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**JON CARROLL**

- [Jon Carroll](#)

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Let us suppose that you have a cleaning person. No need to be embarrassed; many people have cleaning people. And of course, because you are a socially conscious adult, you pay your cleaning person double the minimum wage, make sure to deduct for Social Security and never subject her -- it's almost always a her -- to physical abuse or sexual harassment.

But let us say for a moment that not everyone is like you. Let us say that cleaning people live on the margins of society, doing a job that some regard as vaguely shameful. Cleaning people have no job security, and often they do not have enough work. They often are asked to double as child care specialists, grocery shoppers, laundry providers and captive audiences.

And if a woman does not speak a lot of English -- and there's a lot of that going around just now -- then all of these problems are exacerbated. Which is why WAGES was started in the first place.

WAGES (it's one of those dopey acronyms, Women's Action to Gain Economic Security) is a local nonprofit that helps set up housecleaning cooperatives and then assists with education, leadership training, management support and whatever else is necessary. They do not own the cleaning companies; the cleaners own the cleaning company. The cleaning company sets wage scales, job descriptions and schedules. It also buys tools and supplies and handles assorted business hooahs, like paying business taxes. The co-op staff is bilingual, so it can act as a conduit between the Latina cleaners and the (mostly) English-speaking customers.

WAGES has set up three cleaning cooperatives, one in Redwood City, one in Morgan Hill and one in Oakland. The one in Oakland is called Natural Home Cleaning. It's the newest, so the people from WAGES have moved in across the hall, there to hover, offer advice and, not incidentally, raise money. The offices are in a big brick building on International Boulevard, one of those repurposed factories stuffed with worthy organizations.

On one side of the corridor is the WAGES office; on the other side Natural Home Cleaning. The separation is important; WAGES is an advisory group, or an enabling

group, or something; it does not employ the cleaners. The cleaners are members of a co-op; in addition to cleaning houses, they also meet to discuss profit margins and economies of scale, of which, at the moment, there aren't a lot.

Another aspect of the groups set up by WAGES: They're real green. There's a chemical called butoxyethanol, found in all-purpose cleaners and window sprays. It may not hurt you if you use it once a week, but if your job involves constant exposure, the EPA says, it can produce headaches, dizziness, kidney problems, anemia, liver disease and upper respiratory tract irritations. Put it another way: The cleaners say it makes them feel bad.

I asked Hilary Abell, executive director of WAGES, about possible substitutes: "We've found that vinegar in water works just as well for cleaning windows. And for the all-purpose stuff, we like Seventh Generation dishwashing liquid heavily diluted with water. So it's better for the workers, and it's also better for your home."

I mentioned to Abell that lots of cleaners prefer to be paid off the books. They like the cash, the non-reportable income, and lots of people like to avoid the paperwork. "Well, if someone is making \$20 an hour cleaning houses and getting all the work she needs, more power to her. The women in our co-op are not in that situation."

I went across the hall and met Graciela Berkovich and Coral Lopez Marcelo, two extremely bright young women who seem to have "hope for the future" in a little neon sign above their heads. They were working out the schedules for the next day. The women work in two-person teams. Most of them have kids, so they have availability issues. The customers, too, have availability issues. "You wouldn't believe how complicated it can get," said Berkovich. She does not look stressed, she looks as if she's where she's supposed to be.

At the moment, Natural Home Cleaning has 16 cleaners, each of whom makes \$12.20 an hour. Its goal is to get up to 30 cleaners. In other words, they have the supply; they need the demand. Perhaps you live between Richmond and San Leandro, and need some eco-friendly, socially conscious, real darn good cleaners -- just call (510) 532-6645. In the mid-Peninsula: Emma's Eco-Clean at (650) 261-1788; in San Jose, Eco-Care Professional Housecleaning at (408) 778-8445.

Or perhaps a lovely donation to this organization, which provides a sense of community and a decent income wage to Latina women. Or, maybe you'd like to volunteer. Call (510) 532-5465 or check them out at [www.wagescooperatives.org](http://www.wagescooperatives.org). The preceding does not constitute an endorsement, although it comes darn close.

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Of course, I know that you do all the windows yourself. This is for the other people, the

ones without your self-discipline.

*It's just apartment house sense. It's like apartment rents. Remember: One man's ceiling is another man's [jcarroll@sfnchronicle.com](mailto:jcarroll@sfnchronicle.com).*

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