



The Shepherd Of The Harbor

Twinkle Borge rules the Waianae homeless camp with a strength and compassion that comes from her long experience with homelessness.

NOVEMBER 16, 2015 • BY JESSICA TERRELL

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It takes a lot to shock Twinkle Borge.

The stout 46-year-old woman has been homeless — or as she would prefer to say, houseless — for more than a decade.

In the last few years alone, the de facto leader of what's now Oahu's largest and most unusual homeless community witnessed a man hang himself. She cleaned out a camp with dead dogs, and watched a man set himself on fire.

Still, the first time Twinkle visited Adam Luafalemana-Fuiava's campsite she was horrified to see that the teenager's bed was nothing more than a thin blanket spread out on the ground.

"I know I shouldn't be telling you this," Twinkle recalls saying to Adam. "But that's fucking ghetto."

At least put a tarp underneath the blanket, Twinkle thought to herself. Or a pallet. Anything would be better than sleeping in the dirt.

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Twinkle took Adam to another part of The Harbor, where she'd built a spare campsite for herself with a simple floor and walls made from wood pallets. It had a stove and a little shelf with canned food. And elevated beds. Then she asked Adam if he and his family would like to live there.

The 16-year-old started crying.

"You would do that for us?" he asked her.

"I would do that for anyone," she said.

Being at The Harbor — and therefore under Twinkle's care — is like being family. No one gets left behind.

People arrive at The Harbor in all states of mental and physical health. Some have just lost their home, others have been living on beaches and under bridges for years.

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Aug. 31 — There are several people sitting outside Twinkle's Hale. I introduce myself to everyone as a reporter, offer them ice cream, tell them I will be around but there's no pressure to talk to me. Most people are friendly, but wary.

Twinkle says it's not her place to judge them. Instead her job — an unpaid round-the-clock duty that she undertook of her own accord several years ago — is simply to find a place for them to sleep. That and lay out a few basic rules of conduct.

She may shrug it off as a job or duty. But it's plain that running The Harbor in the way that a beloved queen might oversee a kingdom is a calling, not a burden.

Twinkle's greatest gift is her ability to create a sense of community among such a disparate — and sometimes broken — group of people.

"Maybe I am the outspoken one and the one that goes to them and the one that fights with them, you know, and argues with them," Twinkle says. "But I also am going to be the one there hugging them,

helping them."



Twinkle Borge has for years been the undisputed leader of The Harbor, organizing a governance structure that includes a second-in-command and section captains.

‘Everything Is For A Reason’

The people closest to Twinkle in The Harbor say she’s “soft batch,” slang for someone who has a soft heart, who gives people second and third and maybe even fourth chances.

If Twinkle is loath to write anyone off for their poor life choices, perhaps it’s because she’s made some terrible decisions of her own.



Twinkle and her dog are inseparable. The animal often rides around the harbor with her, sitting calmly between Twinkle's feet on her moped.

Twinkle arrived at The Harbor in 2006, a few years after she lost her home, her job, and then her son.

The former Big Brothers Big Sisters employee says her downward spiral started when she fell in love with a meth user.

At the time, Twinkle — who got her first name from a mischievous older sister — had two jobs and steady income. She had a fiancé, and a small child.

“If I knew then what I know now, I would never be in this predicament,” she says. “But I guess everything is for a reason.”



Shanelly is one of Twinkle's great nieces. She lives in The Harbor with her parents, but spends much of her time at Twinkle's hale.

When Twinkle found out that her girlfriend had been using their rent money to buy drugs, she made the unusual choice of walking away from her job instead of walking away from the woman.

"I said if this is what it's about, I am going to make sure we lose everything," Twinkle says.

Twinkle isn't one to talk much about her emotions. She speaks plainly and bluntly about her decisions and seems to accept things simply for what they are. Even a decade later, she can't say for sure why she made that choice.

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Sept. 6 - The flies are the biggest problem in the camp right now. Big black houseflies. They are everywhere. It's because of the rainy season starting so early, Adam says. They lay their eggs in the dirt. Even the cleanest camps have them.

The first place Twinkle went with her son and girlfriend was [Keaau Beach Park](#).

Twinkle hated Keaau. The heat. The trash. The grueling 2-mile walk along the highway to get her son to the nearest elementary school.

She was getting into fights at the beach, too. Mostly with her girlfriend.

"Our fights grew so intense to where we were fighting with .22s, were literally shooting at each other," Twinkle says.

She sent her 5-year-old son to live with his father in Honolulu, when it became clear that she was in danger of losing him to Child Protective Services.

About nine years ago, Twinkle and her girlfriend ended up spending the night in their car in the woods next to the Waianae Boat Harbor. It was possible to drive into the property back then, before the main entrance was blocked off.



The Harbor sits on prime beachfront property and some campsites have spectacular ocean views.

This is beautiful, Twinkle thought. Unlike at Keaau there was no one parked nearby. There were no lights. A few people had camps set up, but the woods were mostly quiet. Peaceful.

“Why don’t we live here?” she thought.

The next day she went and bought a tent.

“I started building from there,” she says. “I fell in love with The Harbor.”

Surrogate Mother

Waianae was a rougher place a decade ago. The pop pop pop of a gun on a Saturday night was a familiar sound, she says. She smoked meth. She dealt it.

She could have ended up in prison or in a casket, but then a child saved her life — or at least altered its course.

When Twinkle’s family found out she was living out in The Harbor, one of her grown nieces started coming to the nearby park with her children to see how she was doing.

REPORTER’S NOTEBOOK

Sept. 6 — There’s a portapotty near the entrance to the camp that’s open only at night. The bathrooms in the park have been closed for a few years now. Instead there are portapotties nearby, but they are a long walk to get to, and the park is closed starting at 10 p.m. — meaning that if anyone from the homeless camp tries to use them at night they could

Twinkle wanted to be trusted to babysit her great nephew, so she stopped using for a day. And then another. And another, until one day the child was left with her for the afternoon.

“I never used again,” she says.

Her son stayed with his father, although Twinkle says she has a great relationship with him. He’s about to graduate from high school and she’s already planning his party.

Now, a decade after moving to The Harbor, Twinkle has become a surrogate mother to a large brood of children and adolescents.

“I worry more about the kids than anything,” Twinkle says.

get a ticket.

She worries if they're eating. How they're being treated in school. If they have clean clothes and good hygiene. How they're feeling, how they're thinking.

Twinkle says she knows it's their parents' responsibility to worry, but she just can't help worrying too.

Taking Charge

Twinkle stepped up as The Harbor's leader and spokeswoman a few years ago.

One of Honolulu Mayor Peter Carlisle's last acts before leaving office in 2012 was to bulldoze Keaau Beach Park camp, sending hundreds of homeless people seeking refuge elsewhere.

As they were swept from nearby land, the number of people living in The Harbor skyrocketed. And so did complaints from community members and politicians about the camp.



Cory Lum/Civil Beat

Twinkle's phone is often buzzing with people from the community seeking assistance.

New arrivals weren't used to the rules The Harbor community lived by. Fights broke out among longtime residents and newcomers. Trash piled up near the highway. People were stealing from the neighboring high school, and walking across campus in the middle of the school day.

When Twinkle heard that officials were holding a meeting on the homeless situation, she rounded up some of her neighbors and went.



Twinkle regularly attends Waianae Neighborhood Board meetings as a representative of The Harbor.

[William Aila](#), the Waianae harbormaster at the time, told Twinkle he would give people in The Harbor 60 days to get things under control or he would sign the papers for a sweep. Twinkle said OK.

It's a job she took on simply because it needed to be done, and she figured she could to it.

"Things needed to be in order here," Twinkle says. "I thought I was the only one blunt enough to say it as it is."

The reason she continues to lead the camp is simple, Adam says.

"It's her home," he says. "She's going to do everything in her power to protect it."

The Governor Of The Harbor

Twinkle is known throughout Waianae and beyond as the person to go to with any problems at The Harbor.

But she's also been a regular figure in the news in recent months as a spokeswoman for the greater homeless community on the Leeward Coast, often sought out for comment as the city considers developing new temporary shelters in Waianae.

She carries a small flip phone that a family member pays for, and it's hard to catch her when someone isn't calling about one problem or another.



Twinkle and her extended family gather in the evenings outside her hale. She tries to be easy to find if someone in the camp need her.

One day a few weeks ago, her phone buzzed repeatedly. The local charter school principal was calling to find out why one of the children in The Harbor was missing from class. Someone broke into one of the boats in the nearby marina. Could she get to the back of the encampment ASAP? A resident on meth started a fire and it was billowing smoke near a tent with an infant.

In early September, when she ran into a local family that was being evicted from their home, she spent several days rounding up donations to help them build up a campsite in The Harbor.

In October, after officials cleared out the main [Kakaako encampment](#) in Honolulu, Twinkle made room for 20 new sites in The Harbor — just in case anyone made their way up the coast in need of shelter. Nobody showed up, she says, but she was ready.



Pohaku, one of Twinkle's nephews, has lots of help from others in the compound.

Her sense of community extends to those who have lived in the Harbor for 10 years or for two days. When a group of young [Salvation Army volunteers](#) came to camp out in The Harbor for a week as part of their year-long mission in Hawaii, she made sure they had a safe spot to camp where neighbors would look out for them. She cooked them all dinner on their last night in The Harbor.

Twinkle organizes Christmas and Halloween parties for children in The Harbor, coordinates with social service workers to try and move people into permanent homes and makes sure they get the medical care they need. If someone needs a new tent or clothes, she will find it for them.

"I will do whatever it takes to actually replace your tent," Twinkle says. "I will do shoutouts on Facebook or go within my family and ask, 'Do you guys have an extra tent? I have someone in need of one as of today,' and someone will come and bring it."

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Oct. 10 — In the late afternoon, Ben is sitting shirtless in the shade along the concrete wall that marks the main entrance to the camp. His dog Spice lays calmly at his feet. Ben sits watching a line of boaters washing off their vessels at the faucets on the other side of the unpaved lot. He says he's been waiting more than an hour for the chance to fill some of his water.

When small stopgap measures aren't enough, Twinkle will move children — who sometimes need more care than their parents can provide — into her campsite, which has a multi-room structure for cooking and hanging out as well as several tents for sleeping.

She lists her occupation on Facebook as chief executive officer at "Building Dreams with our kids."

In September, she had her 17-year-old niece Queenie living with her, as well as 19-year-old Adam and his 23-year-old sister Tam. Also sleeping under her tarp roof was a 15-year-old already lived in the camp, but whose parents were having problems controlling her, a 13-year-old whose mother lives in a tent next door, and an 8-year-old great-niece.

She feeds them all with the \$500 she gets each month in food stamps and donations from the local food bank. Sometimes she scrounges around for cans and bottles and recycles them for a bit of cash. She

calls in favors when things get tight at the end of the month.



Cory Lum/Civil Beat

Lori-Ann shows off the pork 'hekkā' she made for dinner that night. Twinkle makes sure everyone has a job to do to keep the family running.

Each night someone in her camp cooks up a big pot of food, and people throughout The Harbor trickle by to get a plate, or just to sit outside and talk in the fading light. She often sends leftovers to campsites where she knows people might be going hungry.

"I just feel responsible," she says. "I think I was always like that even from when I was growing up."

[Honolulu Community Services](#) Director Gary Nakata, who is one of the people tasked with finding solutions to the island's growing homeless population, says he's learned something important from Twinkle and her second-in-command, Rose Loke Chung-Lono.

"Love and respect apply to everyone regardless of what situation you are in," Nakata says.

Adam And Twinkle

Adam has stuck close to Twinkle since their first meeting three years ago.

He calls her Mom. She calls him her biggest supporter and confidant.

Every night — no matter how crazy her day has been, zipping from one end of The Harbor to the other on her bright yellow moped, dealing with all manner of problems — the two try to find at least a few minutes alone together.



Queenie, left, Tamra and Adam return to the camp after using hoses in the boat harbor to shower.

They often sit on a low rock wall in the Waianae Boat Harbor parking lot near a set of faucets where most people in the community shower, their figures illuminated by the soft yellow glow of the streetlights above.

“Adam would be the only one out of everyone there that would know anything about me and everything about me,” Twinkle says.

Adam knows when she’s having body cramps or headaches. He chides her for working too hard and taking on too many tasks.

But even Adam doesn’t know the full weight of the worries she carries.



Twinkle stays in close touch with neighboring Waianae High School to make sure the camp is respecting school rules and not allowing students into the camp.

At night, in the front bedroom of the large tarp-roofed structure that she shares with her extended and adopted family, the leader of The Harbor has trouble sleeping.

Her generator broke a few weeks ago. Without electricity for fans, the stillness of the night air makes her hot flashes hard to bear. She has panic attacks in the darkness, and what should be six hours of rest turns into four.

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Oct. 10 — As we walk past the back of the camp, a young shirtless man starts yelling toward an older man walking down the path. "What?" the man says. "Do you have any hydrocodone for sale," the younger man asks. "No," the man says, and then walks away shaking his head.

When she gets up in the morning, her brown eyes are bloodshot from lying awake at night. Thinking. Planning. Worrying.

In September, her biggest worry was a resident who had gotten into a fight with several people in the camp and smashed up a neighbor's campsite.

Getting along with your neighbors is always a good idea, but it's crucial in a place like The Harbor, where people's most basic sense of safety depends on trusting the people around them.

"This should be a place where you lay your head to rest," Twinkle says. "Not where they got to worry about their place being destroyed or coming back with their tent all ripped up. Nobody should do that or live that way."



Adam, left, and Twinkle have become close since Adam's family moved to The Harbor three years ago.

Neighbors said the fight started out as a domestic dispute that escalated as several people confronted the man. The police were called, but no one was arrested.

Twinkle considered whether he would come back and retaliate if she kicked him out of the camp. He was allowed to stay, but only under careful watch.

But she also worried about whether, as the leader responsible for so many people, she'd made the right choice.

People need to feel safe in the Harbor, and such behavior clearly can't be tolerated. But evicting someone from their home is a big decision, especially when they have nowhere else to go.

Maybe a camp vote is the better thing to do, she says. Majority rules.

"Reality wise, who am I?" Twinkles asks no one in particular.



Keeping order in The Harbor is her hardest job, Twinkle says.

In October, she was still weighing her options, anxious over what was happening with this guy. Watching his behavior carefully. Waiting.

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Oct. 13 — Adam comes back to the camp from an excursion with Twinkle. He carries a clipboard with a few sheets of lined paper, and he starts writing down names. He's making a list, he says, of all the adults in the camp for a Christmas present donation event. Crystal, 25, is now dating Kalani, something the other girls tease her about.

But new worries began keeping her up at night, too.

People started talking about change coming to Waianae and The Harbor.

A community group is trying to get a lease for the state land where The Harbor sits. The governor declared a [state of emergency](#) in the islands and came up with an extra \$1 million to tackle homelessness anew. He suggested Waianae might be the next target of enforcement.

"Why does everything have to be happening all at once?" Twinkle asked Loke.

"Just shake it off, girl," Loke told her. "Breathe."

Not Going Anywhere

One day in October, when Twinkle's brow was especially furrowed and her worries more visible than usual, one of her adopted daughters told her they would never let anything happen to her.

"I know that, baby girl," Twinkle told the girl. "But remember, I would never let anything happen to you."

When the girl pointed out that Twinkle is getting old, Twinkle replied that she is just getting wise. They both laughed.

"One thing about those kids, they get my back all the way," Twinkle says.



Twinkle says she may be hard on Adam, but of all the kids in her camp she also spoils him the most. "I love that boy," she says.

Twinkle could leave The Harbor easily. Family members have implored her to come live with them. Or to at least to move in with her elderly father, whom she spends time caring for several days a week at his home in Waianae Valley.

But after so many years of living out in the open, houses feel uncomfortable to her. She spends most of the time at her father's house sitting out on the porch, she says.

It's also unlikely she will leave as long as there are people living in The Harbor. As long as there are children in The Harbor.

"The day they push us out then maybe I go home," she says. "Until then, I know there's more work to be done there."

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.



WATCH VIDEO

This time lapse shows the stunning views enjoyed by people living on the edge of the encampment



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