

Sukkot on the streets

finding community amid temporary shelter

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When he woke up from a six-month coma, Al Sabo (photo) found his life unraveled. His wife had attempted suicide, and his three children were in foster care. He had lost his job as the managing editor of a trade publication. He couldn't walk.

After several months of rehabilitation, Sabo ended up on the streets of downtown Los Angeles. He was almost 60 years old, white, and had spent his life avoiding places like Skid Row.

On his first night without shelter, he lay on the cold concrete in the dark, terrified of what a group of young, predominantly black drug addicts might do to him if he fell asleep. As it turned out, what they did was help him survive.

"They watched over me. It was totally amazing," he said. "They went out and hustled up food for me. They took care of me. It gave me a whole different perspective of who people here really are, and a new understanding of the problems they're facing."

Sabo slept on the street for two months. He learned how to create a makeshift shelter with cardboard and tarp. He learned that, in the most precarious of situations, people with very little are willing to give a lot.

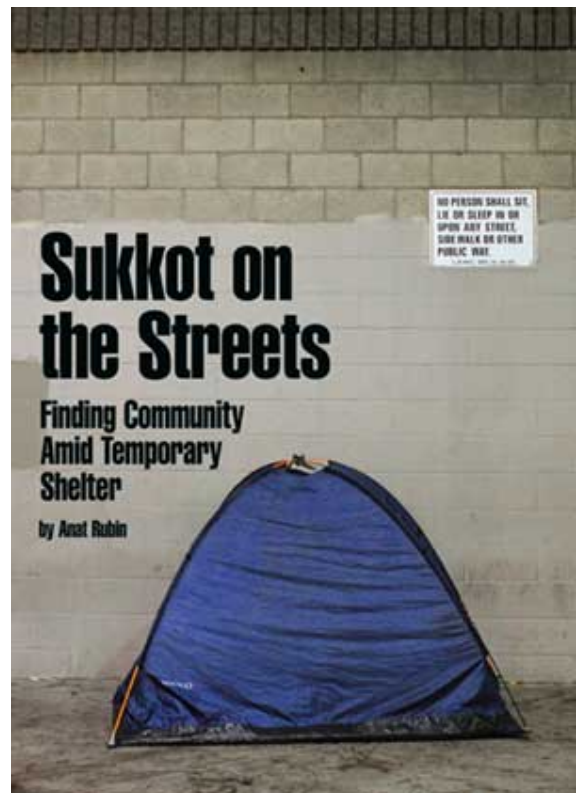
Every night on Skid Row, 5,000 people pile onto shelter cots or erect their flimsy huts in the concrete desert of the city. Another 9,000 go to bed in the area's residency hotels, hoping to still have a roof over their heads the next day. In the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, year-round they share their sukkot with each other and remind us that we have failed to do the same for them.

When Sabo's disability check came, he was able to afford a room at the Frontier Hotel. The Frontier is less than one block away from where I live, in a loft on Main Street. But Sabo and I are separated by much more than the physical space between us.

I am part of the new downtown, a much-touted "revitalization" of L.A.'s urban core. When I tell people in other parts of the city where I live, they say things like, "I hear they're really cleaning up the area."

Sabo is part of the old downtown. He's poor, disabled and doesn't have anywhere else to go. When others talk about "cleaning up the area," they are talking about getting rid of people like him.

In the last few years, gentrification has swept downtown Los Angeles. Developers set their sights on the area's



residency hotels, and city officials, eager to preside over the rejuvenation of a long-neglected city center, failed to protect those who for decades have called these hotels home. Countless residents have already been displaced. Thousands more, like Sabo, are trying to hang on.

Just three months after Sabo moved into the Frontier -- a slum property by city standards -- the building's owner began converting the hotel's 450 rooms into market-rate apartments.



Al Sabo

Sabo, like most of his neighbors, had been paying \$400 a month for a 150-square-foot room at the Frontier. He said he had problems with roaches and rats and didn't have any heat in the winter. It was no bargain, but it was the cheapest rent in town.

Now the owner was ridding the hotel of tenants like Sabo, one floor at a time.

"They were not only converting the top floors into lofts, they built a separate entrance on Main Street because they didn't want these people associating with the residents that were already there," Sabo said. "They certainly didn't want people that had been there for years to mix with the young yuppies that were coming into the lofts and paying a lot more money."

The newer, wealthier residents entered the building through a grand, recently refurbished lobby with its own set of elevators. The old residents, most of them black and many disabled, entered from another side of the building, through a bleak, concrete chamber.

The Frontier was a microcosm of what was happening downtown. Block after city block featured advertisements for the new urban life. Old buildings were festooned with images of young white couples in modern interiors, a reminder to longtime residents that the new downtown would not include them.

These low-income residents felt they had been doubly neglected by the city: Before gentrification turned these blighted properties into valuable real estate, they said, the city departments in charge of enforcing fire codes and habitability laws turned a blind eye. When the evictions began, they said city officials failed to enforce state and local rent-control laws that would keep them from joining the ranks of the homeless.

Housing rights advocates and community members used to fight the city and downtown landlords to improve slum conditions. Now they were fighting just to keep people inside.

The Bristol Hotel, just a few blocks away from the Frontier and a stone's throw from City Hall, was emptied in three days. Many of the tenants said they were evicted at gunpoint.

The Alexandria Hotel was purchased, with substantial help from the city, by a developer who evicted 100 tenants in the first year. Activists said some mentally disabled residents were simply locked out, and remaining tenants, many of them elderly, were stranded on top floors for days without working elevators or running water. The city officials who subsidized the renovation ignored countless pleas from tenants complaining of rampant abuses.

I visited the Alexandria last year as a reporter covering Skid Row for the Los Angeles Daily Journal. I had only

intended to stay long enough to interview a young woman who was being evicted, but she wouldn't let me leave until I had met her neighbors, who were being pushed out as well.

She introduced me to Leonard Woods, a 53-year-old man who worked as a carpenter before he suffered a spinal injury that left him dependent on a motorized wheelchair. He had been living at the Alexandria for more than a decade. He said the new management, in an effort to get him to leave, refused to accept his medication when it came in the mail.

She introduced me to an elderly man named Saul Teitelbaum, who for years had been living in the same room. Despite debilitating alcoholism, he was helping other neighbors take care of a young, mentally disabled woman down the hall before he lost his battle with management and suffered a stroke.

She introduced me to 71-year-old Hilda Quintana, who moved into the hotel 25 years ago and raised her children in two adjoining rooms. She said the new owners told her she and other elderly residents had to stop sitting on the lobby benches for hours each day because it didn't look good to prospective tenants. She said when she refused, they tore the benches out, and she began bringing her own chair downstairs, in protest.

My tour guide, a woman named BG, was in her late 20s. She knew everyone in the building. She knew their stories. She even knew about their recent doctors' appointments.

Hours later, I walked into the elevator in my own building, just two blocks away. Two of my neighbors got in as well, and we waited in silence to arrive on our respective floors. We didn't know each other's names.

It's difficult to convince the public that a residency hotel is a home, not a building full of transient people. It's more difficult still to convince the city that Skid Row is a community.

"I've been on both sides of the socioeconomic spectrum, and the message you hear when you're on the other side is that 'those people' don't want to work, they don't want a home. They'd rather be on the street doing their drugs and drinking their alcohol," Sabo said. "It's just not true. It's so untrue. But the politicians tell the press, and the press spread this word, and when you're on the outside looking in, you tend to believe the bull.... You believe it because that's what they want you to believe."

These stereotypes have been integral to the city's plan to change the demographics downtown. Skid Row is home to the nation's largest concentration of homeless people. In September 2006, the mayor rolled out a policing initiative that would aggressively target this population.

The so-called "safer cities" initiative brought 50 additional uniformed officers and as many undercover cops to a 50-square-block area that had relatively low rates of serious or violent crime. It was promoted as a means to improve public safety and bring additional homeless services to the community. Those services never came, but the police actions have been in full force for two years.

In that time, officers have made 750 arrests on Skid Row each month. Public defenders began seeing their caseloads double with people who had a record of possession and now were being charged with "possession with intent to sell." Most of their clients were picked up with less than \$5 of crack cocaine.

They said prosecutors were refusing plea bargains on drug cases coming from Skid Row, meaning minor drug cases that would have settled early, usually for probation and drug treatment, were going to trial in a court system already overburdened with murder and rape cases.

There was little public protest to the policing. The city's claim that those being arrested were criminals who belonged in jail and prison were pervasive. The reality would have been difficult for the public to bear.

More than half of Skid Row's homeless live with severe mental illness. Without proper treatment for debilitating conditions like paranoid schizophrenia, many turn to drugs for relief. Cities across the country have come to realize

that the only way to help this population is to create housing with on-site services, often called permanent supportive housing. Los Angeles has been slow to invest in this type of housing; instead, our civic leaders have called this population "service-resistant." Favoring developers over the needs of the existing community, they have used that characterization to justify a law enforcement solution to what service providers call a public health crisis.

Officers on Skid Row have also been busy writing 1,000 citations each month for "crimes" such as entering a crosswalk after the light begins to flash, drinking a beer inside a tent, and even flicking cigarette ash on the street.

These citations carry hefty fines. When poor and homeless people can't pay them, the citations turn into warrants and eventually lead to arrest.

A downtown activist once told me that when poor people drink outside, it's considered a tragedy or a crime. When rich people do it, it's considered progress.

Nowhere was this double standard more evident than on the monthly downtown art walk, when Main Street galleries, some of them on the bottom floors of residency hotels, open their doors to thousands of people from all over the city.

Last year, community activists videotaped police officers ignoring art walk participants carrying open containers of alcohol from one gallery to the next.

Some of the footage even shows police officers opening doors for people leaving galleries with bottles of beer, while less than a block away people were being cuffed and searched by officers in rubber gloves, and then cited for carrying a can of beer in a paper bag.

In the cafes along Main Street, gallery goers from other parts of the city talked about how great it was that there was finally something happening downtown.

Sabo is no longer at the Frontier, which stands empty save for the top two floors. He was the last holdout at the hotel, and, with help from community organizers, he worked out a deal to move to another of the owner's buildings. He has become an activist of late. He has been vocal about the injustices at the hotels and even more vocal about the discriminatory policing that has sent so many of his friends to jail.

"I might have been one of those people walking down the street in my suit, telling a homeless person, 'Go away, get yourself off drugs and then you won't have to bother me,'" he said.

Over the years, he has learned what many people learn when they come to Skid Row: On the fringes of society, people can show remarkable compassion and understanding.

But they need more understanding from the rest of us. They need our city's support. They need us all to be better neighbors.

Anat Rubin is the director of public policy for Lamp Community, a nonprofit providing housing and services to homeless people living with mental illness on Skid Row. She is also a journalist whose investigative articles on Skid Row, children's health and pro bono legal services have won numerous awards.