

HOMELESS

She Sleeps in the Front Seat, Her Son Takes the Back



CHARLIE NEUMAN

Toddler Selena Rivera, held by her mother, Bertha, looks out the car window before her father, Manual, covers it with a blanket for the night. The Rivera family lives in their car and parks it overnight at the Jewish Family Service of San Diego. Manual Rivera works as a security guard in the daytime.

More than 1,100 people living in their cars in San Diego lack a safe place to

park for the night. About 150 others find overnight spots in designated lots offering some access to water, microwaves, showers, and port-a-potties.

By KATYA CENGEL

December 5, 2018

Naomi Lender hits the trunk of her 2000 Ford Taurus with her fist. It pops up to reveal everything she and her teenaged son Amram will need in the next few days: an electric kettle — for something warm to drink in the morning — a water filter, to purify the water they get from a hose, and bags of food and clothes. She takes a box of fish sticks from a cooler at her feet and heads across the parking lot of Jewish Family Service of San Diego to an outdoor patio where a small group has gathered.

As office workers leave the nonprofit's complex to head home for the day, Lender and the others settle into the parking lot to spend the night in their cars, part of a safe parking program run by the nonprofit Dreams for Change. Registered clients are allowed in at 6 p.m., and on a Thursday evening last winter, John Frawley is the first to arrive, followed by two older women. The families come next, children peeling out of vehicles and onto bikes and skateboards. They spend the night here in their cars, but must leave early the next morning.



CHARLIE NEUMAN

Each night, Naomi Lender removes an electric kettle from her car's trunk. In the morning, she'll make tea before packing up and driving away with her son.

By 6:30 p.m., there is a line for the outdoor microwave, and most of the spaces on the extension cord next to it have mobile phones plugged into them. Frawley is stationed at a table, ready to check in those scheduled to use the indoor shower tonight. The shower and microwave are available only for a few hours. When Lender shows up with her fish sticks, there is already a line for the microwave.

“It’s a shared experience,” Frawley says.

“Everything is a shared experience,” Lender says with a laugh.

She is 5 feet 4 inches, with dark curly hair and a small butterfly sticker on the lower right lens of her glasses. When dinner is ready, she and her son stand while eating, sharing a paper plate and plastic fork. It has been a month and a half since Lender, who’s in her mid-40s, and Amram started sleeping in the parking lot. When they lived indoors they would watch TV in the evenings. Now they talk to their neighbors.

“This is like a little neighborhood,” Amram says. “Each of our cars are like our houses.”

He is almost as tall as his mother, with brown hair and long eyelashes.

"You're not really supposed to peek into anyone else's car," he says, "because it's disrespectful and they might be doing something private."



CHARLIE NEUMAN

Teresa Smith, founder and C.E.O. of Dreams for Change, with the parking lot of the Jewish Family Service of San Diego behind her. The organization provides people living in cars overnight parking.

'I'D RATHER STAY IN MY CAR'

The idea to create a place where people could safely sleep in their cars came to Dreams for Change founder Teresa Smith during the 2008 economic downturn. As a social service provider at a nonprofit, Smith began seeing a different group of people looking for housing: people experiencing homelessness for the first time. "They just weren't these generational poverty-type families," she says.

Instead, they were families and individuals who had lost their jobs, their homes and savings during the recession. In general, they weren't struggling with mental illness or substance abuse, as many of the chronically homeless do. When sent to shelters they would come back and tell Smith: "I'd rather stay in my car." So Smith started trying to figure out a way for them to do that.

It's something that Megan Hustings, interim director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, has been seeing more of in recent years, especially on the West Coast, where having a car is all but essential. At the same time, cities have been trying to discourage people from staying in their cars, including creating zones where it's illegal to park a car for more than a certain amount of time. "There are a lot of cities, communities, that will ticket unnecessarily," Hustings says. Which is why the safe parking programs are important.

The idea behind the Dream for Change's Safe Parking Program is to set up parking lots where people can safely sleep in their cars. Dreams for Change provides staff to check people in for the night, make sure things are running smoothly and counsel participants in an effort to get them back into regular housing. The parking sites are either loaned to the program for free or for a minimum fee of about \$500 a month to cover gas, electricity, water and trash services. Dreams for Change also pays for port-a-potties. The annual budget for two sites is around \$55,000, which comes from private donations. Smith's salary comes from separate consulting work she does, and the staff at the sites are often social-work college students completing internships.



CHARLIE NEUMAN

John Frawley checks his email one last time before closing up his car for the night. He'll recline his front seat as far as it can go and sleep there.

Smith opened her first overnight space in a church parking lot in 2010. While she tries to keep the

locations of the overnight lots consistent, that isn't always possible. One organization whose lot she was using sold the property. The local government at another spot kept imposing fines that would have cost Dreams for Change too much to fight. Smith had to temporarily close another site when things got chaotic after she let in too many people.

By the fall of 2017, Smith says she was on the verge of closing one of her two sites, due to lack of funds, when the city of San Diego gave the program a little more than \$350,000 to open a third site and add spaces and staff to the current Jewish Family Service (JFS) site. The money came after a deadly Hepatitis A outbreak forced the city to reassess how it deals with its homeless population. Because JFS sees the Dreams for Change program as complementary to its social mission, the organization does not charge Dreams for Change for use of the lot. It also helps work with clients on finding housing and employment.

In all, Dreams for Change now has 150 spaces at three locations (120 of them funded by the city), which left 1,112 of the 1,262 people that the annual Point-In-Time Count for San Diego County found living in their vehicles in San Diego on a single night in 2018 without a safe place to park. In all, for the one January night that was counted, there were 8,576 homeless individuals in San Diego County, 4,990 of them unsheltered. The others were in emergency housing, transitional housing or safe havens.

Smith and Hustings believe that lack of affordable housing is now a bigger problem than economic conditions in making people homeless. In San Diego for the past two decades, older affordable housing units have been razed to make room for new development, says Chris Ward, a San Diego City Council member who is vice-chair of the county's Regional Task Force on the Homeless.

"We're building affordable housing," Ward says. "But we're building just enough to be able to replace the affordable housing that we tore down." And not enough to account for population growth, he says. The apartment vacancy rate in San Diego is about 4 percent, according to the San Diego County Apartment Association, making it difficult for tenants to find a new place before they lose their old one. The average wait for federal Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher rental assistance is eight to 10 years, according to the San Diego Housing Commission.



CHARLIE NEUMAN

The back seat is a bedroom for 14-year-old Amram Lender. He has arranged things for the night, the rear window ledge serves as a nightstand and a desk. His mother, Naomi Lender, will sleep in the front seat. This homeless family parks their car each night in the Jewish Family Service of San Diego's lot.

MAKING A HOME

Naomi Lender is seated at an outside table, a new batch of fish sticks in front of her. She texts Amram, who has gone off to the car: “Eat more now?” The talk on the patio is about the program’s three port-a-potties, two of which have been taped shut.

Amram returns a few minutes later. At school, he says other kids ask him a few times a week if it’s true he sleeps in a car. He tells them, “Yes, yes it is.”

He keeps a toy robot, a phone charger and drawings from art class — “the stuff I’d normally put on a desk” — on the ledge below the back window. He is a smart kid, a year ahead in math and a decent chess player. The backseat is his bed. His mom sleeps in the front passenger seat.

“At least it hasn’t been like this for my entire life,” Amram says.

Before her 2015 divorce, Lender had a home. But her older brother David Goldberg explains in a phone

call that it was not divorce so much as Lender refusing to take responsibility for her own life that got her into trouble.



CHARLIE NEUMAN

Second-grader Jasly Brothers does her homework at an area normally used for breaks and lunch by employees in a nearby building. She's sleeps with her parents in their car.

"My little sister always seemed to get everyone else to do stuff for her," he says.

After the divorce, Lender lived with their elderly father. During those two years, Goldberg says Lender lost food and financial benefits because she failed to fill out required paperwork. When their father's health declined further, Goldberg moved him to his home. Lender and Amram ended up living in their car.

"I did not want to see her do that," says Goldberg, a vice president at a San Diego manufacturing company. "But I just had a sense that she needed to reach a particular level where she had to take care of herself."



CHARLIE NEUMAN

As the sun comes up in San Diego's Kearny Mesa area, Kathy Jones removes the tarp she used to cover the windows of her Toyota where she slept last night. Many of the homeless who stay overnight in the parking lot cover their vehicle for privacy.

SLEEPING IN THE FRONT SEAT

“So we’ll either be dead ...”

Kathy Jones doesn’t finish her sentence. She’s in her early 60s, the same age her husband was when he died four years ago. A self-employed industrial mechanic, he didn’t have health insurance when he was diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and a handful of other ailments. The medical bills added up and, in a few years, Jones says, she lost both her husband and the house they had lived in for 38 years. As a widow, she receives \$800 a month in Social Security survivor benefits, \$300 of which she spends on a storage unit.

Many of the people residing in the lot store what they don’t currently need: the couches, the desks, the pots and pans, everything that once made up a home. They keep what they need now, like the hangers of clothes Jones suspends from the grab handle in the backseat of her 2000 Toyota Corolla.

The average stay in the lot is three to six months. Jones has been living here about five months. She was

quick to greet Tom and Diane Roe when they arrived. She went to the same high school as Tom, although it is his wife Diane she sits with now at one of the outdoor tables. Diane has a headlamp on her head and Jones' little dog, Miha, in her lap. It is a cold night and the dog shivers under a pink coat.

When they were younger, Tom worked as an auto tech while Diane stayed home with their daughter. Then Tom's diabetes got so bad that he started having trouble walking and lost his job. Around the same time, their landlord, a family friend who had kept their rent low for more than 30 years, died and his son decided to sell the house. Now they sleep in the front seats of their car, reclining them as far as they will go. Their golden retriever, Foxy Lady — named after the Jimi Hendrix song — gets the back.



CHARLIE NEUMAN

Homeless people in their cars are tucked-in for the night at the Jewish Family Service of San Diego parking lot. Some cover the windows to block light and provide privacy.

Diane's sister-in-law, Penny Roe, tries to help out, inviting them over on weekends so they can have a home-cooked meal. In a phone conversation, Penny explains that she has seen Diane search for work and Tom, a veteran, try to obtain disability benefits and housing through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

"Before I used to think, 'Well, look at those people asking for help,'" Penny says. "Until it happens to a family member, and then you look at it differently."

Diane knows most of the regulars: the young couple with the toddler, the single father with the kid's bike on the back of his vehicle, the woman with the double cab truck. About the only people Diane doesn't know are the ones who park by the back fence near the port-a-potties and a hand-washing station. Diane calls that area La Jolla because she believes the people there are snobby like she imagines the people who live in the affluent community must be. In truth, though, she doesn't know their stories, something Jones admits later.

"We share some of our stories, but we don't know everyone's real stories."

Jewish Family Service Chief Operating Officer Dana Toppel wants to unearth those real stories and find out what happened beyond just an apartment becoming too expensive.

"Usually, in all of our lives, regardless of who we are, there are sub-layers to every situation," Toppel says.

That is where the case managers, social work interns and housing navigators come in. With the extra staff, Dreams for Change and JFS, the actual holder of the government contract, hope to increase the number of clients who go on to obtain permanent housing to 44 percent from 60 percent.

"We know in the homeless world that the more time that passes that you're homeless, the more likely you're going to become chronically homeless," Toppel says.



Cliff Johnson, 35, brushes his teeth at a hose made available to the people sleeping in their cars. Johnson has been unable to work construction jobs due to health problems.

IN FOR THE NIGHT

After dinner, a case manager asks Lender about employment. She tells him another agency is helping her look. Among Dreams for Change's clients, 30 percent have jobs and 20 percent receive disability benefits. Lender isn't sure if that is reassuring or frightening.

At 9 p.m., there is a sudden surge in activity, as the younger children board skateboards and head to their family vehicles. The lucky ones sleep in SUVs and vans, the unlucky ones in small cars. Then it is quiet.

Only a few people remain outside, Amram and his mother among them. It is their night to clean the patio area. When they are done, the microwave and cleaning supplies are stashed in an old GMC Safari van. For the first three years of the program, Dreams for Change founder Smith and her friends took turns sleeping in that van. Smith wanted to oversee the parking lot and make sure nothing happened. Nothing did. Now a client is in charge after staff members leave at 9:30. By 10 p.m., most people are tucked into their vehicles, tarps thrown over the top for privacy, warmth and darkness.

Amram pulls out a folded T-shirt and pants to wear the next day. He puts his shoes just outside the driver-side back door. He tries not to drink too much at night so he won't have to make the cold walk to the port-a-potties.



CHARLIE NEUMAN

Amram Lender makes a bowl of cereal for breakfast after spending the night in the back seat of his mother's Ford Taurus. The 8th grader will soon be off to school for the day.

MORNING EXODUS

By 6:30 the next morning, half the cars are gone. The remaining residents are busy trying to get out before 7 a.m., when the program officially closes for the day and the parking lot reverts to use by office workers. Tarps are being folded, blankets stowed away and teeth brushed.

Amram and his mother are the last to leave. At 7, Amram still is in his Batman pajama bottoms. Lender is huddled over the trunk preparing packaged soup with hot water from their electric kettle. JFS staff members don't seem to mind. At Halloween, the accounting manager even organized a "trunk or treat" for the children, with staff decorating their cars and passing out candy from their trunks.

After Amram and Lender have taken turns getting dressed in the car, Lender pulls out a packet of lentils.

"I think this is dinner," she says.

Amram ignores her and takes out a box of cereal and a paper bowl.

"I'm just going to make my breakfast on the curb as I usually do," he says.

When he is done pouring his cereal, he puts the cereal box in the front passenger seat. He pours the milk right before they leave. Naomi turns the key in the ignition and the car makes a loud screeching noise. She turns it off and tries again. It screeches again. She takes her hands away from the ignition and places them in a prayer position. Amram leans back in his seat. The car does this regularly; it's one of the reasons Amram is confident no one will ever steal it.

His mother turns the key once more. This time it starts.

Katya Cengel has written for The New York Times Magazine, the Wall Street Journal and Newsweek and is the author of "Exiled: From the Killing Fields of Cambodia to California and Back."

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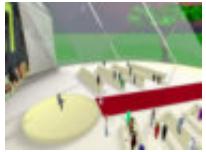
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