



Papi Spekhang

Fast trolleys and Curbside collection in Johannesburg



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It's still dark at 5am when Papi Spekhang leaves Metro Centre. He walks onto the quiet Bertha Solomon Road alongside Wits University pulling his trolley, which is empty except for the bag that is flattened and tied to the base. He turns right to head towards the western inner-city suburbs. His motion is skateboard-like as he pushes off with one foot on the ground, the other on the deck of the cart. He steers the iron board frame cum handlebar and he's off, down the hill. At times he's so fast it's impossible to keep up with him except by car. His green signature African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO) uniform is deeply stained from many days of reclaiming work.

Metro Centre

Some of the reclaimers who are passing through here live at the same site near Wits University. Colloquially it's called Metro Centre, because it is adjacent to the parking area for the City's bus fleet, called Metrobuses. This naming has interesting satire to it as the building housing the municipal headquarters – on the same road and about two kilometres from this site – is formally known as the Metro Centre. A taxi association also uses the space as a base for their operations. Reclaimers who had been living on the street in Fietas were relocated to this temporary site after ARO negotiated with the taxi association to allow a limited number of people to reside there.

Some, like Papi, moved to Metro Centre from Bekezela, a dense informal settlement in Newtown, home to the famed Market Theatre, just on the other side of the Nelson Mandela Bridge. Bekezela is extremely well located, as it is close to the inner city, which is a good source for recyclables, as well as a large buy-back centre where reclaimers can sell the materials they collect and sort. Bekezela houses families and many reclaimers. But disagreements and conflicts arise between groups of residents. Papi says he is glad to have moved from a place where 'there is too much drinking and fighting'. Metro Centre, with some 30 shacks, is much quieter. Here, as at Bekezela, residents help one another. When one reclaimer is hauling goods to sell, another reclaimer will assist – because it takes two and sometimes three people to pull and steady the 'train' of coupled carts and three or more enormous bags as they are dragged up the hill and over the bridge to the buy back centre. "We also make a boula (fire in a tin drum) together and share our food and cook together," he says.

Growing up

Papi prefers the quiet – having grown up on a farm near Mafikeng. But he's not a stranger to noise and to the sounds of conflict. His family moved to Joubertina, the then black township adjacent to Carletonville, when he was a young boy. In 1992 - when there were massive party

political uprisings in the area - Papi was taken, along with other young men and boys, to the stadium to protect the township. They stayed there at night, keeping guard and hearing the gunshots, screaming and fighting as ANC and IFP aligned combatants fought on the streets. He says, "our fathers and grandfathers were working on the mines, so it was up to the youth and young boys to defend the township." It was a terrifying time for the ten-year-old.

Own boss

After he matriculated, Papi trained as a security guard. But he says that work is too dangerous, "and no one will employ me with this hand" he adds, holding up his left hand. Two of his fingers were amputated after a falling accident. He says if he were formally employed, he'd have to do light work. But in this work of reclaiming he is his own boss; he works the hours he chooses and no one is behind his back. The materials he collects are also a form of savings as he can choose to store some materials and sell them when he is unable to work.

Working the bins

Papi's gloves protect him against the cold and will protect him from the dirt and possible hazards inside the bins he will be digging through today. His first stop is 12 kilometres away in Westdene. He leaves





before dawn, but the roads he travels on are already oversubscribed with reclaimers. There is an understanding about who has access to which bins. Papi says this has become necessary because, 'there is too much fighting for bins these days – you need to have your own spots'. There are groups of reclaimers 'who like to own the streets' he says. These are some of the reasons he thinks that it is important that reclaimers are organising.

When Papi arrives in Westdene, he heads for a student accommodation complex where he has an arrangement with the caretaker. Papi fetches the bins from inside the complex and lines them along the roadside. He then shakes out his voluminous bag and rolls down the edges to create a large round hollow. This shape is important as it will help steady the filled bag on the trolley when he has finished collecting at the end of the day.

As he begins to flatten and stack the cardboards he pulls from the bins, he is careful to maintain the rounded fat shape by building a circular wall of cardboard around the edges of the bag. He throws papers, plastic bottles and cans into the centre, but not before these too have been flattened by hand or underfoot. A resident comes out and hands Papi a few 5 litre bottles that have been emptied of catering sauces. Papi takes the bottles and then continues to dig in the line of bins and fill his bag. He finds a pair of shoes in one bin. He's going to give these to a deaf reclaimer from Zimbabwe who lives with him at Metro Centre.

Papi then moves on to Brixton, the next suburb where he will work today. His trolley is already starting to get heavy, and his body strains at a 45-degree angle to pull it. On some of the level roads he pushes the

load from behind. As he climbs the hill that rises towards the Brixton Tower, he keeps to the verge of the road to avoid fast moving vehicles.

Brixton is different from the other areas where Papi collects as ARO has a partnership with the residents there and in the neighbouring suburb of Auckland Park. The pilot is called Recycling with Reclaimers. ARO reclaimers educate residents on reclaiming and recycling and the residents separate their recyclables into special bags for the reclaimers to collect. Each week, the reclaimers give the residents new plastic bags for their recyclables, or return empty reusable bags to residents who put them out. At the end of the day, the reclaimers participating in the pilot weigh their materials at a scale set up in the park. Of the 73 kg load he has collected, Papi says this is not his best day. When the COVID-19 lockdown started, many of the students went home and still have not returned, so there are fewer materials to collect.

Following the Pikitup routes

This is Papi's Tuesday route. On most other days, like all of the street reclaimers in the city, he follows the Pikitup municipal waste company's collection routes so that he can salvage valuable materials residents throw away in their rubbish bins before Pikitup comes to collect them. But on a Wednesday Papi collects material from the Clicks department store in the inner city. He has an arrangement with the store management and they have been keeping materials for him for a number of years. He also gets damaged goods such as cosmetics whose casings are cracked. They have not expired and are in good condition, and Papi is able to sell them informally.

