

REED SEIFER

# HOW I STARTED PROMOTING OPTIMISM

IT STARTED WITH MY FATHER ACTUALLY, IN THE EARLY 1980s. I grew up in Connecticut, but both my parents were raised in Brooklyn. My father was the middle child of working-class Jewish immigrants who emigrated from Poland in the 1930s. He was born on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and raised in the projects of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Unable to attend college, despite his wishes, my father immediately went to work to support his family as a mail boy in the garment district. Over the years he worked his way up and by the time I came into the picture my father was a vice president of a knitwear company with headquarters in the Empire State Building. What a thrill it was to run around the Empire State Building on the occasional day I would accompany my father to work.

One Autumn day when I accompanied my father to the city he took a half-day off from work and we spent the afternoon at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I cannot remember the exhibitions we saw, but I can remember the delight found in a hot dog and a can of orange soda from a pushcart while sitting on the museum's steps. I was nine. In the early 1980s the first laws about recycling came into effect in New York: a 5 cent deposit was redeemable on all soda cans. When my father and I were sitting on the steps of museum when we saw a homeless man digging through one of the trash barrels, looking for glimmers of aluminum. When I finished my dog and soda I made it a point to dispose of the can in the barrel farthest away from the homeless man. But my father, who came from nothing and made himself into something, made it a point to go up to the homeless man. My father stood there in his Ralph Lauren three-piece suit, handed the homeless man his empty soda can with a flourish and said, "Here you go, sir." The homeless man replied, "I'm no sir," to which my father responded, "I don't have the patience to argue."

My father died when I was 15. He was 50.

I attended Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, with a major in studio art and a minor in creative writing. My senior thesis was a combination of writing and design. As one part of the project, I turned the story about my father and the homeless man at the Met into a poem, paired it with a truism I found on a sugar packet in the university's dining hall, "An Optimist is someone who tells you to cheer up when things are going his way" and titled it "Optimism". I wrote it in 1994.

## OPTIMISM

*An optimist tell you to cheer up when things are going his way.*

A middle-aged executive sits outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art. When the museum's fountains have been depleted of pennies, bums rummage through the trash barrels, picking up aluminum.

The executive finishes a soda,  
and unlike one who goes to the barrel farthest from the fountain,  
he walks over to a bum, hands him his can and says,  
"Here you go, sir."

The bum says he's no sir,  
but the executive doesn't have the patience to argue.



My senior thesis, "A Contemporary Illumination of Poetry," explored illustration of my own words – inspired by medieval manuscripts but revised for a contemporary audience.



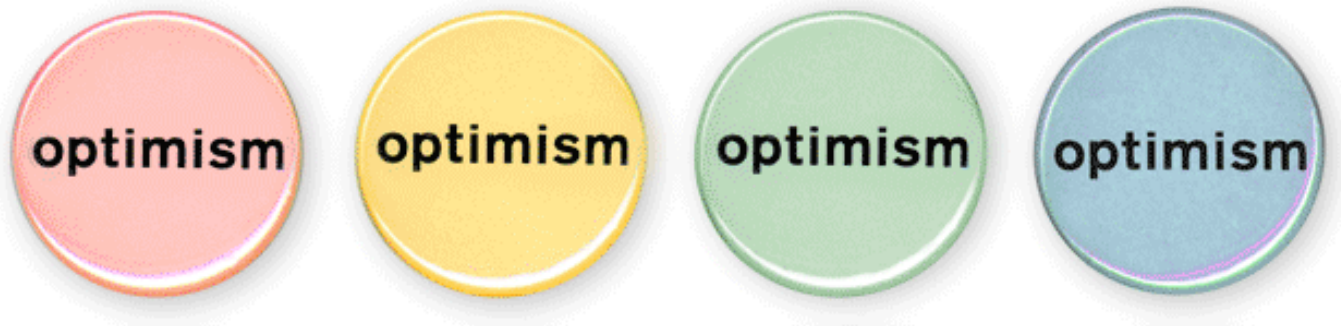
The "Optimism" poem was "illuminated" as a six-pack of Optimism brand soda cans

I burnished the graphics to the cans by hand, very slowly to each can. I designed and with the financial support of my mother, produced 500 Optimism buttons. I distributed these around campus to build anticipation for an exhibition of the cans in the University gallery.

The buttons were a hit, and they took on a life of their own, beyond the intentions of the original project. I saw the power in how they moved people. I was struck by the eagerness with which people sought them out. After graduation I got a graphic design job and moved to New York City. Through a serendipitous meeting the remainder of my Optimism buttons were later

sold to "The Store Next Door." This was the effervescent design shop which was next to and part of the Whitney Museum of American Art. What a double-fold honor it was when they sold out quickly.

In 2002 I resumed producing Optimism buttons, featuring a minimal, colorful, and a more legible design. The buttons continued to be gleefully received. What a true art it felt to be, to create something which so easily brought so much joy. In particular, to do this in New York City felt especially poignant. I gave away many from that first batch.



In 2007 I was elated to open an online store in partnership with Supermarket, [www.supermarkethq.com](http://www.supermarkethq.com), a site which promotes the work of independent artists. This connected me to a global audience.

As of February 2009, I have produced, distributed, gifted, donated, and sold over 20,000 buttons. All made in the United States. I continue to explore other methods and vehicles for promoting optimism in the public sphere.

The best is yet to come.

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NEW YORK

[www.projectoptimism.com](http://www.projectoptimism.com)

