



This Waianae Homeless Camp Is Not What You'd Expect

For years, a "village" hidden in the woods of West Oahu has quietly been home to dozens of homeless families.

NOVEMBER 16, 2015 • BY JESSICA TERRELL

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Strangers don't often venture into the woods here by themselves.

Only a few tents and shacks are visible from the dirt parking lot that borders the Waianae Boat Harbor, where more than 200 people have found a relatively undisturbed refuge on the rocky edge of the Leeward Coast. The true size of Oahu's oldest and now largest homeless encampment is obscured by a heavy cover of overgrown kiawe trees and thick underbrush.

But it doesn't take long to spot the scrawled "no trespassing," "go away" or "keep the fuch out" signs posted along the many paths leading into the 19 acres of trees and scrub brush nicknamed The Harbor by the people who know it best.

Joe Kalani Smith never thought of himself as a stranger though. The scrawny 18-year-old, known simply as Kalani, graduated from the high school that sits on the northwest edge of the encampment.

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So when his parents kicked him out of their house in September, he caught a bus to The Harbor and walked confidently into the woods carrying a [University of Hawaii](#) duffel bag full of clothes and a blue camping tent.

Kalani made his way along a wide dirt path guarded by a half dozen roosters and several cats, past a large campsite surrounded by a wood fence, past a small donation tent filled with cardboard boxes of clothing and books.



A tent near the entrance has been set up to accept donations. People come by at all hours to look for what they need.

The woods were more crowded than he remembered from when he used to cut through the brush on his way home from class. Dozens of eyes watched him from behind darkened screens in shelters cobbled together from wood pallets and blue tarps.

Kalani thought he could just walk into The Harbor and find a place to pitch his tent.

He was wrong.

The first rule of this extraordinary homeless community is that there are rules. And leaders. And an order to who pitches a tent where and when.

“Go see Auntie Twinkle or Auntie Loke,” a man riding past on a bicycle told him.



Joe Kalani Smith moved into The Harbor when he graduated from high school and had to leave his parents' home.

Rose Loke Chung-Lono, one of several women who have taken it upon themselves to create a sense of structure in the camp, was easy to find.

If titles were given in The Harbor, Twinkle Borge would be the governor, Loke says.

Then she chuckles. "That would kind of make me the mayor."

No Other Place Like It

As Hawaii [struggles to find solutions](#) for its growing homeless population, more than 200 people have come up with an answer of their own. They've built a little village in the bushes along an often overlooked stretch of West Oahu coastline.

There is no other place in Hawaii like it — even though the state has the [highest per-capita homeless population in the country](#) and the islands are dotted with homeless encampments.

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Aug. 24 — I arrive in the afternoon, after a big rainstorm the previous night. Several roosters roam near the entrance to the camp. The camp smells of wet earth and animal urine. Big brown puddles in the center of the main path to "Twinkle's Hale." Mud everywhere. Orange mud that covers the wheels of cars and splatters up the back of your leg with

[Nearly 5,000 homeless people](#) live in the open or in temporary shelters on Oahu, a number that continues to grow even though homeless populations on the mainland are dropping. In the last few years, city and state officials have tried — unsuccessfully — to solve Hawaii's homeless problem by implementing bans on sitting or lying on public property and "sweeping" homeless encampments that have taken root in urban neighborhoods. It's proved difficult to get significant numbers of homeless people into permanent housing.

The Harbor encampment has defied the odds; it's existed largely unmolested by authorities for more than a decade. That's a testament to the fact that The Harbor is self-governed and mostly self-policed, a fairly well-functioning, community-based solution to the homeless problem, former Waianae Harbormaster William Aila says.

every smack of a flip flop against your heel.

Some people — including local politicians and developers who have their eye on this state-owned property in the middle of the town of Waianae — would like to see The Harbor cleared, the homeless moved elsewhere.



The Harbor is sandwiched between the Waianae Boat Harbor and Waianae High School.

But most residents along the Waianae coast appear to have adopted a live-and-let-live attitude when it comes to the encampment.

“The homeless here, we treat them just like any other human being,” says Marina Dominguez, a Nanakuli resident who uses the park adjacent to The Harbor. “They don’t bother anyone. They stick together. They just need more help.”

Still, the camp’s existence is precarious.

After city and state officials cleared out the two large largest homeless encampments in Honolulu this summer, [Gov. David Ige](#) said the state would shift its focus to other towns on Oahu, including Waianae.

Although his top homeless advisor more recently said any plans to do anything different in The Harbor would first be carefully considered, the camp does occupy public property. That they are there without permission is not lost on the people who have made The Harbor their home.

But sweeping The Harbor without real alternatives in place for its residents would be a mistake, argues Aila, their former landlord of sorts.

“You would destroy something that is working right now with very little government aid or investment,” he says.



Pinky has been working to build a new fence for a friend who lives in The Harbor.

Rain, Scorpions and Tragedy

That's not to say The Harbor is always an idyllic place to live.

In August a resident doused himself with gasoline and ran naked through the camp, flames devouring his skin while neighbors frantically tried to save him. They did, but just barely. Nobody knows why he set himself on fire, only that he struggled with mental illness.

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Sept. 2 - Rayna has been in the camp for a few months. Said she used to be here a few years ago. Kim says hardly anyone is here by choice. She'd be happy to talk to me. Her boyfriend doesn't like to let people inside the tent area though.

During a summer storm Loke awoke to a stream of water falling on her face. Heavy rains brought down the tarp roofs of more than a half dozen residents in that storm, and formed giant brown and orange puddles in the paths that are necessary thoroughfares for people who can't drive a car to their front doors and unload.

In high winds, pale scorpions fall from the trees by the dozen. The last time a scorpion fell on Lori-Ann Marcellino, a young mother of two, she sliced a small gash in her leg and ripped out the creature's stinger without complaining. Centipedes hurt more, she points out matter of factly. The real danger is staving off infection in a place where people walk around with open wounds dripping pus.

Even with all its challenges, many people who live here view The Harbor as a welcome alternative to the realities faced by thousands of

homeless living in the islands.

Here people may struggle with life's most basic needs, but they don't struggle alone. Instead, their burdens are shared by a tight-knit community bound together by both necessity and camaraderie.



Pohaku is Twinkle's great-nephew and, like other kids, is required to do chores to help out.

When Kalani showed up in camp this summer, Loke came out from her tent and sized him up, taking in his thin but muscular frame, the watch on his right wrist and the Fitbit on his left, the open sore on his ankle, the lost look on his face.

She said she could feed him dinner, and let him pitch a tent in a little open patch of dirt nearby. If he wanted to stay in The Harbor though, he would have to prove he could care for himself.

Then the mayor of The Harbor gave Kalani some wood pallets to elevate his tent and a futon mattress to stick under it. The pallets, which form the base of nearly all 113 campsites in The Harbor, would provide protection from flooding — and spare Loke and Twinkle the work of digging the tent out from the muddy lakes that form every time a tropical downpour rolls through.

Kalani climbed into bed. He heard the rumbling of a generator next door and the crowing of a rooster. A cat brushed up against the outside of his tent, but nothing else disturbed him. He felt calm. He felt safe.



The residents of this camp moved to the site just two months ago. They've spent hundreds of hours making it a home, including adding a bathroom area.

Houseless Not Homeless

People in The Harbor like to say they are not homeless but simply houseless.

Twinkle and Loke encourage this attitude. The words are just two letters apart, but it makes a big difference in how people think and feel about themselves. And how well they get along in The Harbor.

"Your home is a castle if you make it a castle," Loke says. "Your home is a dungeon if you make it a dungeon. Your home is whatever it is that you feel comfortable in."

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Sept. 4 - The rain isn't as bad as expected. I walk back to the horseshoe to visit Kim, but she says she's too busy and can't talk. She hops on a bike and rides off. Rayna is across the path in her boyfriend's camp. It's filthy, and she wears a white T-shirt that is flaked with dirt. She's collecting empty bottles and plastic containers from the yard, which is separated from the path with a shredded blue tarp. A malnourished pit bull is chained in the corner of the camp. The scene looks and smells like something from skid row or the worst section of Kakaako.

Brenda Cruz has lived in a tent perched near the rocky shoreline in The Harbor for seven years, almost as long as her neighbor, Tita. Another neighbor, Marsha, has lived in The Harbor for a decade.

Shina Gonzalez spent two years building her little two-room shack from tarp and pallets and sheets. It's the only camp in The Harbor, she proudly boasts, with a little white door that locks — and a karaoke machine.

Auntie Joey built a coral rock wall around her yard, digging up hundreds of stones and fitting them together as intricately as any professional brick mason might have. Then she taught her neighbors to do the same, helping build a wide lane with neatly swept yards and stone walls.

In Twinkle's hale, visitors leave their slippers at the door — even though the floor is pieced together from plywood and frayed scraps of carpet often flaked with dust and mud.

In another country, The Harbor might not even be considered a homeless encampment. A shantytown, maybe. A rural village with few

resources.

America's view of homelessness is different.

People fall in love in The Harbor. They've had babies in The Harbor. Some even draw their last breath here.

Each life event is witnessed by neighbors so close they can hear the pop of a soda can being opened in the tent next door.



"I guess I'm just not done yet."

An addiction to methamphetamine led to the homeless life, but small joys like gardening can still be found in The Harbor.

Shina knew her neighbor Duke was in a dark mood this summer because she listened to him argue with his dogs. She knew Auntie Joey wasn't feeling well, and watched out for Auntie Fina's camp while the elderly woman was in the hospital.

"In The Harbor, everyone is family," Adam Luafalemana-Fuiava says. "When you walk out your door in your neighborhood and say hi to your neighbors, does everyone say hi back? At The Harbor they would, even if you just moved in."



[WATCH VIDEO](#)

Even residents of The Harbor say they were surprised the first time they ventured into the encampment

Neighbors share meals, generators, cigarettes. They sit around in camping chairs and gossip.

They read news stories on smartphones about the growing homeless sweeps across the state and wonder what will become of their little village.

"Nothing lasts forever," Tita says.

Life On The Edge

The Harbor camp sprawls along well-worn dirt paths and side trails that meander through a large parcel of trees and brush, bounded by the rocky coastline on one side and Farrington Highway on the other. The often yellow and parched Waianae Mountains tower in the background.

People who make camp along the outer edge of The Harbor are rewarded with stunning sunsets and ocean views.

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Sept. 11 - Both small tents set up for donations in the camp were totally flooded, and most of the books and clothing will likely be thrown out now. Throughout the camp are orange and brown little lakes of water, so trudging around involves a lot of wet and muddy feet (note to self, need to find a place to buy rain boots.)

The land is wedged between the public boat harbor and Waianae High School's rear parking lot. It is so close to the school that you can hear the loudspeaker announcements all the way to the far side of the camp.

Much of The Harbor is just a thin layer of dirt and clay atop a bedrock of coral. Closer to the high school there are fewer trees and the thick growth becomes mostly tall grass and shrubs. The woods and the shoreline are pitted with deep sinkholes, a few of which are filled with ocean water and are home to opae ula, a protected species of tiny red shrimp.

Harbor residents care for these sinkholes and protect the rare shrimp as part of an agreement the harbormaster made with Twinkle a number of years ago.

Many of the current residents arrived after a series of homeless sweeps from 2010 to 2012 drove people living on Leeward Coast beaches into the mountains and the bushes.

As more residents moved in, The Harbor got dirtier. More dangerous. People walked through the high school campus in the middle of the day with beer bottles. They stole from boaters and classrooms. Neighbors complained.



Cory Lum/Civil Beat

Sanitation is a constant struggle in the camp.

Aila, who was the harbormaster for many years and after that head of the state [Department of Land and Natural Resources](#), which owns the parcel, told Twinkle she had 60 days to clean out the area.

With the threat of eviction hanging over her, Twinkle — a heavysset woman with a hearty laugh and a blunt no-nonsense attitude — decided she needed to do something serious to save The Harbor.

She started holding monthly meetings in the nearby park, where business owners could come and address any issues they were having with The Harbor. She brought in portable dumpsters and convinced residents to band together and clean out the large piles of trash and belongings that had accumulated in common areas.



Twinkle often zips through The Harbor as she goes to check on residents or handle problems in the camp.

And she began recruiting people like Loke and Tita to serve as area “captains” who would help maintain law and order. Or their version of it anyway.

The camp is divided into three sections. Each area has at least two section captains, who report to Twinkle.

Most of the camp's captains are women. Loke says women are stronger emotionally when it comes to this kind of work, their maternal and protective instincts easily triggered by threats to their home.

"Women spin faster when it has to do with children than men do," Loke says. "Men go get mad, but women (are) going to do something about it."

Taking The Rules Seriously

In The Harbor, law and order is a simple concept. Don't steal, and have respect for yourself and others.

Respecting the boaters who pay for the four water faucets out in the boat harbor parking lot means not showering until after 4:30 p.m. and giving boaters access to the faucets whenever they need it. This can be hard because the biggest daily necessity is water, which residents must haul from one of the faucets to their campsites.

Twinkle and Loke give people a warning for minor infractions, and try to persuade them of the need to behave better.

But it's the big stuff, like stealing from the high school, that they won't put up with, because that puts the entire camp in danger.

"When people come to me with pictures and evidence, you are out," Twinkle says. "Because I don't want everyone to think that's how the rest of the people (are)."



Filling the water jugs is a daily necessity for residents in the homeless camp. Kids often get the duty.

In August they booted someone who was letting high school kids hang out in the bushes while cutting class. In September they talked about kicking out an elderly woman whose dog had repeatedly gotten loose and tried to bite a tourist in the neighboring boat harbor and then a child in the camp. The woman lives in a tent surrounded by trash and rarely emerges. The area smells of urine and feces. It's no good, Loke says.

Dropping someone from the camp is serious business, and the two women don't take it lightly.

"It is devastating," Loke says. "It hurts me and Twinkle a lot to kick somebody out, because where are they going to go next?"

It's also dangerous business. The only time they wear closed-toed shoes is when they need to deal with trouble at a campsite.

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Oct. 2 - There hasn't been rain in a while now, and what was once a muddy lot full of puddles is now as dry as can be. There's a strong wind blowing down from the mountain, and it creates little dust storms in the unpaved lot. The dust blows high enough to need to hide your face inside your shirt to not choke. Little rocks and sand sting the ankles

"Strap 'em up, girl!" Twinkle will say, and the two women will go marching through The Harbor, calling on camp residents to fall in line behind them as they go.

A few weeks after Kalani arrived, Loke sat down at a tall glass kitchen table in the center of her tent, pulled out a roll of white butcher paper, and began to work on a new map of the camp. Kalani wasn't the only new resident and others had moved on. Time for an update.

Three of Loke's 17 dogs sat beneath her high-backed stool, napping while she worked. Camp work starts when people begin dropping by her tent early in the morning and continues throughout the day, she says.

When a rooster wandered in from the field, a little terrier tried to scare the bird away. The rooster was unimpressed. It flapped its wings aggressively and when the dog turned tail the rooster leisurely drank

from a bowl of milk left out for the pups.



Loke has taken it upon herself to keep track of everyone in The Harbor, including assigning camp sites based on experience and need.

New people have been moving in as city officials crack down on homeless camping elsewhere on Oahu. And, like other neighborhoods on the island, The Harbor also has been transformed by Hawaii's growing homeless population.

When Tita first moved to The Harbor a decade ago, there were only nine campsites in the woods. Now there are 113 sites sheltering more than 250 people — depending on the time of year — according to Loke's meticulous tracking.

Some people, like Shina, live alone. But other campsites, like Twinkle's, are home to more than a dozen people. Three of the largest compounds belong to Micronesian families, who build high walls of wood and tarp around their areas, and tend to keep to themselves.

Loke has made it her job to keep track of who lives in The Harbor. Nobody pays her to do it. She does it because she doesn't want to have to worry about losing the entire community — and her own home — because some troublemaker moves in.



Cory Lum/Civil Beat

[LISTEN](#)

Rose Loke Chung-Lono talks about some of the many things she's learned from friends living on beaches and in The Harbor.

Loke has reason to be afraid of this particularly terrifying potential turn of events, of being without even a tent in the middle of the woods to call home.

She and her family lost their Waianae house to foreclosure in 2009 after she had a heart attack and could no longer work as a carpenter. Her husband lost his job around the same time.

They moved from one beach to another to avoid city and county homeless sweeps. Then in July of 2010, the sweeps caught up with her and nearly 200 other people living at Guardrails Beach in Waianae.

"I just started crying because we didn't know where we were going to go next, what was happening," Loke says.



Ben planted papaya near his tent.

Go to The Harbor, people told her.

Now she lives with her husband in a shelter built from a combination of metal pipes and giant overlapping tarps. The tarps sag in places, and her main room is filled with giant piles of clothing and toys — what could be taken as the beginning signs of hoarding is really the result of a partial collapse in the structure during rainstorms earlier in the month, she says.

The space is open on the sides, flanked by a small field of tall grass and boulders to the north, and a rocky hill to the east that she calls her pet cemetery. Loke buried eight of her dogs there after they caught fever and died last summer.

But the strain of being houseless and trying to help manage a camp with hundreds of people in need of help is taking its toll on her. She's simply worn out.

"It's not tired of The Harbor. It's just tired of living the way I am now," she says. "It gets harder and harder every day."

When the last big rain came, Loke says she tried to fix one leak in her roof and then another. Finally she just stood in the middle of a leak and cried.

"I said I don't want to live like this no more," Loke says. "I guess I just got frustrated. It's not to blame anybody, it's just me. I'm just tired."



Fenced and gated entrance, surrounded by a wall of coral rock around the perimeter of this camera shy resident located inside the Waianae Boat Harbor encampment.

Ghosts And Demons

Shina is a big presence in the camp, with the loud booming voice of someone trained for the stage. She used to manage bars and work in entertainment before becoming homeless 15 years ago.

Shina has a rare disorder that causes her body to produce too many red blood cells, and she gets around most of the time on a motorized scooter. The Harbor is too hot for her and her health is suffering.

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Oct. 3 — I don't get much sleep. The plywood floor is hard beneath me. I awaken to little noises. A large dog (or a small person) walking on the tarp underneath my tent. Roosters crow in the night. The thumping of the bass continues from the parking lot until around 2 a.m. At 3 a.m. I can hear the sounds of a man and a woman yelling at each other from another part of the camp. At 6 a.m. the birdsong starts again.

Living on beaches and in The Harbor has been a bit like being on "Gilligan's Island," Shina says. Returning to civilization will be strange, but she has to if she wants to get better.

It took her years to build her two-room home in The Harbor, with its wood pallet walls and blue tarp roof. She has a small door, and windows made from pallets with mosquito netting stapled over them.

"If you take the slats out of a pallet you can make French windows," Shina points out.

Inside the entrance are two old couches that she covered with sheets to hide the dirt and stains. She stapled white sheets onto the walls to make her own wallpaper, painting a large red rose on the wall by the door.

Shina has a karaoke machine and likes to have people over to sing at night.

"Being houseless, you would be surprised. You know there are some people you wouldn't believe — they look so retarded," Shina says.

"Never judge a book by its cover. There are some people who can sing or play like you wouldn't believe."

She doesn't venture out much after dark, especially not around the bend in the path to a section of the camp that people call the

ghost lane.



Strangers who might wander into the camp from the Farrington Highway are warned to stay out.

The Harbor is haunted, she says.

Five years ago, a man hung himself around the corner from where Shina lives. Shina wasn't there, but the thought of it bothers her sometimes. She keeps holy water and mirrors in her home for protection.

Another neighbor was digging space for a campsite and found a pile of human bones — likely one of several burial grounds identified in the area in an archeological survey commissioned by the state in the early 2000s.

Evil spirits attach themselves to people here, Shina says, pointing to a neighbor walking by with his head down and a frown on his face.

I can see the ghosts on him, she says.



"I love the free living. Not having to answer to anybody."

[Read Tita's Story](#)

Tita, who has made her home in The Harbor for more than a decade, says she's happy with the freedom it affords her.

But if there's a demon in the camp causing real havoc, it's meth. Twinkle estimates that 75 percent of the people living in The Harbor are current or former users of the drug.

Paula, who moved to The Harbor in August with three of her children, says she knows of eight drug dealers who sell in The Harbor. Paula's son heard someone offering to trade meth for two cold Heinekens the week he moved in. The drug can be bought for a pair of rubber slippers, Paula says.

One woman in the camp — who neighbors say is a chronic meth user — has eight children. A few of them live in the camp, but most are cared for by relatives. She has a toddler who is only at the camp once in awhile. But sometimes he stands barefoot, all alone, surrounded by piles of rubbish, his legs covered with dirt and bug bites.



Twinkle, at the head of the table, dishes up meals each night to anyone who comes by her hale.

“Children are No. 1 for Twinkle,” Loke says. “But to me, the adults need just as much help as the kids do. Kids may not be able to fend for themselves, that’s why the adults are there to fend for them. If the parent cannot take care of their child, something’s wrong.”

Twinkle says she would love for her community to be drug-free, but she knows it would take a lot to make that happen. And while she talks tough about wanting a zero tolerance policy, the truth is more complicated. These aren’t nameless and faceless drug addicts — these are her neighbors and her friends, many of whom wreak little havoc on anyone but themselves.

Some people became homeless because of drugs, Loke says. But she knows others who became drug users after they lost everything. People will do just about anything to escape the harsh realities of their life, she says.



Loke, left, and Adam are key players in keeping The Harbor functioning and out of trouble.

Depression is another demon that stalks the camp, taking a particular toll on the women. Living like this can destroy your sense of hope, Auntie Joey says.

That's because after awhile it gets hard to picture a future beyond just day-to-day survival, Paula says. Sitting in a tent with her 20-year-old son and his girlfriend, Paula says it hurts to know that she isn't providing everything for her kids that she should.

"Your sense of self worth goes away," she says.

Paula sleeps most of the day when she's not looking after her kids. She blames her exhaustion on anemia, but says it could easily be depression too.



There are about 100 pets in The Harbor. It's tough for homeless people to find shelter space if they have pets.

Jody Cleveland sent her youngest children to live with relatives when she moved to The Harbor three years ago, because she knew she couldn't care for them.

She says she went to see a psychiatrist, but didn't get much help much with the depression she feels. The anxiety. The sense of despair about what the future might hold.

'A Wing And A Prayer'

Tita says she's lived in the camp the longest — 10 years in all. Brenda Cruz, who lives next door to her, makes the same claim. It depends a lot on how you count — consecutive years or total.

Tita and her boyfriend are among the few in the camp who make a living solely from what they call daily "hustles," whether it's making items to sell on the street or picking up odd jobs.

Most people get food stamps. Some get welfare, too. Many people pick up temporary or under-the-table jobs throughout the month. A few, like 19-year-old Hannah, work full time — commuting by bus to Waikiki or Kapolei every day.



Brenda says she's been living in The Harbor the longest of anyone. It depends on how you count it.

Steady work near The Harbor is hard to come by. A 58-year-old man, who goes simply by the name Kiawe, says he's walked up and down the coast looking for work.

"I've applied everywhere," he says. "Even McDonald's. Nobody calls. Maybe it's my age?"

Standing at a weekly food distribution event in the park, the shaggy-haired man lifts his right foot and points to a hole in the bottom of his shoe. My feet hurt, Kiawe says.

Finding a job when you live in an apartment is hard, 52-year-old Jody Cleveland says. But landing a position when you don't have an address or a telephone is nearly impossible.

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Oct. 4 — Joey comes around at about 7:30 a.m. to see if I am up and can give her a ride to the grocery store. She's planning on cooking a big family dinner for everyone. We go to breakfast at the Spinner Cafe. People clearly know her there, and greet her warmly. We talk about people drinking and doing drugs in the camp. Living on the beach can do that, she says. It can make you go crazy because you wonder what's going to happen tomorrow.

You don't see any future. The \$750 a month in rent will take up almost all of her disability payments, but it's worth it, she says. It's a matter of life or death.

Those without work or welfare like Cleveland get by on "a wing and a prayer." Some buy packs of cigarettes and then sell them individually to neighbors for 50 cents a smoke. They collect the seeds from kiawe trees and make flour. They fish or collect opihi to sell. They gather recyclables, though it's harder these days to find cans with so many people combing the same area.

Tita makes crafts in her little oceanfront tent, using homemade tools to transform tin and wrapping paper into flowers. She listens to the surf pounding against the shore while she strings together intricate shell necklaces to try and sell to tourists who come to the neighboring boat harbor for dolphin tours and fishing excursions.

Brenda's husband catches crab and fishes. She uses a small space inside of her tent to make Puerto Rican empanadas that she sells to neighbors a few days a week, three for \$5. Her setup is primitive and she has to be quick as she works — if she leaves the dough alone for

even a minute the flies will descend. The food is delicious, she says, but it does upset her stomach.

Cory Lum/Civil Beat



Lee Ann washes clothes using a bucket system in her tent.

In between Tita and Brenda live the Greeks, an elderly couple who moved there this summer. The couple emigrated from Greece to Florida decades ago, but their accents are still pure Mediterranean.

The Greeks are known throughout the camp as “the old couple.” They are so different from the other campers that a better name might be the odd couple.

They have been married for more than 40 years, and walk to the bus stop on Farrington Highway often holding hands. They came to Hawaii on vacation last spring without any idea of how expensive the hotels would be.

Still, they fell in love with the area and decided to pitch a tent on the beach and stay. It’s been four or five months now. They say their grown children think they are in a fancy hotel in Waikiki.



New residents to the Waiane Boat Harbor encampment set up a shipping pallet foundation and start pruning weak tree branches.

The Greeks have a simple setup: just a little pop-top tent and two folding chairs facing the ocean. They get up early and come back late, spending most of their day at the library or Ala Moana Center.

The people in the camp for the most part are nice, they say. Sometimes when someone starts fighting or they find human feces on the ground they get upset.

Mostly, they wonder how in America the government can turn its back on so many people. Why is there nowhere for people in this community to shower? To go to the bathroom.

“This is America,” the old man says. “It’s supposed to be No. 1.”

Leaving The Harbor Behind

In August, Shina decided it was time to move out of The Harbor.

She’d reached an agreement with a nephew moving to Las Vegas to rent his vacant house in Waianae.

The camp is too hot, she says. It’s not good for her medical condition.



LISTEN

Shina Gonzalez talks about what she will miss when she moves out of The Harbor.

Shina wants to leave her camp in good shape for whoever moves in. She takes pride in her place — and in her appearance. If she wears lipstick and cleans up her yard, she says, perhaps that will inspire a neighbor to do the same.

“Just because you live in a situation like this, never means you can’t look good or you can’t plant plants or flowers or make your area look like a castle,” she says.

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Oct. 10 — Al Brede, 52, wants the space clean so that she can put up a fence and ready her yard for Halloween. The camp has a decorating contest each year. She's never won, but she still likes to participate. She makes her own decorations. Stuffed shirts. She hangs someone from a tree. She puts out stuffed animals, which her dog loves to rip the eyes off of. Her brother built a coffin and she might ask to use it but she's afraid of coffins, she says, so maybe not.

Shina spent her last days in the camp lovingly pruning her plants and raking her yard for the new tenants, two young women she's watched grow up in The Harbor.

She will miss her neighbors, she says. She will miss waking up in the morning and having Joey come by with breakfast, miss waving to and talking to Auntie Fina. Miss the late-night card games and karaoke and stringing up Christmas lights.

On one of her last days in the camp, Shina went by to talk to Twinkle about reserving another spot in case of emergency.

Everyone needs a Plan B, she says. There are too many things that can fall through. Landlords. Utilities. Roommates.

She said a little prayer as she readied to leave: “Don’t let me fall backwards. Show me a little miracle, because I can do miracles too. I will keep pushing.”

Coming Full Circle

A few days after Shina moved out, a young couple began renovating her shack. Tam and Queenie had been living in a tent inside

Twinkle's compound but now they needed some privacy.

The couple, who met in the camp, plan to move to Colorado after they earn their high school diplomas. Tam dropped out several years ago and is working her way through a Community School Diploma program. Queenie expects to graduate from Waianae High School in the spring. The girls are both Hawaiian, and neither has ever traveled out of state.

The two girls ripped Shina's old white sheets off the wall. The cloth was dappled with mold. They stapled up new cloth as fresh wallpaper.



Queenie found refuge in Twinkle's compound but eventually built a camp of her own.

Tam tied a long piece of red rope around a fist-sized rock and spent hours throwing the rock up into a nearby kiawe tree, using all her weight to pull down thorny branches that would rip apart the tarp roof in the rain.

Friends came over to help. Auntie Joey brought a crock pot of rice and hot dogs. Someone else plugged in a large speaker and provided a soundtrack of hip-hop.

Auntie Joey ripped apart Shina's rock wall and guided Tam in rebuilding it, using her own trembling manicured hands to carefully wedge the rocks into place. They wanted it to be a little higher, a little more stable.

Even Twinkle's 5-year-old great niece, Shanelly, took a turn carefully hammering down a nail sticking up from one of the wood pallets.



Nighttime in The Harbor brings neighbors closer together.

Tam and Queenie took their time slowly making the place their own. Finally one night, after Twinkle grew grumpy about the messy state of her own living room, the two girls carried a large plastic tub of belongings over to their new digs, along with a pile of blankets, pillows, and a box fan.

The girls pushed the two old couches in the living room together to make a bed, hung a flashlight from the ceiling for a makeshift living room lamp, and spent the first night in their new home playing cards with a neighbor in the dim light.

Over the next few weeks, Shina came back to The Harbor every once in awhile, driving up the dirt path on her motorized scooter. She'd dyed her hair a new shade of red after she left the camp, and wore freshly laundered shirts and dresses.

She mostly talked on her cell phone, fretting over deposits and bills. She'd managed to pay the rent at her nephew's place, but the electric company wanted a hefty deposit to turn the lights on. Water was another problem.



Kids are independent in The Harbor but many adults help in keeping an eye on them.

"It's like jumping out of one fire and you are jumping into another fire," she says.

Each time she came back, she looked more discouraged. Less than a month after moving out, Shina told Twinkle she needed to move back in.

The question: where to put her?

In the few weeks since she'd left, one family moved out from a spot along the northern side of the encampment, but another Micronesian family quickly took their place. A man named Lou who just lost his apartment snagged a spot in the center of the camp. A working family of four started clearing space for a new campsite near the highway, after their landlord jacked up the rent beyond their means.

"What about in back?" Twinkle asked Loke.

But there were not many spots left in the growing camp, and Shina was sandwiched into an empty space across from Kalani's tent. The two-room shack she'd called home for so long was no longer hers.

By now, Kalani who had started with little just a few weeks before, had added a pop-up tent to provide shade and was looking for material for a fence.



Kalani continued building up his campsite. He eventually moved to a new site with his girlfriend.

He'd started dating a girl in The Harbor. They'd adopted a puppy together. With Loke's encouragement, Kalani had also found a job in Kapolei. He was building a life for himself in The Harbor.

For Shina, the thought of starting from scratch was overwhelming. But she was home in The Harbor again, and that's a comfort she's grateful for.

"As long as I have a little spot where I can put up a little pop tent and crawl in to sleep, I'm happy," Shina says. "I can do it. You know, it's either do it or you don't do it. But I'm hardcore, so I can do it."

Editor's Note: Some people in this series would speak with us only if we did not identify them by their full names. Some would only agree to be photographed in shadow or at a distance.



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