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From wash to spin dry, a haven from the grit of L.A.'s skid row

A laundromat and showers next door offer a respite from the streets. The attendant lends her ear as well. 'You think that you have problems, then you listen to some of these stories,' she says.

Kate Linthicum

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Brenda Sanford has spent the last two decades as the desk attendant at the only public laundromat on skid row.

She does more than just help people choose the right wash cycle and retrieve money from jammed dryers.

"They come in here with their problems and I talk to them, listen to them and feedback them," Sanford said. "You think that you have problems, then you listen to some of these stories."

From her perch behind the counter, Sanford keeps an eye on those coming through the door, some toting garbage bags stuffed with clothes and the blankets they use as sidewalk bedding. There have been scuffles in the past, but most of the people who come here "are really so grateful," Sanford said. "They're happy just to have a place to come, and they respect it."

They're especially grateful on stormy days.

On Monday, when some stretches of downtown resembled the Venice canals and the gray looked like it might never lift, Warren Earl Rudolph walked in, shook water from his hair and placed a bag of potato chips on the counter in front of Sanford.

"It was the last bag," he said with a smile.

"Thank you, baby," she said, smiling back.

Rudolph had no laundry to do that day, but he had come to check in on Sanford, his old friend, and to dodge the rain for a minute. Rudolph has lived on the streets of skid row since the late 1970s.

The laundromat is a service of Lamp Community, a homeless advocacy organization. Next door the group provides men's and women's bathrooms and showers, which Sanford also manages.

She hands out hand-wrapped parcels of tissues and sells towels for \$1.

A man named Ray always brings his own. He spends about an hour a day at the showers, washing, shampooing and — because you never know when you're going to meet a woman you want to impress — applying deodorant and a splash of cologne.

"I go the 15 yards," he said, patting the top of his head.

In the mornings, the line for the showers sometimes stretches out the door. The blue-and-white-tiled stalls are cleaned after every use and are monitored by Lamp staff.

Occasionally addicts sneak their drugs in.

"Some dudes go in there, take a hit and can't even come out of the stall," said William Thurman, who was pushing a mop Monday.

The showers usually cost 75 cents. But last month an anonymous donor gave Lamp's clients a Christmas gift: free showers until New Year's.

Ray said he was thankful. A warm shower, he said, could help ease the trauma of life on the streets.

"People ain't got nowhere to go," he said. "They go from mission to mission. They've been on the streets all night and all day. They've done messed up their money. What they need in the morning is a shower."

Besides, he said, "Who wants to be funky? You want to be funky? I don't think so."

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