

Camping Means Getting Off the Streets

By Linda Crannell

If you are homeless in the city, the only time you get off the streets may be when you go home; if home is a camp.

This camp site is only a couple hundred yards off the parking area of a huge shopping center, and only a couple of hundred feet from a large modern apartment complex.

Down the dirt path off the parking lot, along the fence around the apartments, through the tall grass and weeds of the field, into the woods.

On undeveloped public land, this site must be evacuated within the week. A few days ago a utility worker discovered that the site was severely infested with mosquitoes and made a report to the health department. The decision was made that the area needed some treatment that would require the removal of anyone who was living there.

Because such camps represent the only home they have, most street people are understandably secretive about the location of such sites. Since this one was scheduled to be abandoned soon anyway, the people who use it allowed this author the opportunity to visit it. The photographs and descriptions are the courtesy of their hospitality.



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The probability of the presence of a camp nearby was heralded by the Teddy Bear who keeps a faithful vigil as friendly sentinel.

We liked him a whole lot better than the horrifying mask originally placed at eye level on a tree to scare away intruders.

The mask was discarded when intruders never appeared.

(It was the author's misfortune to stumble across the rotting mask where it lay in deep shadow on the outer perimeter of the camp!!!)



The next man-made artifact to appear through the trees is a glimpse of blue - more vivid than any sky could provide.

It is the first of three tents in the camp.

Four members of an extended "family" live here.

A married couple share one tent; two single men each have their own.

This group has only lived at this camp for a little over a month. Previously they had lived for a much longer time in a better campsite with a fresh water spring. But some new people moved into the area with whom they did not get along. So they moved temporarily to this less desirable camp which was empty at the time, although it had been occupied by other homeless people before.



This rotating migration among campsites already known to those participating in the vast information "network" of the homeless community is the most common practice among those who camp. Sometimes residence at one specific campsite lasts considerably longer; and every once in awhile somebody goes off and finds a brand new place to camp. But mostly the camps get recycled by different people over and over again. They never have many amenities; this one has no source for water and there is no way to hook up to power here. But one thing is certain: it beats sleeping under a bridge or on a sidewalk. There is the dignity of privacy, and we can see the sense of humor and respect for life of those who live here as we look at the many unique ways they have personalized this home away from the streets.



Not surprisingly, cooking is done by propane on a Coleman stove, and lighting is by kerosene lantern. Saws are needed to keep the woods from encroaching, and a rake serves the role of a vacuum-cleaner here. But, unfortunately, the gigantic citronella candle which provides the only form of pest control proved to be inadequate to keep the hoards of mosquitoes at bay.

Canopies provide shaded areas, and the living room is even protected from rain - at least from the kind of rain that comes straight down!



Touches of art and whimsy are scattered all around.

Vanity even gets its due.

But expressions of reverence also abound.



There is a chapel of sorts in this camp. While such a formal place for prayer and meditations may be uncommon in the camps of homeless people, a conscious commitment to pursue a practice that will deepen religious faith is definitely very common.

In any area with a sizeable homeless population there will be a "church under the bridge." And even among those who are not church goers, many carry Bibles...and some preach from them.

The reason for that may not be difficult to understand. Homelessness is an extremely vulnerable situation; it is a dangerous lifestyle regardless of whether you live on the streets or in a camp. And the misfortunes which cause homelessness can severely challenge faith - faith in much of anything.

Even a moment's failure to maintain faith that one is a loved and worthwhile being, can be truly and quickly deadly.

Sometimes knowing you were created by God - who cherishes and loves you unconditionally - is your only comfort.



Now we switch from a consideration of the sublime to the very mundane. But the segue is somehow appropriate.

Every camp has a trash pile, obviously. Campers say they can tell the characters of those who have occupied a camp before them by looking at the type of trash they leave behind. Here is their classification: a messy site with tons of junk food wrappers, "potheads"; a starkly barren site, "crack-heads" (who often don't care about food at all); a site littered with beer cans and bottles (with few signs of ever eating much), alcoholics.

But these problems are not typical of the homeless who establish camps. That's why clean and sober campers have to be cautious about the abandoned campsites they choose. So what does the trash of homeless people who have no addictions look like? Pretty much like anyone's would where there is no garbage pickup service and nobody has vehicles for trash removal.

Leaving the camp, this writer stumbled over a discarded broken statue of an angel. The fallen angel made me reflect. In a society with such vast resources it should surely be unconscionable to merely consider growing homelessness a sort of "acceptable loss" of "throw-away" people in a competitive economy. All of us deserve to be valued more highly than that.

Austin Advocate

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500 E. 7th Street
Austin, TX 78701

(512) 305-4122

The ReEntry Program serves homeless single adults who have no dependents living with them.
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