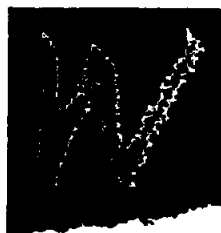


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ACTION

It may look like a dump, but the Resource Center in Hyde Park is actually an orderly demonstration in practical politics—a demonstration that Ken Dunn, AM'70, has been waging for more than two decades.



When Ken Dunn arrived in Hyde Park in the fall of 1967 to begin graduate studies in philosophy at the University, he was appalled by how dirty the air was. Having grown up on a farm in central Kansas and having just spent the previous three years working as a Peace Corps volunteer in the interior of Brazil, he could feel

the Chicago air abrade his throat and lungs.

He tried to distinguish the different kinds of smoke it contained. Coal was still being burned in the city then; that accounted for some of the pollution. But there was also another kind of smoke—"a bit like burning leaves but different"—that he could not place. Sniffing the air, he followed his nose to the source: local grocery stores were disposing of their empty cardboard boxes by burning them.

"In Brazil I had worked on rain forest preservation," Dunn, AM'70, recalls. "My project was to redirect a group that had been involved in slash-and-burn agriculture. In Chicago I discovered for the first time that not only were people in the Amazon

Buying back resources by the shopping-cart load.

burning forests down needlessly. People in cities were burning up forest products needlessly, too."

Dunn approached local stores. Save your cardboard, he told them, I'll collect it and sell it. Although he did not realize it at the time, he had found his vocation. Last year, the nonprofit organization that evolved out of his efforts—the Resource Center—recycled some 24,000 tons of material at its South Side locations, generating gross revenues of two million dollars.

Like other major cities, Chicago is confronting a garbage crisis. As local landfill sites fill up—at present rates, it is estimated they will be full within a few years—the city faces the prospect of shipping its garbage ever farther away at ever greater cost. Recycling, once a quixotic venture of committed environmentalists, is now widely recognized to be an economic necessity. But the question of how best to design a

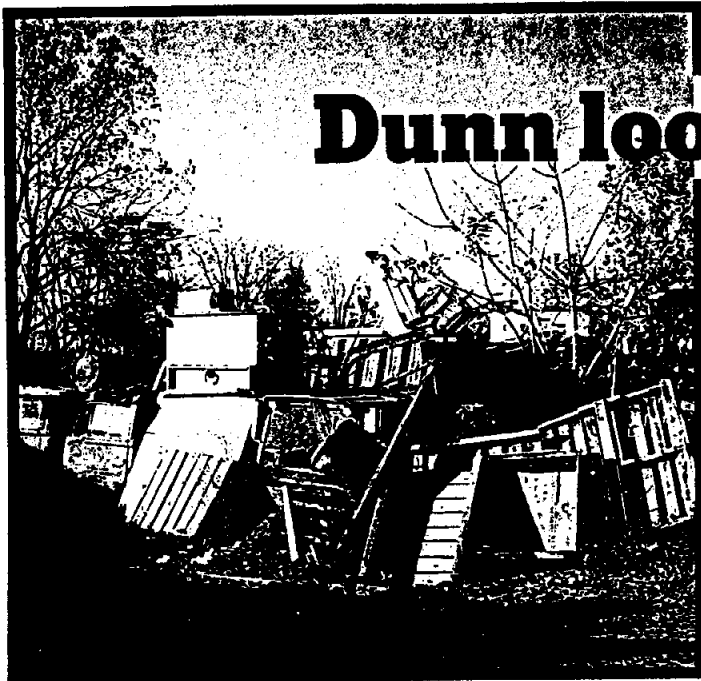
citywide recycling system is a matter of intense controversy. In the debate over alternative approaches, Ken Dunn's voice has particular resonance, for he speaks out of vast practical experience with different strategies for recovering reusable resources from the flood of "garbage" consumer society has loosed upon the world.



**Text by
Jamie Kalven**

**Photography by
Patricia Evans**

Dunn looks like a farmer



At the Resource Center's transfer facilities, Ken Dunn (right) has brought an eccentric order to an abandoned rail yard.



As Dunn tells it, the initial impetus for the Resource Center came in part out of frustrations generated by "the many trips, in short time, driving to and from Washington" that he and friends made during the late 1960s to participate in demonstrations against the Vietnam War. After one particularly grueling weekend drive, he and several friends began to talk about the meaning of the word "demonstration"—about its evolution from what Dunn terms "a logical demonstration, the use of one's analytic abilities to demonstrate a position," to mass political demonstrations in which one is "only a body rather than a mind who could actually *demonstrate* the reasonableness of his position."

Dunn decided to reorient his efforts. Instead of going to Washington to attack "the most significant problem of our age," he would try "to change people's habits and thinking about the seemingly least significant aspect of their daily lives—how they throw away their garbage." He would do so by demonstrating, in the medium of action, a set of propositions about consumption and waste. The vision that moved him then, as now, was that changes in consumption habits occurring from household to household would build ultimately toward changes in government policy and in our national posture in the world.

Jamie Kalven, currently at work on a book about sexual violence, is the editor of A Worthly Tradition: Freedom of Speech in America by his late father, Harry Kalven, Jr., AB'35, JD'38, who taught for many years at the Law School.

The Resource Center is not a business, Dunn stresses, it is an educational institution. He describes the work of the Center as "the rhetoric of action," explaining, "How do you convince the city of Chicago to stay away from incineration and land filling and do recycling instead? You do it by demonstrating that recycling works." And in order for that demonstration to be persuasive, "the continuing challenge is to keep the rhetoric of action at a scale that cannot be dismissed."



Dunn may talk like a philosopher, but he looks like a farmer. He has the physical vigor and weathered look of one who has lived his life largely outdoors. Dressed in sturdy work clothes, dirty from the day's labors, he looks out at the world through wire-rimmed glasses that seem too small to accommodate the breadth of his vision, yet contribute to an impression of sharp focus and clarity of purpose.

Over the years, he has become a familiar presence in Hyde Park. He always seems to be on the move, hastening slowly, from place to place by means of a variety of vehicles—ranging from a bicycle (often, in years past, with one of his children perched on the handlebars) to large truck rigs. In many minds he is identified, above all, with the fleet of battered VW vans that have, since 1976, traversed Hyde Park's streets and alleys collecting the newspapers, cans, and bottles placed out on the curb each week by residents.

talks like a philosopher.



He was first drawn to Chicago by the presence in the philosophy department of Richard McKeon. A renowned authority on Aristotle, Richard McKeon was, until his death in 1985, a commanding presence on campus. While in Brazil, Dunn had come upon a comment by McKeon, quoted in a news magazine, that spoke to questions about technological change and human values that were coming to concern Dunn deeply. Planted in him by his childhood on a farm in an Amish area of Kansas and sharpened by his experience in Brazil, those questions had assumed great urgency for him by the time he reached Chicago.

At their first meeting, Dunn recalls, McKeon expressed misgivings about his academic background—Dunn had no Greek or classical studies.

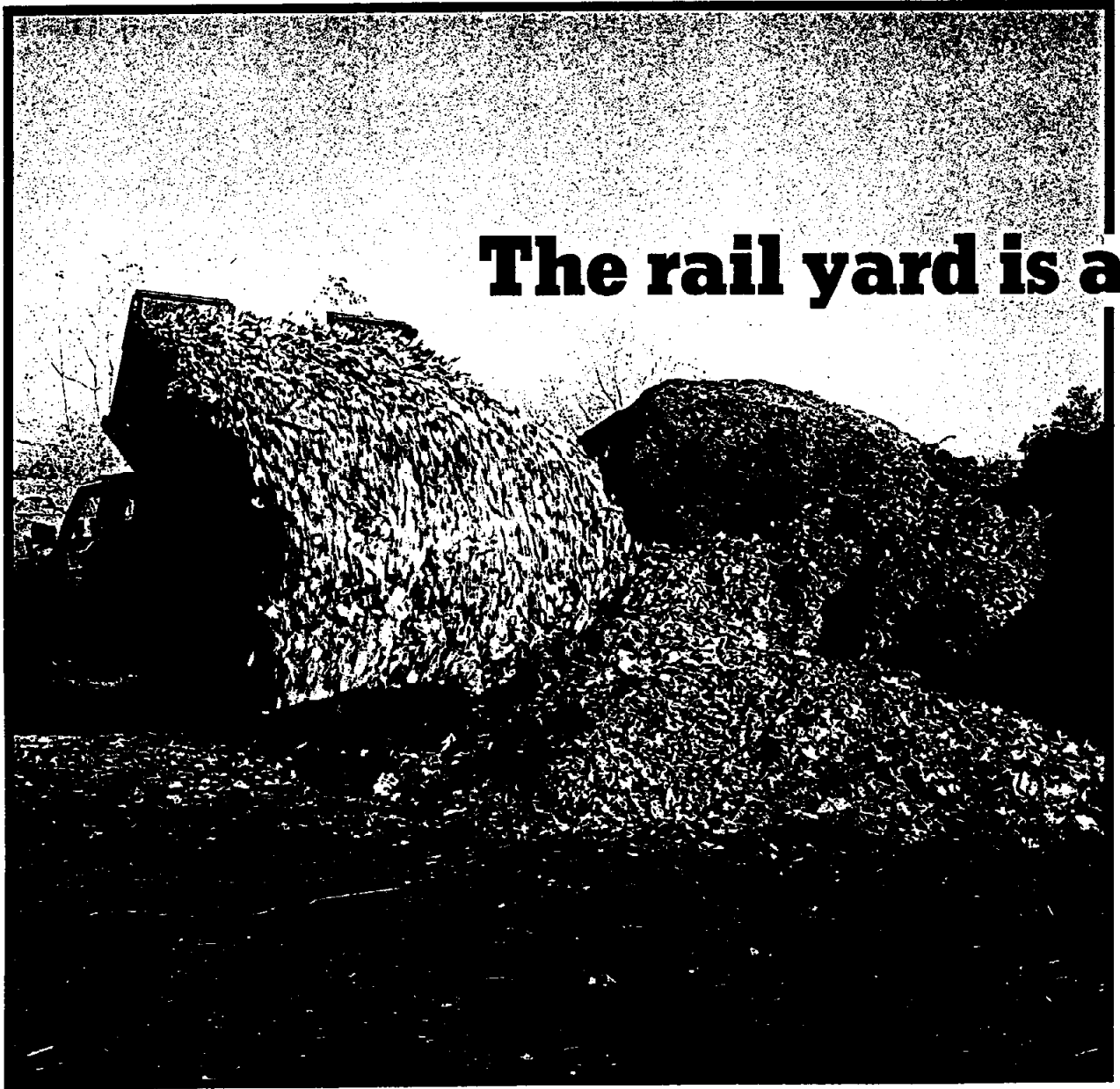
"You could pick up Greek in your first year," said McKeon.

"No, I think not," Dunn replied. "I've got other things I'm very interested in, things I really want to learn." He would just have to trust the existing translations, he said. Later Dunn learned that McKeon "often spoke of learning being connected to a vital interest." Perhaps, he speculates, that is why the professor waived the language requirement and admitted him to the department.

The philosopher and his eager student "always got on well," Dunn says. "In classes I didn't often have the right answer, but I think he was always pleased with my participation. I never said anything I thought I *should* say. I only said the things I really felt were relevant."

Dunn's studies in philosophy and his recycling activities soon flowed together to become aspects of a single effort. His dissertation topic was "Resources and Discontent," an inquiry into the interaction between the waste of natural and human resources. He wrote several chapters, but never finished. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he went on to articulate his thesis in another medium.

Dunn's ongoing conversations with McKeon continued after his formal academic studies ceased. He regularly came by McKeon's house to help out with manual tasks. "He always needed more bookcases," Dunn recalls with a smile. "He would stand around talking with me about what I was interested in, while I was making bookcases for him.



The rail yard is a hi

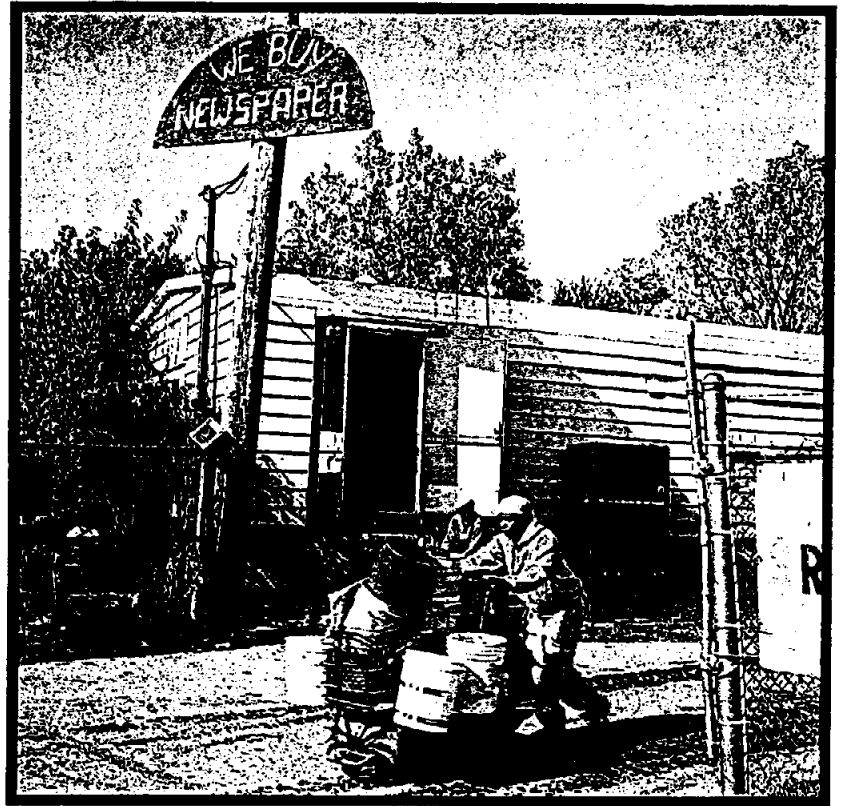
I would never go there to work on bookcases unless I had what I thought was a topic worthy of his consideration."

Over the years, Dunn was also a regular instructor in the University's Continuing Education division, teaching the "Great Books" in its Basic Program. A colleague recalls that students were sometimes taken aback by Dunn's appearance. "He always looked like he'd just come out of the junkyard. That put some people off. On the other hand, he was very conscientious and had a sort of pacifying effect on people—he was able to hear the other side of the argument."



In a cold January morning, Dunn gives a tour of one of the settings where his ideas can be seen in action: the Resource Center transfer facilities, located in an abandoned rail yard at 70th and Dorchester, about a mile south of campus. It is here that recyclable materials are deposited, processed, and then hauled away to be sold.

This is the destination of the VW vans and other Resource Center vehicles that collect newspapers, cans, and bottles in Hyde Park and in other communities where the center,



Dumping leaves for compost is quick work; filling a shopping cart or sorting mountains of glass is not.

e of purposeful activity.

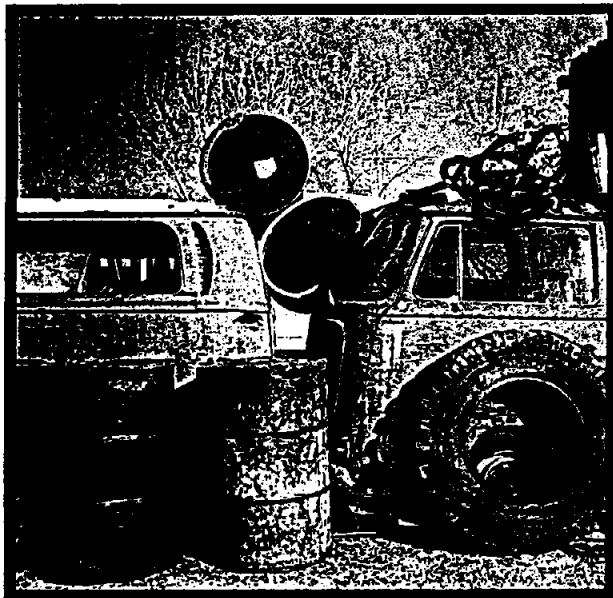
under contract with the city, provides curbside collection. The center also has a contract with the Chicago Park District to take the yard waste—leaves, grass, trees, etc.—that the Park District collects: five to ten truckloads are delivered daily. Under a similar arrangement with the Chicago Police stables, truckloads of horse manure are delivered. Mixed with lawn waste, the manure will yield compost. Trees brought in by the Park District and private tree companies are processed for firewood and wood chips.

Then there are the freelance recyclers. Some come in cars and trucks, but most push shopping carts or haul their loads on their backs. They are the scavengers, the urban hunter-gatherers who have become a common sight in American cities, picking through garbage cans and dumpsters. About a hundred different individuals come through every day.

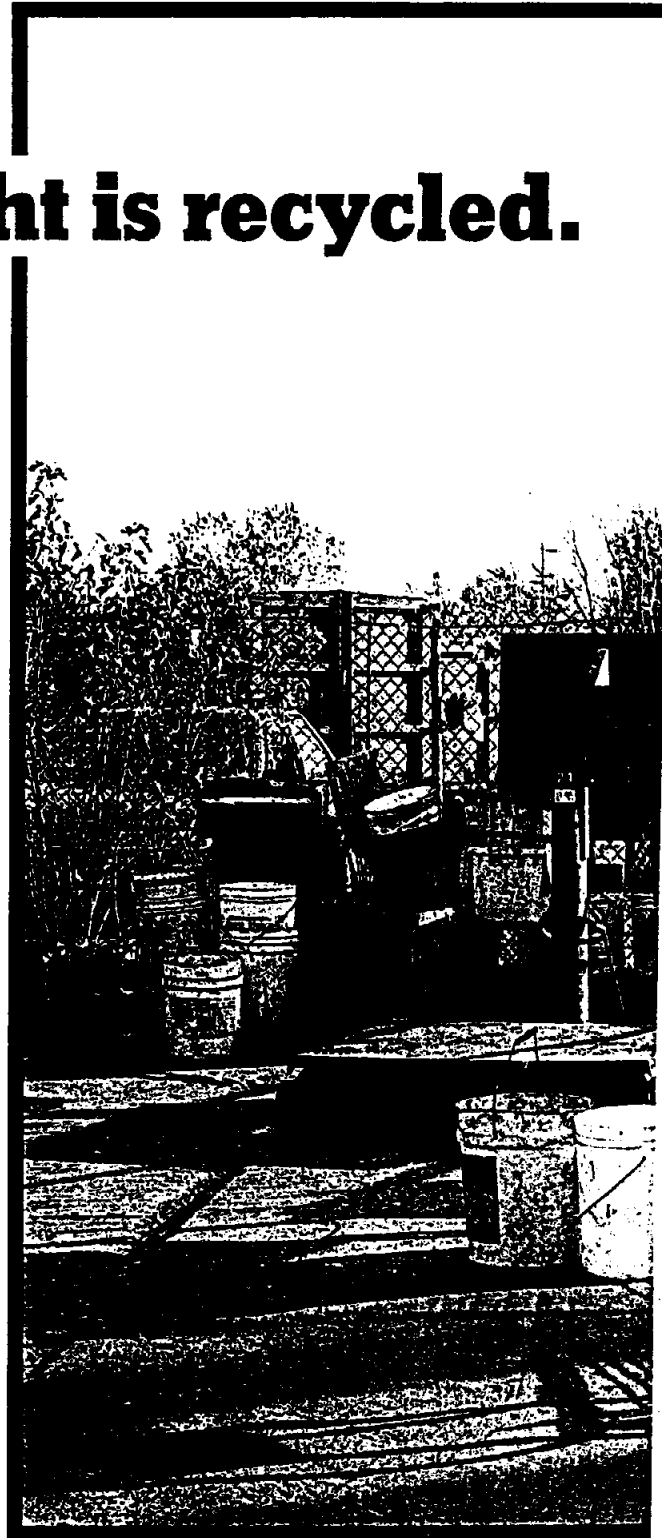
They unload their carts, have the contents weighed, then go to the "buy back" window. Dunn knows many by name. He estimates that a person with a cart will come away with about \$8 to \$10 per cartload; most make two trips to the transfer facility each day. (Last year, the Resource Center paid out more than \$400,000 to these alley entrepreneurs.) Many



Everything in sight is recycled.



Freelance recyclers (right) earned \$400,000 last year; old barrels and vans are reused to store recyclables.



of the recyclers are on welfare; this is a way of making a little extra money. It is also, Dunn adds, "a way of feeling they have something useful to do every day. There is something intuitively pleasing about finding things."

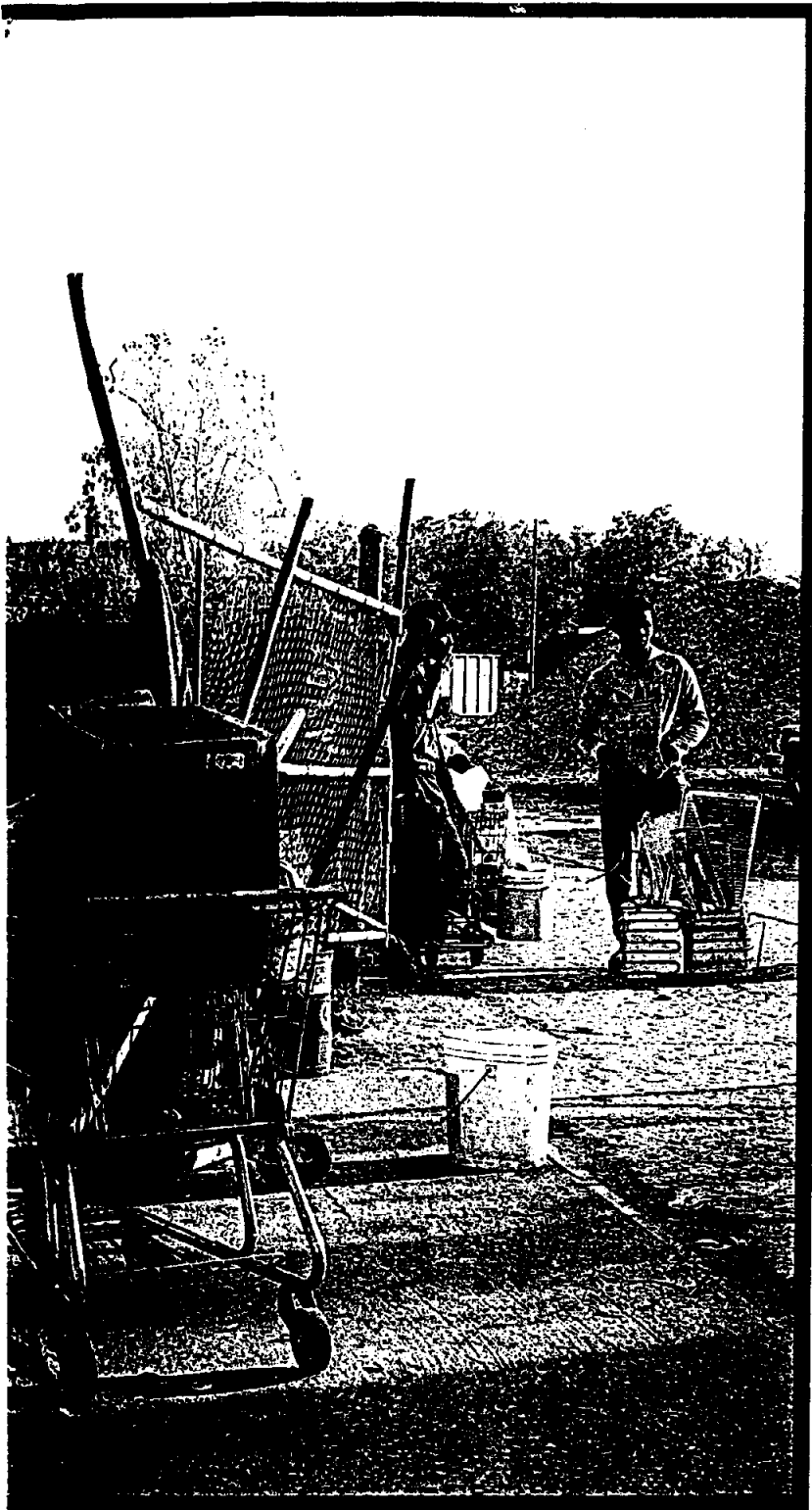
The rail yard is a hive of quietly purposeful activity. What might seem from afar or in passing to be an undifferentiated junkyard is

in fact the expression of a highly ordered vision. The space is articulated by walls and barriers formed by old truck bodies and the carcasses of VW vans.

Under the roof of a Quonset hut—open at both ends—workers sort through the never-ending avalanche of newspaper, separating out magazines, cardboard, and brown paper

bags. Elsewhere, others sort cans and then feed them into a machine that compresses 800 aluminum cans into 27-pound cubes which Dunn refers to as "biscuits." Another group of workers picks through a mass of glass containers, creating piles of different hues—green, brown, clear.

Talking with Dunn, it becomes apparent that



the Resource Center is directed toward recovering lives as well as resources. The organization employs 60 people—most in collection and processing, a handful in administration. There are fifteen employees at this site. Many of those who have found a livelihood with the Resource Center are from the impoverished surrounding neighborhoods. “Most people

assume that day laborers or unskilled people are stupid and don’t care,” Dunn says, “but these guys really work hard. Their production is phenomenal.”

Some employees have worked for the Resource Center for more than ten years. Dunn points out one of the first workers he hired. “His pride in his work is even beyond ours.

Notice his jacket. It’s monogrammed with his own name and it says ‘Resource Center’ on it. We can’t afford to do that. He bought it himself.”

With the exception of a few brightly colored pieces of machinery, everything in sight is recycled—used and reused and used again. It is a strangely consoling—and even, in its way, a beautiful—place. In this setting, man-made materials take on an almost organic quality—perpetuated, reincarnated, given ongoing life by the care conferred upon them. And the postures of the workers, winnowing through these artifacts, suggest both the hard labor and the dignity of farmers bringing in the harvest.



ver the years, an intricate community of people, some largely invisible to others, have come to collaborate with Ken Dunn in his demonstration. Yet it has remained, in essential respects, a one-man operation—animated by one man’s vision, and sustained by his single-mindedness.

Now that recycling is on the city’s political agenda, Dunn and the organization that embodies his vision stand at a critical juncture. No longer confronted by indifference on the part of the city, they must now contend with competing interests and agendas. As regional landfills approach capacity, there is little question that citywide recycling is necessary. The questions are how it is going to be done and by whom.

Last fall the city announced a plan under which mixed recyclable items will be collected in a single bag by city garbage trucks. Advocates of the plan argue that it is the most cost-effective alternative and that the convenience of placing all recyclables in a single bag, rather than sorting them, will encourage citizens to participate. Dunn and other critics counter that the studies on which the city plan is based are biased and flawed, and that the single-bag approach would result in contamination—and hence the waste—of a large percentage of the materials.

Dunn and other independent recyclers are negotiating with city officials, urging them to scrap the plan. At stake, as Dunn sees it, is not only the future of the Resource Center but also the potential of recycling as a vehicle for social change.

The future of recycling in Chicago may be uncertain, but one thing is clear: city officials will not find it easy to ignore this patient man in dirty clothes who, day after day, year after year, presents to his neighbors and fellow citizens an argument for change cast in the form of the rhetoric of action.

“I am,” says Ken Dunn, “still demonstrating.”