



NO PITY

In Portland, a band of fed-up citizens are fighting back against car thieves and chop shops. They'll step in where law enforcement can't and do repos on behalf of crime victims.

The man carrying the gasoline was nicknamed What-the-Fuck Chuck. Not that a sobriquet is necessarily an indicator of one's judgment or lack thereof, especially here in Portland, where open-minded people like Paul Regan are disinclined to judge. But then Regan noticed the lit cigarette in Chuck's other hand and thought: *Holy crap. Is finding this car really worth it?*

Of course it was. The car, a 1981 Chevy Camaro, was Regan's treasure. White with thick green stripes running over the hood and back, the car was an homage to Portland's Major League Soccer team, the Timbers. Emblazoned across the Camaro's tail in bold capital letters were the words "NO PITY," short for "No Pity in the Rose City," a rallying cry of hardcore Timbers fans like Regan. The only thing that could have made this car more quint-

essentially Portland would have been to wrap it in bacon.

One morning last May, Regan's wife looked out the window of the couple's home in Northeast Portland and didn't see the Camaro. "She asked me where I'd parked it," Regan told me recently. "Right out front," he replied, wondering if she might be pulling his leg. She wasn't. NO PITY had been stolen.

Regan, a hairstylist who looks a little like Denis Leary, called the cops, but the short-staffed Portland Police Bureau was too swamped to do anything. An officer suggested Regan post about the theft on social media. He started with Nextdoor, despite the platform's reputation for bigotry, paranoia, sanctimony, and all-around awfulness. As if on cue, someone responded that they found it inappropriate to write "NO PITY" on the car, because it's important to have compassion for others.

Regan also shared the news about the car on two Facebook Group pages where users congregate to help people get their cars back, sharing pictures of missing vehicles or parked cars that look fishy for some reason or another: missing plates, "rattle can" paint job, make and model matching a stolen-car alert, a nice car parked in a shitty place, vehicle identification number tag removed, wheels off and the back seat full of trash and a sleeping bag.

In the first few days after the theft, Regan heard of various possible sightings. Under a bridge near downtown was one. Another was at a park overlooking the confluence of the Columbia and Willamette Rivers. But follow-up searches led nowhere, and soon the scent went cold. Losing hope,

Regan began spending his free time driving around with a friend, peering into car lots and alleyways. At one point, he stopped to ask a garbage collector to keep an eye out for his beloved Camaro.

Then on June 1, one of the group members from Facebook contacted Regan with news: according to footage surreptitiously captured by a drone, his Camaro, not to mention a bunch of other cars, was in an abandoned lot—occupied by homeless people—just below the railroad tracks in the St. Johns neighborhood, north of downtown. A recovery specialist was already on his way there with backup.

Regan drove a rental to St. Johns. On the scene, he was met by three men: The group's de facto leader, Nick Haas, was a mechanic with a wild long beard who rides a Harley, wears leather, and boasts about his various firearms. The other two men were Frank Donaldson, an employee at a local paint store who had befriended Haas on a previous recovery mission, and Chuck Burseson, a.k.a. WTF Chuck.

Haas, one of Portland's most active stolen-car hunters, had already scouted the location. "I realized I had stumbled into something *huge*," he later recalled. After seeing at least 20 partially stripped cars and other vehicles, he called the police; there had been two shootings in the area earlier in the year, and Haas told me he didn't want to take chances. But when the officers arrived, they explained that they could only wait nearby because the cars in question were on private property. Haas and his friends were on their own.

Regan didn't know any of these people, and wasn't inclined to march into a homeless encampment—cum—chop shop to demand his property. But his love for the Camaro was powerful. He wanted it back, and these men were volunteering to help. If they didn't go in now, the car might be cut to pieces and lost forever.

Grabbing the canister of gasoline, WTF Chuck said to Regan, "Stay close." That was when Regan noticed the cigarette in Chuck's left hand. Suppressing his survival instinct, Regan followed the impromptu posse down the muddy embankment and into the world of Portland's cut-rate dark knights.

No need to sugarcoat it: these past few years have been tough on Portland. The city is still suffering from PTSD following the riots of 2020, when peaceful protests in the wake of George Floyd's murder were co-opted by a small but rabid faction that clashed nightly with police, federal agents, and right-wing counterprotesters. That September, smoke from devastating wildfires gave the city a *Blade Runner* pall. A year later, still more fires and smoke, followed by the terrifying heat dome that killed dozens of people. Stir into that cauldron the pandemic, an intractable homelessness crisis, and related problems like drug addiction. Is it any wonder that people here are stealing cars in record numbers?

In the years preceding COVID, the Portland Police Bureau reported close to 7,000 motor vehicle thefts a year. Big numbers, but in 2021 the figure jumped to 9,061. By October 2022, when the bureau last updated its count, thefts were on track to top 10,000 by year's end—including one bookmobile.

At the same time, Portland's police force has been gutted, although it is starting to rebound. In 2020, calls to defund the police spurred the city council to reduce the force by nearly 100 sworn officers, from 1,001 to 916. That reduction was followed by a wave of attrition, leaving the bureau with 772 officers by May 2022. These shortfalls mean workload triage, which means deprioritizing stolen-property crimes.

Yet out of this disheartening milieu, an unexpected and controversial force for good has emerged. A growing band of frustrated, altruistic, risk-taking, tech-savvy, and sometimes just plain bored citizens have joined together to form a ragtag army. Convening online and IRL, thousands of people are working to reunite owners with their stolen cars. If you have a missing-vehicle problem, if no one else can help, and if you can find them, maybe you can turn to...some random people on Facebook.

One morning last fall, I hopped out of a Lyft at the corner of Lombard Street and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in Northeast Portland. Trucks zoomed past as I stood on the littered sidewalk beside a sketchy motel and across from a run-down gas station and a Jack in the Box. This is the other Portland, the part I saw but didn't see during my 16 years of

living here. The part with no taxidermy-adorned hipster coffee shops, no art galleries or sleek offices for green businesses, no twee bike shops tailor-made for the *New York Times* travel section. Just an economically depressed swath of an American city like any other.

I was waiting for Sara Jane, a stolen-vehicle-recovery artist bordering on savant. To date, Jane (not her real name) has recovered or helped recover roughly 900 cars and trucks. Our plan had been to meet up and ride around town, maybe cruise past some hot spots for thievery while talking along the way. But then I received a hurried text message:

*Meet me
Going for a truck [I've] been chasing
Mlk and Lombard*

About 30 minutes later, when I texted to say I had arrived, she sent a photo of a dilapidated black Ford F-250.

Is that there?

It wasn't.

Jane drove up suddenly behind me in a scratched gray Mitsubishi mini-SUV. After a half-second greeting, she started firing off facts about the F-250 in question—where it was last seen, where else we could look for it, new intel other members of the group had posted. She thought of the Jubitz truck stop and gas station just up the road, a place where she had found stolen vehicles in the past, so we took off in that direction.

Born and raised in Portland, Jane is 40, with straight brown hair and large kind eyes. She recently left her job at Costco after eight years and now picks up part-time gigs like delivering for DoorDash or working security at event venues. She smokes, laughs easily, and is dizzily fast when it comes to scrolling, posting, and messaging.

Jane's childhood was a portrait of instability. Her mother struggled with addiction, and Jane bounced around to different homes, different schools. When she got pregnant at 15, she resolved to care for the child, she told me, to give her daughter a good home and prove that she wasn't just like her mother.

Today, Jane has two adult daughters, a 13-year-old son, and two grandchildren who are just about the only things that can distract her from her primary occupation, which isn't exactly an occupation so much as it is an unpaid pursuit that consumes most of her waking hours: hunting stolen cars. "Once you get that recovery under your skin, it's like a drug," she said.

Some days, Jane stays busy with dot-connecting online—linking alerts about stolen vehicles to pictures of suspicious cars and trucks, updating threads about searches underway, fielding incoming tips from group members, or liaising with police. But she prefers to be on the street. "I kind of feel like chasing this truck is driving me insane," she said as we headed west on Columbia Boulevard. "I don't really like going after one particular thing."

She usually spends hours driving slowly through the city and its outskirts, snapping photographs of license plates, noting abandoned cars, and seeing which homeless camps have been cleaned out, only to resprout a block away. It's about patterns, she explained: "How vehicles are parked, where they're parked, the style, the make, the telltale signs." If she stops to get out for an inspection, she's thinking, "Is the ignition busted? Is there a window broken? Is it left unlocked?" Because these days around Portland, she said, if it's unlocked, chances are it's stolen.

At one point during our morning together, Jane spotted a pair of license plates sitting in the bushes. She stopped to retrieve them, then used the app Bumper to confirm that they were from a car that had been reported stolen the previous day. (She later handed them over to the police.) A few minutes later, we came upon an area she described as a "clusterfuck of vehicles." "This is where I get my camera so I look less obvious," she said, clicking her phone into a dash-mounted holder.

But Jane's real superpower—or, depending on your point of view, ill-advised specialty—is that she is unafraid to walk up to people anywhere in the city and start talking to them about cars or, if no one is there, to open a door and nose around for clues, like a discarded envelope that might reveal the true owner's identity. "I just do things that most people don't," she said. I asked whether this was even legal. "I mean, it depends on who you ask." If the car is already stolen, who's going to complain about her trespass?





She calls her strategy “recovery with kindness,” and it’s rooted in compassion for people on the street, the vast majority of whom aren’t stealing cars. Sometimes she will make up a story about Grandma’s lost poodle. Conjuring tears, she asks to look around a little. In other cases, she is straightforward, explaining that she’s not a cop and has no interest in other people’s business—all she wants is her friend’s car back. *Can we just take care of this and keep the police out of it?* This approach usually works, she told me, and although she carries mace for emergencies, she’s convinced that she is safer because of the fact that she’s a woman alone. “People aren’t threatened. And they want to help,” she said.

Lino Pavon, an officer who has been with Portland’s East Precinct for more than a decade and who has developed a working relationship with the stolen-car-recovery crowd, is impressed with Jane’s investigative efforts and diplomacy. “She talks to people that normally would run from me,” Pavon said, gesturing toward his uniform and bullet-proof vest. Not all of the police force is in favor of this vigilantism, but Pavon’s superiors support it enough that he was given the green light to download the Facebook Messenger app onto his work phone so that he can be in better touch with the car-recovery community.

The reasons for Jane’s commitment to the cause are unclear. “I hate the word *vigilante*,” she said. It has a certain connotation, she explained—“guns and testosterone and all that.” Whatever she chooses to call this pastime, it’s clear that the drive to help people like Regan find their vehicles has grown into a full-blown obsession. “Those are people I want to help, and I will not stop,” she said.

But there are risks. Car recovery may be a hobby, but so is bowling. “I do worry, because things can go sideways,” Pavon said. Although many of the cars that these volunteers find are unoccupied, that’s not always the case. “You never know who those people are,” he said, referring to car thieves. “I’ve made countless arrests of people who were wanted for Measure 11 crimes—assault, rape, murder—and those criminals are often in stolen vehicles.”

To illustrate the point, Pavon recounted an episode when Jane had driven into a homeless camp and, from the sparse information he received, it sounded as if she had been boxed in and wasn’t able to leave. She messaged him, but he and his partner had been dispatched on another call. “I couldn’t jump in the car and drive over there to help her,” he said. He eventually managed to get officers from a different precinct to race to the scene. They couldn’t find Jane at first and were reluctant to enter the camp. “There was a shooting there the night before,” Pavon said.

“Then the next thing I know, she’s texting me back: *Oh, yeah. We’re cool. We’re good.*” Jane had cast her kindness spell. The people in the camp even helped her fix a tire and get her car unstuck. There’s no question that she’s daring, Pavon said. “And crazy, too.”

Jane isn’t dismissive of the dangers. “Yes, I could get shot. Yes, I could get hurt. Yes, I might fuck someone over, the wrong person, and they might come after me. But this could all happen at 7-Eleven, too,” she said. With every recovery, she continued, “I’m bringing joy to somebody’s life. I’m changing somebody’s life. Why would I want to stop doing that, you know?” Besides, there’s something liberating about her choice. “I’ve dedicated my whole life to doing what people felt I needed to do,” she said. “And finally, at 40 years old, I just kind of middle-fingered the world and said, ‘I’m going to do what I want to do.’”

One morning in May last year, Jane was scrolling through the PNW Stolen Cars page (or maybe it was the sister page, PDX Stolen Cars) when she saw Regan’s post about the kidnapped Camaro. “There are cars that really stand out,” she said, and this was obviously one of them. “Everyone wanted to get that car back.”

A few weeks later, Jane heard from one of her favorite, albeit secretive, contacts. The man wrote with a tip about the Camaro’s whereabouts. More than a tip: aerial reconnaissance. Drone footage had captured what was unmistakably the Camaro, nestled in a stand of tall trees in the neighborhood of St. Johns. (For her contact’s safety, Jane declined to connect us. “*Maybe I’m drone dude*,” she messaged me. She was joking, I think.)

Jane went into overdrive trying to reach Regan—via phone, direct messages, his wife, his workplace—but she couldn’t get through. Time was of the essence; she had seen too often how a found stolen car can

vanish again. But St. Johns was far from her home turf. And while she’s daring, she isn’t stupid. If this encampment was as large and secluded as it appeared on her screen, she didn’t want to go in there. Not alone, anyway.

She did know someone, though, who was up to the task—fired up, even. His style made her bristle: he was a swaggering tough guy whose demeanor struck Jane as unsafe and contrary to the idea of earning the trust of people who live on the street. “I go in with honey; he goes in with vinegar,” she said.

Yet there was no denying his effectiveness. He had an active network of friends willing to help with recoveries, he knew the city as well as anyone, the cops knew him, and he was unafraid of pretty much everything. Jane had the NO PITY Camaro in her sights, and she was not going to lose it. So she shelved her misgivings and called Nick Haas.

The scene in the forested pocket below Midway Avenue in St. Johns was like something out of *Mad Max*, but substitute dense forest for desert sun. Cars and stripped cars and tires and parts and oil and trash and clothes and scrap wood strewn everywhere. Imagine a miniature shantytown, with as many semipermanent structures as there were tents. Haas later estimated that there were 40, perhaps 50 cars there, all in “various states of dismemberment.” In the niche treasure-hunting world of stolen-car recovery, this was the mother lode.

Haas switched his phone to video function and tucked it into the breast pocket of his biker jacket, then began recording and narrating as if he were entering a safe house in Abbottabad. He poked his head into a red Chevy truck and pulled a Sawzall blade—often used to start a stolen car without a key—out of the ignition. He wandered past a plywood structure that looked like an outhouse, then along a path through the undergrowth leading to a cluster of torn-apart Subarus and other cars.

When he spied the Camaro, he snapped a quick photograph. At this point, Regan and Jane were still on their way to St. Johns. Jane’s phone buzzed with a message from Haas—it was the picture of the Camaro.

Jane texted back: *You crazy fucker.*

Haas: *There are 20 cars here!!!! Calling 911.*

Eventually, a woman caught up to Haas, asking what he was doing, why he was snooping around. She was clearly distressed by an apparent show of force. “You don’t need to cock a gun in my fucking face,” she said. (If he had threatened her with a gun, the moment was not captured by Haas’s makeshift body cam. If he hadn’t, how did she know he was armed?)

“Fuck off,” Haas replied.

“Don’t come in here and treat me like I did something fucking wrong,” the woman shouted.

“Shut your cock holster,” Haas replied.

“I’m trying to fucking fix this shit,” she said.

“Well, then you’re doing a great fucking job,” Haas replied.

He kept walking with his back to the woman, focused on his mission. She yelled after him: “Fuck you! Fuck you, and fuck you, too!”

“Bye, hooker,” he called back.

In Haas’s retelling—and a witness confirmed his account—it was at that moment that a Jeep Cherokee with two men inside came “roaring” out of nowhere and nearly hit him. He jumped sideways just in time, then took out his pocketknife and began slashing tires.

Outnumbered, Haas was about to shout for WTF Chuck or Donaldson when he heard “Nick—look out!” He turned and saw a man coming at him holding a pipe aloft, ready to swing.

Nick Haas grew up in Salem, Oregon, and moved to Portland in 2010 to pursue his dreams of being a professional musician. He earned some OK money playing gigs at local clubs and running a concert venue, but then he became a dad. His income from music was too inconsistent, whereas fixing cars and bikes—something he’d always had a knack for—was more stable.

His first vehicle recovery was in 2021, and it was a 1980 Harley-Davidson. Once owner and bike were reunited, Haas listened as the man, overjoyed, began calling his friends to tell them he had gotten it back. “It was like watching somebody hold their child for the first time

or seeing a loved one after some horrific tragic event,” Haas said. From that day on, he was hooked. Here was something he could do to genuinely help others, the city, and its overburdened police force. “Everyone screams ‘Abolish the police!’ Well, if we want to abolish the police, we’re going to have to police ourselves,” he said.

Haas, who is 34, spends considerable time talking about two things: the dysfunction of modern society due to scourges like addiction and Nick Haas adventures in ass kicking. Like the time last year when security cameras at his repair shop picked up two thieves trying to steal catalytic converters from vehicles parked on his lot. Haas blasted them with a shotgun loaded with rock salt—“Boom, right in the face. Boom, right in the ass,” he said in a YouTube video.

Then there was the time he walked up to two men in a car that he knew was stolen. “They’re sitting there with a plate covered in crystal meth, a huge pile,” Haas said. “I pulled my pistol out and put it right in the window and said, ‘I’m going to count to five, and if I can still see you guys, I’m going to shoot you both in the ass.’ I started counting out loud. They took their gigantic plate of methamphetamine and went running down the street, spilling it the whole way.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, Haas is a hit with local television, with his steampunk glasses, leather biker gear, and polished sound bites criticizing the status quo and calling on his fellow citizens to take back their city. A reporter named Elise Haas (no relation) was on the scene after a recovery last summer and told viewers, “I was the first to tell you about how Nick Haas had helped recover his 50th stolen vehicle. Today he has now hit 200 vehicles recovered. And he’s inspiring more people in Portland to help.”

In another TV segment, Nick Haas says to the camera, “I feel like if I can lead by example, more people will start stepping up and doing the kind of things that I’m doing, and eventually these guys [thieves] will start to realize this isn’t a good idea anymore.” The local media coverage is heavy on adulation, light on underlying problems, and mum on vigilantism’s potential downsides, what it says about a society.

When I met Haas last October, he had fallen on hard times; he was being evicted from his shop for failing to make payments. He didn’t really know what was next but also said he wasn’t going to let up on his recovery efforts. People need hope right now, he said. “I’ll eat Top Ramen and be broke. It’s worth it. I’m sure Mother Teresa wasn’t a rich person, not that I would ever compare myself to her.”

His family is proud of what he’s been doing but worries that he’s going to get hurt. Yet as Haas sees it, addressing this problem—not just stolen cars but the frayed social fabric that leads to symptoms like addiction, homelessness, and car theft—is about more than personal risk. “The danger of what I choose to do, the risk of being shot by some petty thief high on methamphetamine, doesn’t scare me more or bother me as much as the fact that this situation exists,” he said. “I just wish there were more people who had the ability to say ‘Fuck it’ and do what I’m doing.”

Pavon, the officer who has worked closely with Portland’s recovery enthusiasts, is sympathetic toward fed-up citizens like Haas. “They’re taking matters into their own hands because they see little response on our end,” he said, referring to both the police and city government. At the same time, Pavon urges caution. “I’ve suggested many times that this is not a good idea. You should probably not do that, you should probably not go after those people, you should probably not go into a camp. But I can’t be responsible for their actions,” he said. “I can’t stop them from doing what they’re going to do.”

And then there is the matter of mission creep. “We’ve even done some bigger things,” Haas told me, “like cleaning up the neighborhood. We were dealing with the taggers. We were dealing with the thieves. We were dealing with people breaking into cars.” One house near his shop was a constant source of complaints and concern; Haas said the inhabitants were selling heroin, fentanyl, and meth out of the basement.

So he got a crew together and drove to the house with a U-Haul truck. “We took them out of there. We took all their belongings, put it all in boxes. We drove it clear out to Troutdale, Oregon, and put it all in a storage unit. We told them it’s paid for three months. Don’t come back,” he said. “Then we spent the next two weeks running off every junkie and addicted heroin user and cleaning up needles and garbage and burnt pieces of tinfoil.”

More recently, Haas has been posting about a notorious motorcycle thief in town nicknamed Blackbird because of a crow tattoo just below

his right eye. In one online forum, motorcycle enthusiasts hinted that if Blackbird were to lose all his fingers, “that would be a terrible shame.” To Haas, none of this amounts to vigilantism. “A lot of what I do, according to the black-and-white lettering in the law of federal or state or county—however you want to phrase it—is illegal,” he explained. He claimed that officers frequently tell him, “What you’re doing isn’t legal. But it’s what’s right.”

Inspired by the attention he has gained from recoveries and media coverage, Haas now dreams of spinning up an organization that does good and helps him pay his bills. The working title is Guardians Theft Recovery, and the idea is to have a bunch of loaner cars available to share with theft victims at no charge. If a stolen car is found, GTR will fix it, employing veterans, former addicts, and former inmates. If it’s not found, the victim gets to keep the loaner, no strings attached. It would be a way to push back a little, he told me. Not a remedy, but something.

When Haas saw the man with the pipe, he quickly pulled out his .45 and fired a shot into the sky. “Back off. I *will* defend myself” he said. Onlookers fled into the trees, but the man with the pipe and the driver of the Jeep held their ground.

Hearing the gunshot, the officers parked at the top of Midway Avenue no longer had to hold back. It was time to intervene.

They managed to defuse the situation, which didn’t take much because Haas immediately identified himself, detailed what had happened, and said he had a permit for his firearm. The police brokered a truce and even got Haas to promise to pay for the slashed tires, which he did, knowing full well the police would never follow up.

The officers nevertheless confiscated Haas’s pistol, which he found—and still finds—infuriating. But he wasn’t ready to leave the site. There was work to be done, cars on Haas’s “personal list” that he wanted to drive out of there, chief among them the NO PITY Camaro.

Haas and his crew were preparing to drive the car out of the camp when Regan finally showed up at the scene. As instructed by Haas, who had texted him when he’d first spotted the Camaro, Regan had two canisters of gasoline with him. It was finally time to rescue his baby.

“When I first saw it, I was like *fuuuuck*,” Regan recalled. NO PITY was covered in filth, needed tires, a battery, and gas, and had suffered a few other bumps and bruises, but it was otherwise intact. They salvaged some nearby wheels, and Haas was eventually able to get the engine running. But the car was also trapped in a muddy corner of the overgrown lot and needed to be pulled out. Regan lay on the ground in the leaves and muck to hook a tow cable to NO PITY so they could use a winch to extract it.

By this point, Jane had arrived at Midway but decided to stay uphill, away from the camp and possible conflict. A few minutes later, she watched the Camaro come thundering up the hill with Haas behind the wheel. The car was smoking and spitting mud, but it was alive and finally free from its captors. A few months later, Haas and some friends put together a video about the whole episode, complete with a soundtrack of—what else?—David Bowie’s “Heroes.”

It was a joyous scene that day in St. Johns, especially for Regan, who was high-fiving everyone. He kept thanking Haas and the others. They didn’t want to be paid, but they said they’d accept tips, so Regan gave them the money he had in his wallet, maybe \$100. Then he turned to Jane. “I think you’re an angel. Thank you, thank you, thank you!” he said. After that, the group posed beside the car for a photograph.

The tires they had scrounged to drive the car back up onto the road weren’t safe for travel, so after everyone left, Regan and a friend waited for a tow service to arrive. While they were sitting beside the Camaro, one of the officers came over, thinking they were part of the Facebook group of recovery specialists. “Hey, have you seen a black Firebird?” he asked. One had just been reported stolen. ■

David Wolman’s work has twice been anthologized in the Best American Science and Nature Writing series, he was a finalist for a National Magazine Award, and he has written four works of nonfiction: Aloha Rodeo (with Julian Smith), The End of Money, Righting the Mother Tongue, and A Left-Hand Turn Around the World. He lives in Hawaii with his family.

