

## Even in Beverly Hills, helping homeless is a struggle

There are fewer homeless people in Beverly Hills than on skid row, but they too are entrenched street dwellers. Helping them takes persistence.



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John Jermyn dances to the music at Will Rogers Memorial Park in Beverly Hills. Jermyn, homeless for 30 years, recently got help in moving to an apartment in Hollywood. (Gary Friedman, Los Angeles Times / August 14, 2013)

Amy lives near a man named Bond, just down the street from Jennifer in a terrific neighborhood in the heart of Beverly Hills, where lollipop palm trees sway in celebration of high-living. But it's been years since Amy, Bond or Jennifer had a home other than a park bench or a clearing in the manicured shrubbery.

Beverly Hills doesn't have many homeless people — roughly 30, give or take. But the ones it does have are stubbornly inclined to stay right where they are, living in their own minds and on their own terms, practically in the shadow of multimillion-dollar mansions.

Why?

"It's safe," said Jim Latta, the city's human services administrator, who knows every one of the city's homeless people by name. People living on the streets don't have to watch their backs the way they would on skid row or in Venice.

Kevin Conner, an outreach worker, offered another explanation as well.

"The residents of Beverly Hills give to the homeless," Conner said.

Amy backed him up on that. She lives on a bench in the park that runs along Santa Monica Boulevard, and when I asked how she gets by, she pointed to the nearby church.

"I stand against that wall during Sunday Mass," said Amy, a senior citizen. When Mass lets out, parishioners — lifted by the spirit — reach into their pockets. Amy said she makes enough to hop on a bus and go to the Farmer's Market at 3rd and Fairfax, where she does her shopping.

But Conner said that only makes his job harder.

"If a parishioner gives her everything she needs, she doesn't need me," he said. Which is why he hands donors a card that says, "Positive Change, Not Spare Change," and, "Please give to a charity, not a panhandler."

It's not as if City Hall doesn't get complaints about homeless people from merchants and residents. But most of the gripes are about panhandlers, many of whom don't live in Beverly Hills but drift in to tap locals and tourists.

The city banned so-called aggressive panhandling. But five years ago, it hired Step Up On Second, a Santa Monica nonprofit, to help look after homeless people and try to steer them into services. Only four people have been permanently housed in that effort, but many others have been cared for at least temporarily at People Assisting the Homeless, a Hollywood nonprofit that provides six beds nightly for Beverly Hills' street dwellers.

That might make it sound as though the goal is to push the homeless beyond the borders of Beverly Hills, and I'm not holding my breath waiting for the city to open a Step Up On Rodeo. But after a day of making the rounds with Latta and the Step Up outreach team — Conner and his partner Annie Boyd — it looked to me as though the goal is to make regular contact with a very sick population, earn some trust and jump on any opportunity to offer life-changing help.

Latta said that when he speaks to local groups about his work, he points out that his subjects are a little harder to help than Nick Nolte's lovable vagabond character in the movie "Down and Out in Beverly Hills." That chap ends up sleeping with the maid of a rich, dysfunctional family and enjoying the city's fine dining. Latta's people, meanwhile — like many entrenched street dwellers in any community — are fighting severe mental illness and barely hanging on. Some of them tip a bottle to ward off waves of despair, only to sink further into the depths.

Latta, a career mental health and social worker, keeps a photo of a guy named Al in his office. Al was a steady, benign presence near the Gap store on North Beverly. Though he didn't ask for money, passersby gave him enough to survive despite mental and physical illness, and he resisted efforts by the outreach team to get him treated and housed. By night, he lived behind a dumpster in an alley with the blessing of a merchant, until he became so physically ill that he finally agreed to go to a hospital. A few days after being admitted, he was dead.

"Many want help but struggle to make a change," Latta wrote in a letter to the editor at the time of Al's death. "It took more than two years for our gentleman to decide whether to stay with his miserable but known world or try the alternatives provided by the outreach team."

When we met up with Amy, who is very sick physically and otherwise, Latta was wrestling with memories of Al and wondering whether — if Amy continues to refuse help — the humane option might be an involuntary commitment.

A few blocks away, we met with a man who finally accepted housing recently, only to land back on the streets. "If I can get the church to come up with the money, I'm going to come by and see if I can take you to an apartment," Latta told the man, who nodded in approval.

Beverly Jermyn, an L.A. resident, told me that this kind of persistence paid off in the case of her brother. John Jermyn, who was homeless for 30 years and would often dance his days away on Robertson Boulevard, moved into an apartment at Step Up On Vine in April.

"He had no hope of getting off the street until this wonderful outreach team worked with him," Beverly Jermyn said.

John Jermyn, who played minor league baseball in the Dodgers' farm system 40 years ago, sleeps in his Hollywood apartment by night but still can't resist Beverly Hills by day. I met him at Will Rogers Memorial Park on Sunset, where he said he couldn't talk long because he had lots of dancing to do.

I asked what it was like to live indoors after so many years under the stars.

"It has its benefits," he said, and then he was lost in motion.

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