



## Kids In The Harbor: Lessons From The Edge Of Life

Learning to survive in The Harbor involves a kind of independence and resourcefulness that mainstream children aren't exposed to.

NOVEMBER 17, 2015 • BY JESSICA TERRELL

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**P**aula's 10-year-old daughter sits on a black plastic milk crate, sorting through a collection of bicycle wheels that she just salvaged from a large rubbish pile.

Some of the wheels are big. Some are small and appear to have come from a jogging stroller. None of them seem quite right for the stripped down black-and-silver bicycle frame that lies in the dirt nearby.

The girl is confident she can find what she needs to build a new bike from the piles of junk nearby. If nothing else, it will keep her occupied while the rest of her family clears out an abandoned campsite so they can settle in to what's now Oahu's largest homeless encampment.



*Kids in The Harbor have plenty of room to roam and play, learning a unique independence that comes from living on the edge.*

The last resident left behind a ripped and weathered couch, car seats, boxes of tools, clothing, piles of garbage with empty coffee cups and rotten food containers, and dozens of plastic baggies that Paula suspects contain traces of meth.

He also left behind objects that, with a little imagination, can be transformed into toys. So far Paula's daughter has used a broken shovel to dig for treasure and turned a tent pole into a make-believe fishing rod.

People who worry that kids today are growing up addicted to video games and TV should see these kids in The Harbor. They are clever and resourceful, learning a kind of independence that will help them survive in a world that considers them outcasts.



3-year-old Pohaku gets ready for dinner at his Auntie Twinkle's compound.

Pohaku is 3 years old and only lives part time at the camp. But he knows how to use a broom handle to push up the tarp that covers his auntie's camp and drain the water that collects in a rainstorm before it brings down the whole roof.

At 15, Maelia knows how to make flour from the kiawe beans that grow in the woods, and how to build a new floor using wood pallets. She can pull the stinger off a scorpion and reinforce a tarp roof with rope to keep out the rain.

#### REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Aug. 25 - Several women are sitting at the entrance to the woods, one in lots of makeup. Twinkle is not at home. Instead there is a heavyset young woman who seems less than pleased to have a visitor. She is sitting in the first room feeding four or five kittens and cats on the kitchen table.

Eight-year-old Dorsey can spend hours along the rocky shoreline, splashing about safely in the small key-hole shaped swimming hole carved into the rocks by the pounding surf. Her parents are confident that she knows how to look out for herself and her little sister.

Children in The Harbor know how to fetch water, cook on an open fire, gather wood. They can amuse themselves easily, and make games out of the simplest of objects.

Put the children from The Harbor up against other kids in a survival situation, and The Harbor kids would excel, says Rose Loke Chung-Lono, one of the camp's defacto leaders.

"Our kids would actually teach that other child how to do something," Loke says.

But there are other lessons that come with growing up homeless and struggling to get by. Darker lessons.

Children in the camp learn that little plastic baggies are used for drugs. Even the youngest know several nicknames for meth.

More than one child has had to beg outside of a grocery store for cash after their mother spent all her money on drugs, says Twinkle Borge, the longtime leader of the homeless encampment.

Kids learn which neighbors will feed them when they run out of food at home.

Paula's 13-year-old daughter has learned to never tell strangers even the tiniest details of camp life. Other teens her age talk openly about their families and lives. They don't think twice about sharing secrets with anyone who has access to Facebook or Snapchat.

But for homeless kids, survival and stability — such as it is in The Harbor — requires a more careful approach to life. The older ones know as well as their parents how precarious their position is.



**WATCH VIDEO**

*Walk through The Harbor, from the entrance to the ocean.*

## **Homelessness Is Tough On Teens**

Waianae High School's rear parking lot borders The Harbor. Two dirt paths littered with toys and rubbish cut through the brushes and then empty out into the asphalt behind the school.

Loudspeaker announcements and the harsh buzz of the school bell ring through the camp every day.

But as close as it is, high school can seem a world away.



◉ LISTEN

*Paula's 20-year-old son, who moved to The Harbor in October, talks about the potential he sees in his two little sisters who live in a campsite just a short walk from Waianae High School.*

Bullying is one of the biggest challenges that homeless children face, says John Wataoka. A former principal at Waianae Elementary School, he now oversees homeless outreach efforts at all public schools on the Leeward Coast.

Children often feel out of place. They're embarrassed. Even peers who mean well can be awkward.

Adam Luafalemana-Fuiava, who's 19 now, says he rarely lets friends visit him at The Harbor because many of them are so overly concerned for him that it makes him feel uncomfortable. Pity is not welcome here.

#### REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Sept. 5 – I thought this was going to be a story about the houseless, about community, family, and making ends meet. It's also a story about the homeless, and the hopeless. It's a story about ingeniously crafted and well cared for camps, but also about children living in abject squalor.

Paula says her 13-year-old daughter struggles to make friends at school.

"She has that fear, that shame that people are going to find out where she's at," Paula says. "Make fun of her. Ridicule her. And she's not going to be one of the cool people because she lives in the bush."

Children in The Harbor are not alone in their struggles. As of early October, there were 2,080 homeless students enrolled in Hawaii's public schools; 912 of them went to schools on the Leeward Coast.

Slowly but surely many homeless kids become disengaged from the school community — a problem sometimes exacerbated by teachers or administrators who may have their own prejudices.

Homeless parents surveyed by the Hawaii Department of Education last year said that one of the biggest needs for kids was having a close personal relationship with at least one adult on campus who made them feel protected and loved at school, Wataoka says.



*Joe Kalani Smith moved to The Harbor after he graduated from Waianae High School. He remembers walking through the camp on school days and wondering what it would be like to live there.*

"I think there is a lack of understanding of what our homeless families go through," Wataoka says. "So whenever there is a lack of understanding sometimes there's a lack of compassion that goes with it."

In October there were roughly 47 children living in The Harbor, according to Loke's accounting, ranging in age from a 1-month-old to teens in high school.

The Harbor is home to half a dozen teenage boys who either dropped out completely or graduated from the state's Youth Challenge Academy, a boot camp-style program for troubled boys run in partnership with the National Guard.

Several of the Academy graduates, including one of Paula's sons, still live in The Harbor even though it's been months since graduation. Unemployed, they roam the woods in small packs looking for ways to amuse themselves, scrounging up cash for cigarettes and booze.



*Loke keeps careful track of residents of The Harbor. She counted at least 47 kids in the camp in October.*

Kids who've spent most of their lives in The Harbor — especially the boys — seem a little less focused than their classmates, says Anna Winslow, the principal at Kamaile Academy Charter School, which is just up the highway from the camp.

Last year, Winslow says, there was a Kamaile student who lived in The Harbor and was frequently absent. Winslow told his parents he needed to improve his attendance or he wouldn't be able to catch up. This year the boy is classified as a special education student, she says.

Loke and Twinkle don't really buy the notion that it's problems at school that cause homeless kids to fail. It's often problems at home, just like mainstream kids have, that are really to blame.

Some parents are just too tied up in their own problems to realize that their kids aren't doing well, Loke says.



"Right now, we are just helping each other out, getting by day by day."

[Read Hannah's story](#)

*When Hannah was 12 she didn't want to follow her parents into homelessness. Now she can't bring herself to leave them behind.*

## The Parent Trap

Parents in the camp often struggle with substance abuse, depression, domestic violence and mental health issues — problems no different from those facing families in many other communities, but ones that are exacerbated by the challenges of living out in the open.

Things change quickly in the camp. People move in and out, parents fall off the wagon, start dating, break up, fight. None of these issues would be automatically solved by getting four walls and a traditional roof over their heads, but problems can seem bigger when you don't know where your next meal is coming from or what sort of havoc the next rainstorm will wreak on your home.



*This family recently moved to The Harbor. They set about putting in new carpet and sprucing up after the previous residents left a mess.*

All this instability can have far reaching, lifelong impacts on kids. Studies show that homeless children tend to perform lower on standardized tests than their peers, are more likely to face mental health challenges, and have a higher incidence of health issues such as obesity and asthma.

But in The Harbor people consider themselves simply houseless, not homeless.

Twinkle, the community's leader, has spent the past several years building a community that survives because people who don't have much else know they can rely on each other. She believes things can be different.

#### REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Sept. 7 - Children as young as 2 appear to wander around without oversight, some in little gangs of small children appearing to range from the age needing diapers to maybe 7 or 8. The camps along the trail that is supposed to be haunted are among some of the scariest and most ill kept.

Providing for children in The Harbor is an all-consuming mission for Twinkle. She is aided by more than a dozen camp residents who — much like a surrogate aunt or uncle — help their neighbors' children with homework, offer up hot meals when kids are hungry, and keep a watchful eye on children roaming the camp.

Here, raising a kid really does take a village.

Together The Harbor residents hope not only to meet the daily needs of more than three dozen kids in the camp, but to set them on a path toward doing something bigger and better with their lives — even if the odds are stacked against them.

"I don't want you to think that being homeless is the way," Twinkle tells children in The Harbor. "I'd like you to believe there is better out there for you. But only you can make that happen."

### No Free Ride Even For Kids

Twinkle is an unofficial foster mom in The Harbor, and children are constantly coming and going from her campsite.

Twinkle's four-room structure sits near the main entrance to The Harbor. Her place has a picnic table in front and is marked by a handpainted sign proclaiming "Twinkle's Hale."

#### REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Sept. 12 — One of the women who volunteers with the organization has a niece and 9-year-old great nephew who live in the camp in Waianae. I think that illustrates the challenges of getting some people out of the cycle of homelessness. Several people with the nonprofit got quite emotional talking about the homeless kids at the camp, even though they think overall the kids are doing OK.

The structure has a big kitchen with a propane camping stove and two rickety metal shelves for canned goods and pots and pans. Next to the kitchen is a living room with several couches and a television. She also has space out back for several camping tents — making it easy for her to make room for more people as needed.

On any given day, about a dozen people live with her, at least five of them children or teens in need of shelter and guidance. Some call her auntie, several call her "mom."

Some children come to her on their own. Others are sent by parents who need help controlling teenage rebellion.

Children in her camp don't have a set bedtime and the teens might get away with smoking cigarettes around her, but she's a firm believer in structure. And discipline. If you live in her home, you are expected to go to school, and to help out around the campsite.



*A local food bank distributes many different items to camp residents twice a month. It's a favorite day for the kids.*

"She does what she can. She works with the schools and the kids," says Val Tavaí, senior manager of the Hawaii Community Action Program's Leeward District Service Center, which is located across the parking lot from the encampment. "She might not be related to a lot of the kids, but the kids might tend to go toward (her) tent because there's a family-like atmosphere."

There is no free ride in The Harbor. Not even at Twinkle's house. The 46-year-old keeps a list on the wall, and every child and teen living with her is expected to help with household duties.

In August, 15-year-old Maelia — whose mother and two brothers live on the other side of The Harbor — had to haul the household's dirty dishes out to the parking lot every afternoon. She lugged them over in a plastic barrel and washed them at a faucet next to a large dumpster.



*Adam hauls the family's dishes to a water faucet in the adjacent Waianae Boat Harbor to wash them.*

Twinkle's 17-year-old niece, Queenie, was tasked with hauling water. Another child took care of cleaning the yard and emptying the recycling.

Adam's job was cooking. The 19-year-old cut his foot on an empty tuna can in the camp earlier in the summer, and had several staples holding his skin together while it mended. His foot was wrapped in large bandages, and he hobbled about as he made breakfast each morning for his extended family: a dozen scrambled eggs, Spam and rice.

When Adam wasn't cooking, he was often babysitting.

Kids in the camp connect easily to Adam, not just because he is playful and loving, but because he gets them. He knows exactly what it's like to grow up in an unusual and difficult situation.

## **Growing Up Homeless**

Adam was 13 when his family lost their home and moved to Keaau Beach Park.

Six years later, Adam still blames himself for his family's descent into homelessness. He's convinced that his own unkind treatment of a homeless man came back to bite hard on his own family.

About a year after Adam and his family moved from their home on Molokai to Oahu for his father's job, Adam saw an old homeless man sitting at a bus stop.



*Adam and Twinkle have become family in The Harbor. The 19-year-old calls her Mom.*

The man was dirty. He smelled horrible. Adam held his nose. He taunted him. He told the man he was filthy. Lazy. He laughed at him.

“Why don’t you go get a job?” he asked the man.

A few months later, Adam’s father lost his own job and the family was soon living on a beach with dozens of other homeless people.

“I don’t know,” Adam said, as he sliced Spam on a cutting board in Twinkle’s kitchen. “Maybe it was karma.”

The family lived on the beach for a few years, and Adam hid the fact that he was homeless from most people at school. He was ashamed. Embarrassed. Then his family moved to The Harbor.

#### REPORTER’S NOTEBOOK

Sept. 23 – They ask about the story I’m working on, and whether I will stay in the camp as part of it. Paula says if I really want to do that, I should show up the way other people do. Don’t bring any fancy camping equipment, no sleeping bags or cooking stove. Pretend as if I just got evicted and had 20 minutes to gather anything I wanted to save. Bring \$20 and a tent and nothing else, and then see who will come to help you put your camp together.

Things got a little better after the move. For a start, his new campsite was hidden from public view by trees and brush. It was a big difference from the beach, where daily activities from showering to eating were performed in full view of commuters on the highway.

While his life got easier when he moved to The Harbor, school did not.

He’d stopped attending high school when he was 14, and still living at the beach. Part of the problem was that he was more interested in partying than schoolwork. But he also felt ashamed of being homeless, and he belittled himself.

“I didn’t want to go to school at all,” Adam says. “I was telling myself that I was stupid and I was never going to get better.”

By the time he started improving his attendance, he was too far behind. Adam says he dropped out of Waianae High School in the 11th grade. Now he’s enrolled in an adult education program and studying

## Sticking Together

Kids in The Harbor don't talk much about their fears or insecurities. Instead they learn to talk tough. And stick together.

They may have their own negative feelings about The Harbor, but many talk about it with the same kind of protectiveness they might feel toward their family — it's one thing for family members pick on each other, it's another thing entirely for a stranger to.

"I hate it when people leave and the diss The Harbor," Adam says. "It's not this place that caused your problems, it was you."



*Maelia helps Queenie renovate a camp. The teenagers have learned to be resourceful when it comes to decorating.*

The Harbor is located within walking distance of a park, a playground and the library. When school is out or the library is closed, kids find amusement where they can. They go swimming and diving in the ocean, and play with some of the more than 100 cats and dogs in the camp.

At night the tennis courts in the nearby park are brightly lit until 10 p.m. and it's not uncommon to see small groups of children running around playing made-up games with baseballs and basketballs.

### REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Oct. 3 — I head back into the camp a little after 8 p.m. There are dogs yapping in Joey's tent, and the sounds of generators coming from multiple directions. The camp smells of dry dust and a faint waft of woodsmoke. From my campsite I can hear Duke open up a can

There are no streetlights in The Harbor. A few campsites have generators illuminating the yards, but unless the moon is full there is nothing lighting the paths that wind through the woods.

Most nights, Twinkle and her extended family go to bed early. Adam rides his bike to a nearby McDonald's.

He sits outside the restaurant, which closes at 11 but has free WiFi even after the doors are locked. Sometimes he stays until 4 a.m. doing homework or playing on his iPad.

Paula's 20-year-old son says he's working on a plan to get his sisters

of dog food and chop it up. He talks to his dogs. A Micronesian family walks by with a flashlight. Music plays somewhere in the distance. The whole scene feels much like a pet friendly campground.

out of The Harbor.

"This is not a good place to be," he says.

There's a sense of desperation among many in the encampment. An edginess that grows sharper toward the end of the month, when food — and drug — supplies dwindle and cash runs out.

Paula's son was serving time in juvenile detention when his mom and three younger siblings lost their home. Now he's trying to make up for lost time.



 LISTEN

*Paula talks about some of the tough choices she's had to make since moving back to The Harbor with her two daughters in August.*

Sitting in the campsite he recently cleared out for the family, the muscular young man says if he can get two minimum wage jobs and his younger brother can do the same, they can save up enough money to get an apartment.

It would be even better if he could find something that paid more than minimum wage, but without a high school diploma he knows his options are limited.

He wants his little sisters to be in a place where they can take a hot shower. Where they can go to the bathroom whenever they want to. Open a refrigerator and make themselves something to eat.



*Kids learn quickly how to take care of themselves including when it comes to the ocean that forms one boundary of The Harbor.*

"I just see that being out here is going to tear our family apart. I can envision it. I don't know how," he says, "but I can just see that everyone is going to just split from each other."

Sitting in a shaded area in their campsite, Paula cried a little as her son talked about trying to protect his little sisters.

She said it hurt her to know that she wasn't giving her children everything they needed. But she was also touched to see that her once selfish teenage son had transformed into a more caring young man.

"He used to be a self-centered kid, who only thinks about himself and his fun and never mind how it affects the whole family," she says.

## Learning To Survive

Life in The Harbor teaches kids lessons that are very different from what their peers learn in traditional classrooms.

Children gain a certain amount of inner strength from living in The Harbor, Loke says. Some kids, like Adam, grow into more empathetic adults because of the hardships they've faced.

All Harbor kids are skilled in survival and making their way along what Loke refers to as "the backroads" of life.

### REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Oct. 3 - I can hear a growling sound when I open the door to the shack, but can't figure out where it's coming from. After a few frightening minutes, Maelia jumps down from the ceiling and two other teens jump out from behind the couches.

The hope, parents say, is for kids to harness the strengths they've learned from this unusual life to pursue dreams beyond The Harbor. To not get stuck in a cycle of homelessness that for many can prove hard to break.

Maelia wants to be a rapper, Twinkle says. Twinkle doesn't see that. She thinks the teen should be a lawyer, the way she's always arguing her case with Twinkle.

When Twinkle's niece Queenie graduates this June, she plans to move to Colorado with Adam's older sister.

They've been hiding in the dark for about 20 minutes waiting to try and scare me. They burst into giggles.



Cory Lum/Civil Beat

*Shanelly is a charming 5-year-old, warm and outgoing and curious about strangers.*

Adam loses interest quickly, Twinkle says, but she still wants him to aim high. Go to college and study technology. See a bit of the world.

In August, Adam scored an 82 on the first of five tests he needs to take to earn his Community School Diploma. In September, he passed his second test with an 86 — the highest score of the three residents from The Harbor who participated.

Some days Adam says he wants to leave Hawaii. "I'm getting tired of this rock in the ocean," he says. Other days, he says it would be hard to leave Twinkle. To be away from this place that has become his home.

Twinkle says she'd kick his ass if he stayed just for her.

She has high hopes for kids in The Harbor.

**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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