

BAY NEWS

UNDER THE BOARDWALK, DOWN BY THE SEA

*MAYOR GIULIANI AND THE NYPD SWEEP ASIDE
CONEY ISLAND'S HOMELESS PROBLEM*

By Craig McGuire

Making a decent living as an electrician until a disability three years ago, Melvin and his common-law wife now struggle to get by. With what little the couple had left, they managed to put together a little place right off Brighton Beach.

Sure, the ceiling is low and leaks and there is no heat in the winter. But they had a small refrigerator, microwave, television, and even a phone/fax machine. It wasn't much, but to them it was home...until it was taken away last week by the NYPD.



Melvin and April's "home," built in the sand directly beneath the faded Gazebo on Coney Island's boardwalk, is one of several homeless encampments dismantled in a sweep of the Coney Island/Brighton Beach area last month.

Epitomizing the resourcefulness many in these encampments possess, Melvin had managed to tap into a Con Edison power line and ran a feed into his seaside retreat. Last week, when the NYPD vans rolled up and surrounded his home and drove him out, the police were forced to tranquilize his two pit bull terriers because they just did not want to leave.



Like many of the others displaced by last week's sweeps, and contrary to what most people think of the homeless, Melvin and April may have stolen a bit of electricity, but they also refused repeated hand-outs and have since gone "underground," said Terrence Judd, a case manager with the Bushwick Economic Development Corp. (BEDCO).

While Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's new policy of eradicating the dozens of homeless encampments that dot the city may have washed away the eyesores, but not addressed the real problems associated with homelessness.

"Giuliani's policy is well intentioned and solves the problem for the community, but steamrolls right over these people," Judd said. "There's nothing they can do but submit or move on."

Launched in November at the behest of Mayor Giuliani's office, this latest initiative was spearheaded by the NYPD and is enforced by both Emergency Services units and officers from the local 60th Precinct.

Alongside law enforcement agents, other participants include members of the departments of Sanitation and Transportation and the Parks Department, on whose property most of the local camps sit.



During the course of several days, this combined force surrounds and swoops in on homeless encampments throughout Coney Island and Brighton Beach. While most camps are small and scattered, in one recent raid, several dozens squatters were pulled in from a camp that was beneath the Belt Parkway on Stillwell Avenue.

Perhaps most troubling of these aggressive tactics is how the homeless are treated. While they are not actually physically abused, it is a frightening experience. And, whereas in the past they were only guilty of loitering and usually let go, they are now herded up and taken in.

"If they are caught on these sits, they are considered trespassers and can be charged," Judd said. "If they have no I.D. on them, [the police] will run them through the system. And, if they have I.D. on them, they take them in to check for outstanding warrants."

From the perspective of the city, the program is clearly working, driving more homeless underground and out of the area.



Sixtieth Precinct Community Affairs Office Carlos Martinez said the number of homeless in the area was declining even before the initiative was launched. "Off course, the homeless are more visible in Coney Island during the summer months," Martinez said. "Overall, though, there are clearly less of them in the area following the sweeps."

So just how homeless people were actually assisted following the raids that displaced them from the camps. "Actually very few accepted services," Judd Said. "Those that weren't arrested simply walked away."

Fully funded by the Department of Homeless Services (DHS), BEDCO is a privately run organization that has been sending outreach workers into Coney Island and other areas

since May last year.

They patrol in vans, providing homeless, drug addicts, prostitutes and other streetwalkers with services including lunches, shelter placements, clothing, counseling, and alcohol and drug treatment.

“We drive around looking for them, but most have left, either due to the harassment or the cold weather coming on,” Judd said. “By now they have either set up camps somewhere else or are down in the subway tunnels.”

Keep in mind, there are myriad services available, and BEDCO offers assistance in helping people reach out and securing entitlement and veteran’s benefit referrals.



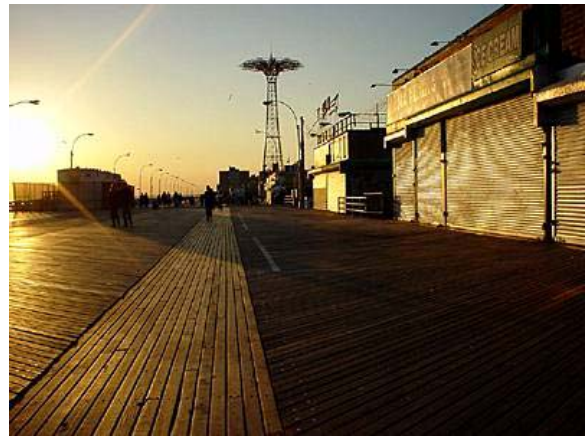
But what if you just do not want to be found? What if you do not want a hand-out? What if you would rather sleep on a bench or under a boardwalk than brave the dangerous conditions in the city’s many shelters or its subway tunnels?

And what if you have no idea what your Social Security Number is, absolutely do not trust the system to take care of you, and would just rather live on the street like you have been for so many years?

Matt Henry is one of many people still living on the streets of Coney Island despite the recent sweeps and rapidly approaching inclement weather. As a peninsula jutting into the Atlantic, Coney Island is wind swept and bitter through most of the winter months.

Henry, who has been a constant figure in the Coney Island community for several years now, refuses to leave. For someone who has spent many winters in the backseat of a Honda abandoned down a dead-end street off Surf Avenue or in a heap of debris on the banks of the filthy Coney Island Creek, it is not a decision he takes lightly.

Until 1984, Henry worked as construction worker. Following a series of misfortunes he found himself living on the streets of Coney Island and now spends a good part of the warmer months tilling a small community garden on a vacant lot on West 23rd St. and Neptune Ave., as well as pulling the occasional anemic fish out of murky Coney Island Creek.



“I been out here, off an’ on, ‘bout seven years,” Henry reflected. “Yep, figure that’s ‘bout seven years too long.”

Having been away for several days, Henry recently returned to find his encampment dismantled, forcing him to now love in the burned out shell of a late-model Chevy sedan. He lined the charred interior with dirty cardboard, but as it is almost like sleeping outside, he knows he needs to find new accommodations before nightfall.

Wiry with thick veins bulging from his neck, a pock-marked face, and hands thick and rough like the bottoms of your shoes, Henry smells like he slept in a burned out car last night and looks like he’s not too happy about it.

“That ole’ Mayor, he ain’t worth a damn,” Henry said, with a smile and wink. “We ain’t doing nothing to him, why he doing us like this. He ain’t doing nothing for me, less he wants to take me home.”

Henry, like many of the homeless in the area, is resigned to his fate. He long ago stopped caring what his Social Security Number was, and is not inclined to sift through the bureaucracy to gain benefits, even if he coughs constantly and walks softly on his left leg.

But despite his appearance, there is a sense of being about Henry, a pride. He may have given up on the system, but he hasn’t given up on himself. He, like thousands like him, will keep on keeping on through the cold winters, the NYPD sweeps, and whatever else is thrown at him.

When the temperature drops below 31 degrees, outreach workers can call in the police to bring homeless in off the street against their will.

“Many of these people have been drinking alcohol and don’t feel the cold,” said Judd, who is also a psychology major at Hunter College. “However, their bodies are actually freezing and they are in real danger.”

Others, Judd says, are simply afraid of what may happen to them in the system, especially in the shelters where assaults, rapes, and robberies are frequent. It makes you wonder just effective is a system where the people is supposed to serve would rather tough it out on the bone-chilling streets of Coney Island rather than accept “help” from the city.

Still, not everyone can even be helped. On one particularly crisp night a few eeks ago, Judd and fellow Case Worker Wayne Fairclough came across a middle-aged homeless woman named Hamburger who frequents the Coney Island area. While it was not yet cold enough to summon the police, at 41 degrees it was still pretty cold.

When approached by the Bedco workers and asked if she wanted to come in from the cold, Hamburger assumed a menacing crouch and scowled as she pulled tow small clear bottles of liquor from her small, dirty cart. “I just got me these two bottles of booze and I ain’t throwin’ them out for nobody,” she shouted. Like narcotics, alcohol is banned in the New York City shelter system.

Although the BEDCO field workers have gained the trust of many members in the community, their work always involves an element of risk.

“We get cursed out all the time, so we know when to back off,” said BEDCO Senior Case Manager Bridgette Dennie. “If a situation looks dangerous, we just pass by and honk the horn. They know who we are and will come over of they want.”

While no BEDCO outreach workers have been assaulted, they are exposed to the danger nonetheless, have little resources to call upon, and are simply on their own.

Stoudamire says many of his “clients” are substance abusers who deny they even have a problem and refuse services. But unlike the city and the NYPD, BEDCO doesn’t stop trying to reach these people when they refuse.

“Sure, every now and then I might get frustrated, but I work around it,” said Stoudamire. “You have to block out what they say to you sometimes and focus on the issues. And you can’t let how bad they look or how bad they smell affect the way you treat them.”

By simply being out in the area every day for months on end, the BEDCO outreach workers have established a rapport with the local homeless population, Dennie said.

“We’ve gotten to the point where we are on a first name basis with most of them,” she added.

In fact, due to this familiarity, many of the clients find the outreach workers much more approachable than the police, Dennie said.

“I recently had a client call me who happened to be an epileptic,” Dennie said. “She had been drinking vodka since she woke up and was having seizure after seizure. I arrived on the scene and held her hand until the ambulance came.”

Sometimes, it appears, all they need is a familiar face. The aggressive policies architected by this administration and implemented by the police is not solving the problem of homelessness, just smacking it to the side so we do not have to look at it for a while abandoning many when they need help the most, forcing them into desperate situations.

Jesse Williams, 37, and his two younger brothers, Arthur and Leon, have been struggling together on Coney Island’s streets for the last two years. “Which includes surviving two winters,” Jesse is quick to point out.

The brothers have been living in a series of small shacks at the end of a dead-end on West 24th Street and Neptune Ave. Like Melvin, the Williams brothers tapped into a power line and had electricity for a small television. That was before the latest sweep. They now sleep in boxes or under rubbish in a park behind the Mark Twain Intermediate School. BEDCO workers have repeatedly attempted to get the brothers into a shelter. During a recent encounter, Dennie tried to get Leon and his wife to tour one of the available shelters that accommodates couples.

“Is that shelter all grimy,” Leon asked Dennie. “Because I been in a shelter and it was so grimy I had to bounce. Besides, I stay there I’ll wind up murdering someone up in there.”

Leon said he is renting a small room in the area. “The buildings, though, they so corrupt out here, it’s all about the [drug] traffic,” he said. “I gots to stay away, but you just get caught up.”

After making a tentative date to meet with the BEDCO workers the next day, Leon began to strut his way back to Neptune Avenue when he abruptly turned around.

“You know, you good people, I ‘preciate what you do,” Leon said, softening as he placed a closed fist to his chest. “To my heart.” He then took a long swig off his stale beer and walked away.