said Nagle.

Sanitation workers face daily dangers including traffic, sharp objects, chemicals and other agents that may be in the garbage

and even the sophisticated, yet hazardous, equipment they operate, said Nagle. (See accompanying story)

"No matter how sophisticated we get, we still need someone to pick it up," Nagle said.

Voice of the workers

After ending her tour with the department, Nagle felt compelled to stay involved in some way with the men and women whose job and mission she so admired, so she consulted with the heads of DSNY and created the non-paid position of Anthropologist-in-Residence for the department.

As such, she's already involved in developing several projects, including a comprehensive archive, an oral history and museum. Still, there's one concern that continues to confound her: What are we going to do about all this trash we produce? "It's a problem that I can't figure out," said Nagle. "Each of us has to be responsible

Workers' deaths highlight job dangers

Despite the fact that sanitation workers do the most dangerous work of the uniformed services, there's a collective disdain and dismissal of their role and importance by the general public and even other public service workers.

In fact, the dangers of the job were recently brought home to the CSEA family after two members employed in sanitation jobs were killed on the job, and a third was seriously injured.

Steven A. Giacobello, 45, died Sept. 23 after he was struck by a car while collecting recyclable materials for the Town of Oyster Bay.

Nick Farella, 42, succumbed to his injuries on Oct. 7 when the Town of Eastchester sanitation truck he was riding on struck a utility pole, crushing him.

In late November, Joe Stalzer, a co-worker of Giacobello's, was seriously injured while collecting recyclables for the Town of Oyster Bay. He is now recovering at home.

CSEA mourns the losses of Giacobello and Farella, and is wishing Stalzer a quick recovery. The union and PESH are

stewards of the neighborhoods that we live and work and play in."

More importantly however, she warned that we need to start looking upstream at the manufacturers and producers of all the stuff that ultimately becomes



Giacobello



Farella

"When we're seeing so many cuts to services, often safety and health — and the potential lifesaving worker training that comes with it — is the first thing to go. In so many cases, we hear that a lack of training contributes to workplace fatalities and injuries."

investigating all of the incidents, and CSEA has stepped up its sanitation worker training in many areas across the state.

"These incidents are not only tragic, but way too common. These incidents have been increasing in number in recent years, and it's a scary trend," said CSEA President Danny Donohue.

"CSEA members' safety and health at work is our top priority, and we have to fight to ensure that all of our members can do their jobs safely," Donohue said, noting, "when we're seeing so many cuts to services, often safety and health — and the potential lifesaving worker training that comes with it — is the first thing to go. In so many cases, we hear that a lack of training contributes to workplace fatalities and injuries."

— David Galarza, Rich Impagliazzo, and Jessica Ladlee

— David Galarza

Watch Robin Nagle's TED Talk at:

http://www.ted.com/talks/robin_nagle_what_i_discovered_in_new_york_city_trash.html