



THE HARBOR

Ben: 'It's Not Really That Bad'

Ben Susa would like to leave The Harbor. But not without his loyal dog, Spice.

NOVEMBER 18, 2015 • By Jessica Terrell  

Ben Susa was living in Northern California, working as a truck driver, when he got some bad news from his family in Nanakuli: The home his parents had lived in since the 1940s was going into foreclosure.

Ben says he came back hoping to save the house he was raised in; but he was too late. His siblings weren't just behind on the mortgage. They owed back taxes, too.

Just before his family lost their home, a friend gave him a little red puppy named Spice. The two have been inseparable ever since, companions on a journey that went from a beach in Nanakuli 15 years ago to a tent in the center of The Harbor in 2007.



Cory Lum/Civil Beat

Spice and Ben have lived in The Harbor together since 2007.

Learning how to take care of Spice in The Harbor was hard at first. Their first summer in The Harbor, the camp was suffering a terrible flea outbreak, Ben says.

“His face would be covered with fleas. I really had to learn how to deal with this,” Ben says.

The best weapon, Ben says, turned out to be liquid dish detergent.

Ben says he doesn’t get welfare or food stamps. He lost his identification a few years back, and hasn’t been able to get a replacement — making job hunting a challenge, too. He makes do with odd jobs. Sometimes he fishes or gathers recycling. When money is tight, his biggest task is getting food for Spice. The dog eats before he does.

“That’s how much I love him,” he says. Spice follows him everywhere he goes.

Ben has a 32-year-old daughter in Alabama. She worries a lot about him living in The Harbor, but he tries to reassure her that he’s doing OK. He has two sisters and a brother who also live in The Harbor, and lots of friends. They look out for each other.

“I tell her it’s not really that bad. Maybe in other states or districts it could be different, but over here, we’re OK,” he says.

That doesn’t mean he wants to stay forever.

He’s had a few offers of transitional housing, opportunities that would come with job training and some financial assistance. Taking the housing would mean leaving Spice behind though, Ben says, and there’s just no way he can do that.

Ben is 50 now. Spice is a calm, easygoing 15.

When Spice dies, then maybe Ben will try to find some help and leave. Until then, they will stay together in The Harbor.

“No way in hell I am abandoning him,” Ben says. “He’s my buddy. My partner. My best friend.”

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