



One Man's Mission for a Zero Day

For four years, Robert Abbott has walked the shores of Onondaga Lake with a trash picker and a quiet goal: to see the shoreline clean, and he's getting close.

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On a gray, rain-streaked afternoon, Robert Abbott stands at the edge of Onondaga Lake, the cold wind sweeping across the water and rustling the leaves at his boots. His gloved hands grip a trash picker, a trash can slung over his shoulder, and a lacrosse stick adorned with an eagle feather. He is not here for sport or leisure, rather he's here for restoration, one plastic bottle at a time.

For the past four years, Abbott has walked the shoreline nearly every day before or after his shifts as an overnight dispatcher. His quiet mission: to clean the lake, piece by piece, until he can walk its full stretch without finding a single bit of litter. He refers to that moment as a “zero day.”

“In my line of work, it means a day where nothing goes wrong, no accidents, no problems,” Abbott says, stopping to pluck a glass bottle from between slick rocks.

It takes him about two weeks to make his way around the lake, zigzagging through brush, climbing slippery rock beds, and navigating beaches of broken ceramics. “It’s not like this is new,” he says, glancing toward a shoreline littered with cans. “Wherever there’s people, it’s the same story.”

Abbott’s project began in October 2021, after what he calls a “heart-burning realization.” He’d been visiting the Ska•noñh Great Law of Peace Center, a Haudenosaunee heritage site on the

lake's shore, when a conversation with Tina Thomas, a member of the Onondaga Nation's Eel Clan and a cultural attendant at the center, changed the course of his life.

"He came in one day and seemed a little lost ... we sat and talked for a good hour or two," Tina said. "He just asked how he could do his part. I told him, 'Start cleaning up.' "

That spark turned to action. "The first time, I just grabbed a garbage bag, tied it to myself, and started," Abbott says with a laugh. "I had no real plan and had lacrosse gloves on because I was afraid of snakes."

His early days were humbling. "Man, being the only person out here picking up garbage, it felt weird," he admits. "Everyone stares at you. I went from being afraid of people to being mad they weren't helping, and now I just enjoy it."

Abbott has refined his routine through trial and error. What started as a simple walk with a trash bag has grown into a system with gloves, buckets, and a lacrosse stick that helps him balance on slick rocks. He keeps a meticulous record of the trash he collects, mapping the shoreline and tracking patterns in debris.

His efforts caught the attention of the American Indian Law Alliance, who honored him with their first-ever "Ally Award" last year. "That was life changing," he said quietly. "Now I've got to live up to it. I've got real weight on my shoulders and it's a good weight."

Adam DJ Brett, a researcher with the AILA, called Abbott "a selfless man who goes above and beyond caring for others." He added, "Robert wants a zero day for the lake and he knows that takes more than one person."

Yet, Abbott doesn't talk like someone chasing accolades. Pride, he insisted, isn't what drives him. "When I feel proud, it's when I see a family hit that shoreline I just cleaned," he says. "That's peak joy right there."

Change on the lake isn't just measured in trash, but also in wildlife. Abbott says he's seen more animals return to the shoreline this year alone than in his first three years combined. Tina has seen it too. "Before, the eagles wouldn't nest here," she says. "The eggs weren't surviving because of how dirty the water was. Now they're coming back."

So far there have been two almost "zero days", though Abbott is quick to clarify that he's still chasing perfection. "It's not a true zero day," he laughs. "By the time I finish, two weeks have gone by, and trash has blown in again. But it's as close as I can get for now."

Abbott doesn't see his work as just a personal mission. He hopes the community will step up alongside him. "We need our community to respect this place and realize it's okay to care," he says.

Abbott pauses, watching a flock of birds sweep low across the lake. The wind picks up, carrying the damp smell of the lake, but beneath it, something hopeful lingers.

“If you want to move in a direction,” he says finally, “you just have to move. Pick up the first piece of garbage. You don’t need a plan just start. Even if everyone thinks you’re crazy.”