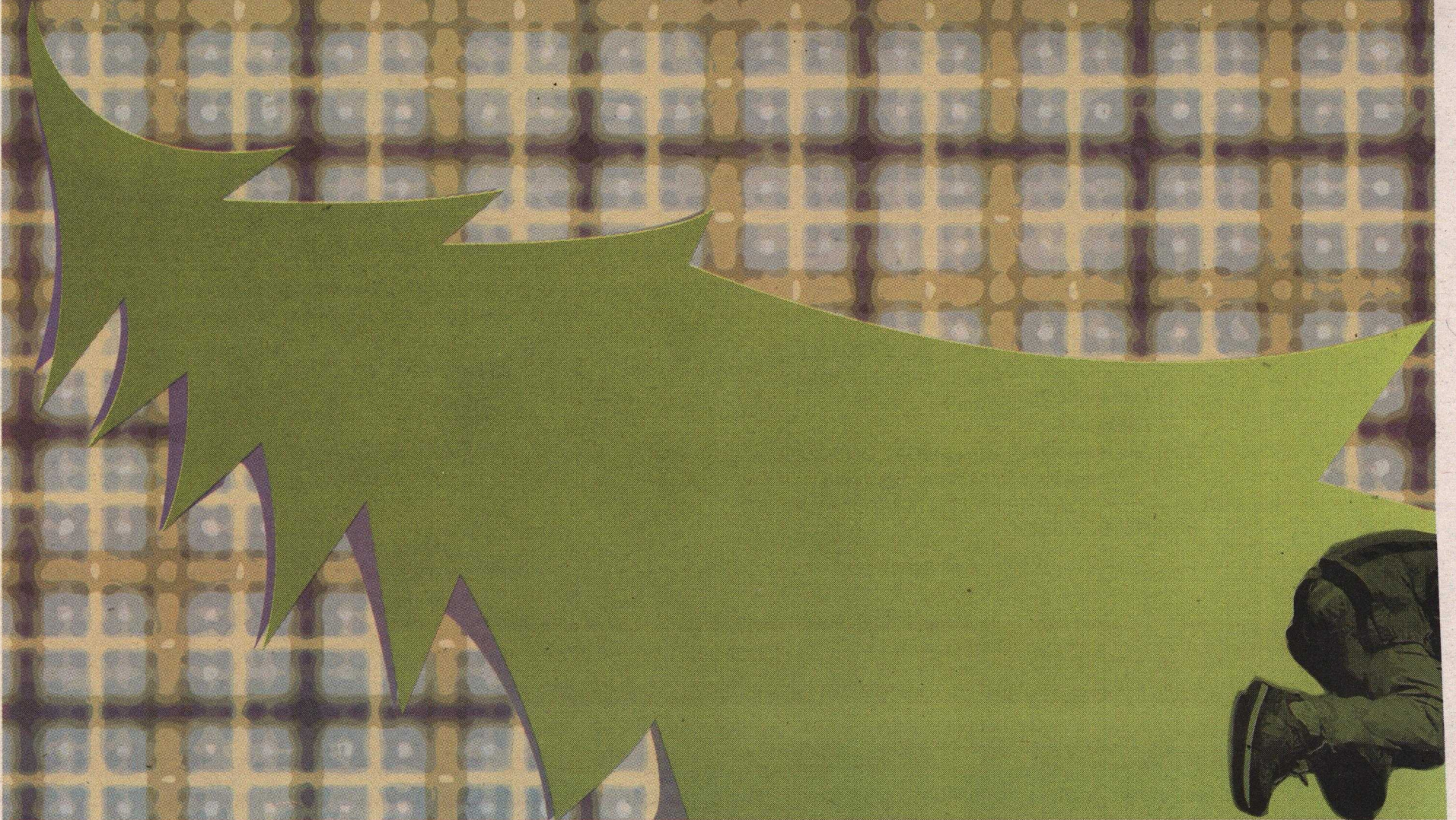


# Out of the WOODS





It's the one issue most people would rather ignore, but homelessness is a very real fact of life for police, park rangers, outreach workers and, most importantly, the homeless themselves. Here are some of their stories by Peter Koht

**E**arly mornings are the reason why I gave up teaching. Yet here I am at quarter to six, pulling into Vernon Street to face what could be a very challenging day, both mentally and physically—and I'm going into it without the benefits of caffeine.

I've agreed to ride along with the city of Santa Cruz's only Park Ranger, John Wallace, while he goes about policing the nearly 2,000 acres of open space that encircle the urban center of Santa Cruz. While these vast expanses of land are stunningly beautiful and well loved by locals, Wallace sees the seedier side of a land use policy that puts aside vast tracts of wilderness around an overpopulated and expensive city. They've become de facto housing for Santa Cruz's homeless population.

Though he usually works alone, this time Wallace is joined in his predawn patrol by Erich Hoppe of the Santa Cruz Police Department (who will put in four hours with Wallace before his regular shift patrolling downtown), and Danielle Long, a social worker from County Mental Health Services. Our early start is intended to maximize contact with the hundreds of people who make their home in the secluded gullies and groves of the Pogonip.

Wallace's first stop is Sycamore Grove, which lies along the San Lorenzo River just off of Highway 9. After pulling his pickup onto the shoulder several hundred yards away from the grove, he backtracks stealthily. Exiting the blacktop, he quickly makes his way down the steep embankment that separates the state route from the forest. As he does so, a shout rings out and two shadowy figures sprint away into the forest.

Undeterred by their escape, Wallace continues to the bottom of the grade and enters into a surprisingly large camp. Terraces have been sliced into the rich soil and stacks of trash bags and suspended blankets separate individual dwellings.

At Wallace's urging, a bleary-eyed couple emerges from their tent followed by their dog. After explaining that he's already warned them to clean up and move along, he writes each of the camp residents a ticket before backing off and letting Danielle Long talk to them to see if they need to be connected to any social service resources.

While that conversation ensues Wallace walks me around the back of the camp for a closer look. "The thing that gets me the most is the environmental degradation," he says. "I feel for these people's situation, but it's really damaging when they cave our terraces and chop down trees. The litter is unbelievable and so is the fire danger."

In early August, even with the summer fog still in the air, it's clear that the forest on the outside of town is tinder dry. Ferns have been cooked off and the forest floor is covered with dry leaves. But despite the extreme fire hazard, this camp featured a compressed natural gas stove— inches away from stacks of paper waste and discarded trash.

Regrouping after Long has a chance to talk both of the residents, we make our way back to Vernon Street to the railroad tracks. Even at 6:30 in the morning there is already a steady stream of persons walking into town from their night out in the woods. After about a half-mile walk on the tracks, Wallace makes an abrupt left hand turn into the Pogonip proper and glides up a vertiginous path, which, if followed completely, would eventually bisect the Fern Trail.

Winding through the dense forest, we pass numerous abandoned camps. "I guess Labor Ready (the independent firm contracted by the city to clean up trash in the greenbelt to the tune of \$30,000 annually) hasn't made it through here yet," Wallace says without slowing. "You should have been in here two weeks ago. This place was swarming with camps."

After passing a few more leftover messes, including a collection of stripped bike frames, Wallace ducks under a snag and enters into a truly disastrous scene. A wooden platform in the middle of a clearing is strewn with alcohol wipes and razor blades, the obvious detritus from a recent night of drug use. Luckily—unlike some other camps we will visit later in the day—no syringes are immediately apparent. Above this shocking tableau, a ticket that Wallace wrote for illegal camping is tacked to the tree trunk with a knife.

And so it goes for the next few hours—Long and myself follow several paces behind Officer Hoppe and Ranger Wallace as they traverse through the lower Pogonip. Some campers are asked to move on, some are cited and issued tickets and one is taken into custody for drug possession.

After Officer Hoppe escorts the unfortunate camper to jail, the group rendezvous on the San Lorenzo levee underneath the Highway 17 bridge. Only a few paces down the levee patrol we run across four men spending the early morning hours vociferously attacking a handle of vodka. It's 8 a.m. and already a third of the Popov is down.

As Wallace pours out the rest of the bottle, one of them says "I didn't know you were a woman."

Wallace, to his credit, laughs it off. Later on he tells me, that were it not for keeping a sense of humor about it, the stress of his job would have gotten to him a long time ago.

In many ways Wallace cuts a heroic figure. Wallace

was feted at the 1st annual Heroes Breakfast by the American Red Cross and he was presented an award by the Commission for the Prevention of Violence Against Women for the action he took in apprehending and convicting a sexual assault suspect in Pogonip. A bodybuilder and former federal firefighter, Wallace has spent his life trying to make the public safe, and his beat—consisting of the Pogonip, Arana Gulch, Delaveaga trails, Neary Lagoon, Moore Creek, Lighthouse Field, Its Beach and city parks like San Lorenzo, Laurel Street and Grant Street—is Herculean on a good day and Sisyphean on a bad one.

Yet despite very positive actions of this dedicated soul, and the very negative situations that we encountered on that early Wednesday morning patrol, the true scope of homelessness in Santa Cruz is bigger than what goes on in the greenbelt.

### THE CORAL STREET EQUATION: TOO MANY PEOPLE, NOT ENOUGH BEDS

While Wallace sees the worst possible kind of poverty in his patrols, according to many people who work with the homeless, most people have a very narrow conception of what the population actually is.

"I encourage people to slice it down and to be more specific about which subgroup you are talking about. It's unfair to characterize everyone with the same stereotypes," says Ken Cole, the Executive Director of the Homeless Services Center on Coral Street. "The park ranger and the police get stuck seeing the unmotivated and chronic homeless that are stuck in their situation by drugs or mental illness. What John sees—and has to deal with—is scary and unpleasant stuff. But those that are homeless and getting out of it are largely invisible to the public."

"If you ask people what they think a homeless person looks like, most will tell you that it's an alcoholic 50-year old white guy asking you for change," says Matt Nathanson, a nurse at the Homeless Person's Health Project (HHPH). "But we have to broaden our conception of the population. It's the working poor, it's families with children, it's 18-year-olds and people living out of their cars and campers."

The statistics back up these assertions. Of the 3,371 homeless persons that Applied Survey Research (ASR) estimated to be living in Santa Cruz in their 2005 Homeless Census, 18 percent reported that their primary shelter was an automobile. Fourteen percent responded that they had children. And while the majority of the homeless in the county identified as Caucasian, 28 percent were Latino and

"The thing that gets me the most is the environmental degradation. I feel for these people's situation, but it's really damaging when they cave our terraces and chop down trees. The litter is unbelievable and so is the fire danger."—John Wallace, Park Ranger



## OUT OF THE WOODS

four percent identified themselves as American Indian. Another four percent identified as African-American.

More importantly, of the 402 homeless persons who participated in the survey that ASR circulated as part of its census project, only 43 percent of respondents could be classified as "chronically homeless," meaning that they had "either been continuously homeless for a year or more or had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years."

While many souls encountered on John Wallace's patrol could match this categorization, many more people in Santa Cruz County that don't have a fixed address could not. Regardless of their individual circumstances, many in the population find solace and support at the Homeless Services Center on Coral Street.

Arranged around a central parking lot, the resource center provides persons with secure lockers, a mailroom, showers and meals. It's also the home of the brand new Rowland and Pat Rebele Family Shelter, the Page Smith Community House, the Homeless Person's Health Project and the River Street Shelter. But despite these amenities, serving the homeless is a task fraught with resource shortfalls and client overload.

Walking through the Service Center on a sunny afternoon is both surprising and revelatory. Many faces familiar to downtown workers and shoppers were present, but many more weren't. Some played dominos while others queued for the clinic, the phones and the showers.

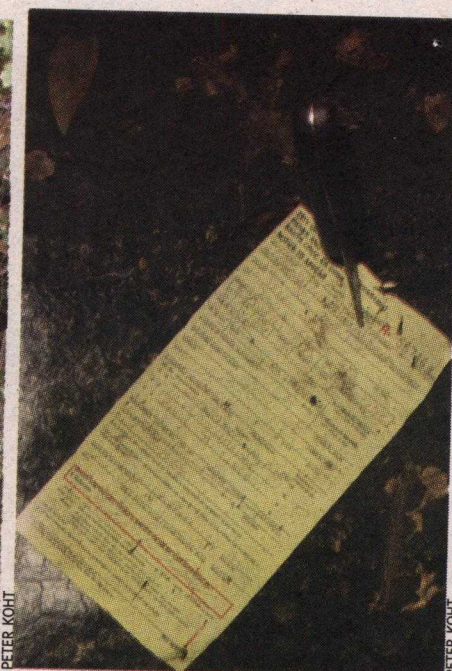
Most telling were the sheer numbers of people who had clearly walked into town along the tracks that morning, knapsacks on their backs. Despite the sheer numbers of people milling about, in a few hours the center would calm down as most of these souls would need to clear out by 5 p.m. when the gates close.

"We have a cooperative and supportive local government both at the city in and the county," Cole says. "Relative to other communities we have certain areas that are pretty strong but we have a minimal emergency shelter system. Or every one person we get into an emergency shelter bed or a transitional housing program there are probably five people that are unable to get into it."

Rama Khalsa, the director of the County Health Service Agency, which oversees public health clinics, mental and environmental health and substance abuse services, explains the equation that sits on her desk daily. "On a



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good day, we have 5,000 individuals that we are responsible for, but we really control less than 300 beds of housing. It's so challenging to find housing for our clients."

A quarter of the homeless surveyed by ASR reported that in the last year they had been turned away when applying for emergency housing and that the single biggest factor in this rejection (63 percent) was the sheer unavailability of a bed—hence the daily exodus to open spaces.

"The greenbelts have been the de facto emergency housing program for the city," Cole says. "That's not a criticism of the City of Santa Cruz, that's just the reality. There are more homeless than we have beds for."

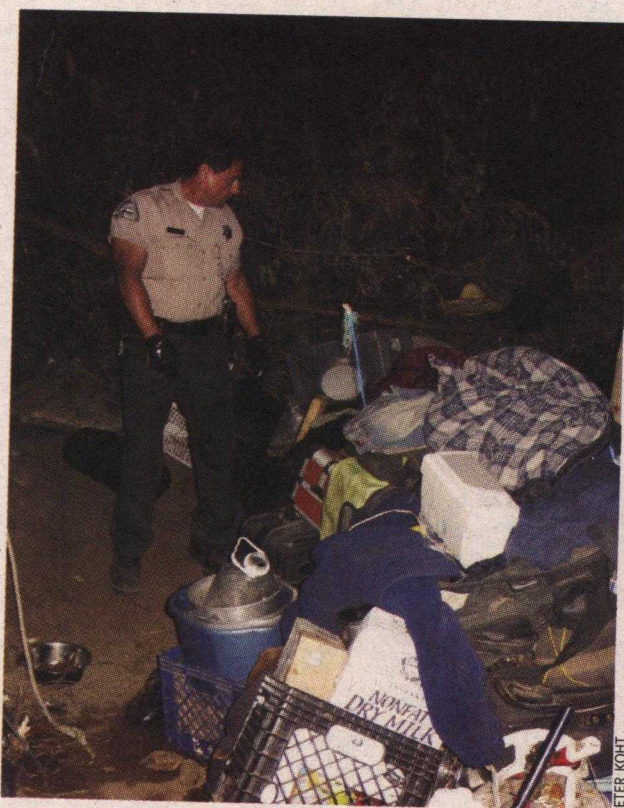
Despite the relative ease of the climate and access to services, Cole warns people not to think that being homeless in Santa Cruz is a life of leisure. "Don't kid yourself and think that people can get a free ride. It's

extremely competitive. Those that are interested in shelter can't get it. So people triple up in motel rooms and hide in abandoned buildings. We just don't have enough emergency shelter for everyone."

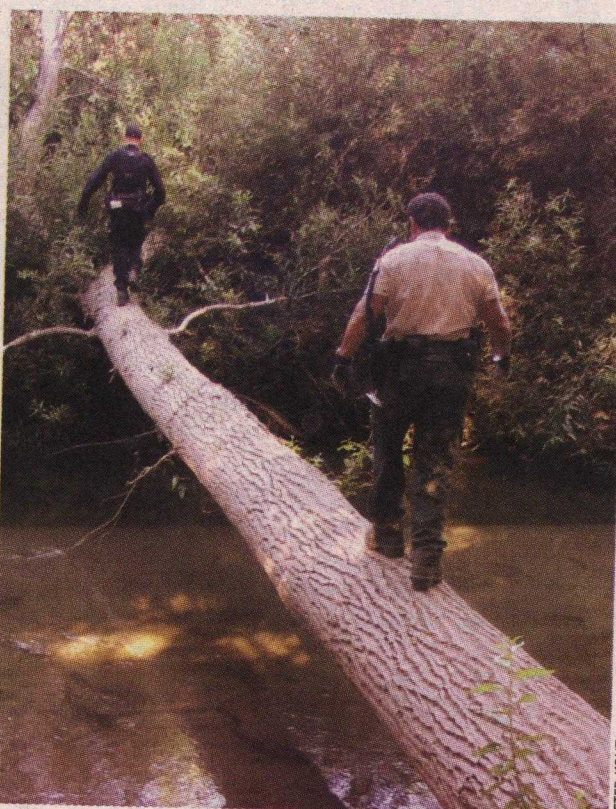
## Health and Homelessness

One of the factors compounding the difficulties inherent to helping the homeless is the sheer complexity of the population. In addition to the wide demographic spread, there are also multipliers—alcohol and drug abuse, mental illness, depression, physical problems and domestic abuse.

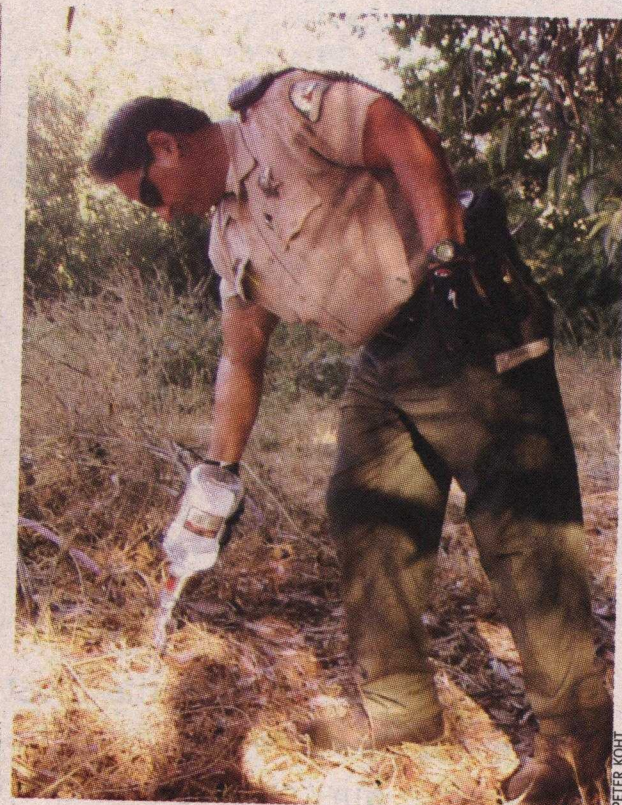
This latter factor is often overlooked in debates about homelessness. But ASR found that of the 39 percent of the homeless population that are female, a fifth of them were dealing with domestic violence issues.



PETER KOHT



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**ALL IN A MORNING'S WORK:** Like the army, Park Ranger Wallace gets much done before 9 a.m. (L) Sycamore Grove at 6:15 a.m. (M) Crossing the San Lorenzo River at 7:45 a.m. (R) Pouring out the Popov at 8 a.m.



“You gotta be careful out there and you can’t be alone. You have to have a friend watch your back, so I always camped with one other guy. Basically, if you wanna be safe, you keep real quiet and mind your own business.” — Rusty, homeless

“Every day is different, actually, every person that I see is different,” Danielle Long says over the phone. When not traipsing around the woods with Ranger Wallace, Long works as a downtown outreach worker serving the homeless population that congregates along and beside Pacific Avenue. In addition to staging services out of the Downtown Host kiosk, adjacent to the Del Mar Theatre on Pacific Avenue, she has been going into the Pogonip to do direct outreach for the last four years. “I get asked by people how to get into shelters, how to get housing. I will figure out what I can do to help them.”

While working along the model of harm reduction, which seeks not to pass judgments on any person’s individual situation, Long says that a large part of her job is “to get people into services, whether they are mental health services or substance abuse services or whatever they need.”



PETER KOHT

**NOW AVAILABLE:** Charming one bedroom in Lower Pogonip. Close to public transit. Clean, quaint and cozy. Ocean View! Now listing for \$500,000.



## OUT OF THE WOODS

One critically underestimated need in the homeless community is the disturbing lack of healthcare options. Even with a healthy percentage of the population eligible for some form of public assistance, for example SSD, SSI or veterans benefits, less than half of the population ever applies for the services that they are eligible for. And with 88 percent of the population without a job, not too many HMOs have homeless persons enrolled in them.

In order to ameliorate some of the health problems in this population, the Homeless Person's Health Project (HHP) operates an open clinic for 16 hours a week in the Homeless Services Center. The rest of the time, workers like Matt Nathanson and Renee Robison are concerned with doing direct outreach to homeless persons throughout the county, connecting them with the county medical clinics and Dientes for dental care, (a huge problem given the upswing in methamphetamine use among the homeless population). The HHP also facilitates a program called Puentes, which helps mentally ill members of the homeless population connect with needed psychotherapy and counseling resources. All told, the HHP assists 4,000 unique patients annually.

One thing that sets the HHP apart from traditional clinics and urgent care facilities is that it is a non judgmental and nonprofit environment for people to share their problems in. "I think we take more time with people here," Robison says. "Our clients come with lots of problems, and not all of them are medical. It's not like a regular visit to the doctor to address a single issue. People who come here have problems in so many other aspects of their life, so it's not just healthcare."

"The other thing to understand is how being homeless can impact your life in so many different ways," says Nathanson. "Can you even imagine how difficult it is to have cancer or even diabetes while homeless? The strength of people that are homeless amazes me. They are so vulnerable—but at the same time they show so much adaptability."

## After the Dawn

"No, I never got a ticket," responds Rusty, recalling his time spent in the Pogonip. "I got real lucky, but I took precautions so I wouldn't get busted. I never started a fire and packed my garbage out."

Met in his spotless room in the Page Smith Community House, Rusty is in his final steps back to a "normal life." Next month, he and his girlfriend, Brenda, will move into their own apartment in Santa Cruz, ending a struggle with homelessness that has lasted for more than 15 years.

Sitting on the edge of his bed underneath a poster of Yankee Stadium and his collection of baseball hats, he quietly recalls the struggles that he faced living between Highway 9 and the railroad tracks. "You gotta be careful out there and you can't be alone. You have to have a friend watch your back, so I always camped with one other guy. Basically, if you wanna be safe, you keep real quiet and mind your own business.

"There's a lot of overdoses and dealers, lots of violence," he continues, "In the time that I was out there [early 1990s] there were even a few suspicious deaths. You have to be very careful."

Like many people interviewed for this article, Rusty had all the trappings of a regular life at one point, but the fates intervened. Within a few months, he lost his job as the foreman of a fire restoration services company and lost his apartment after an argument with another tenant.

Initially, he and his wife sought solace in the Interfaith Satellite Shelter Program (ISSP). Each day at 3:30 p.m., representatives of the program canvass the population at the Coral Street parking lot of the Homeless Services Center to enroll persons seeking emergency shelter for that evening. After signing a pledge form that prohibits antisocial behavior and substance abuse, vans pick up participants around 4:45 p.m. and shuttle them to one of 20 participating houses of worship.

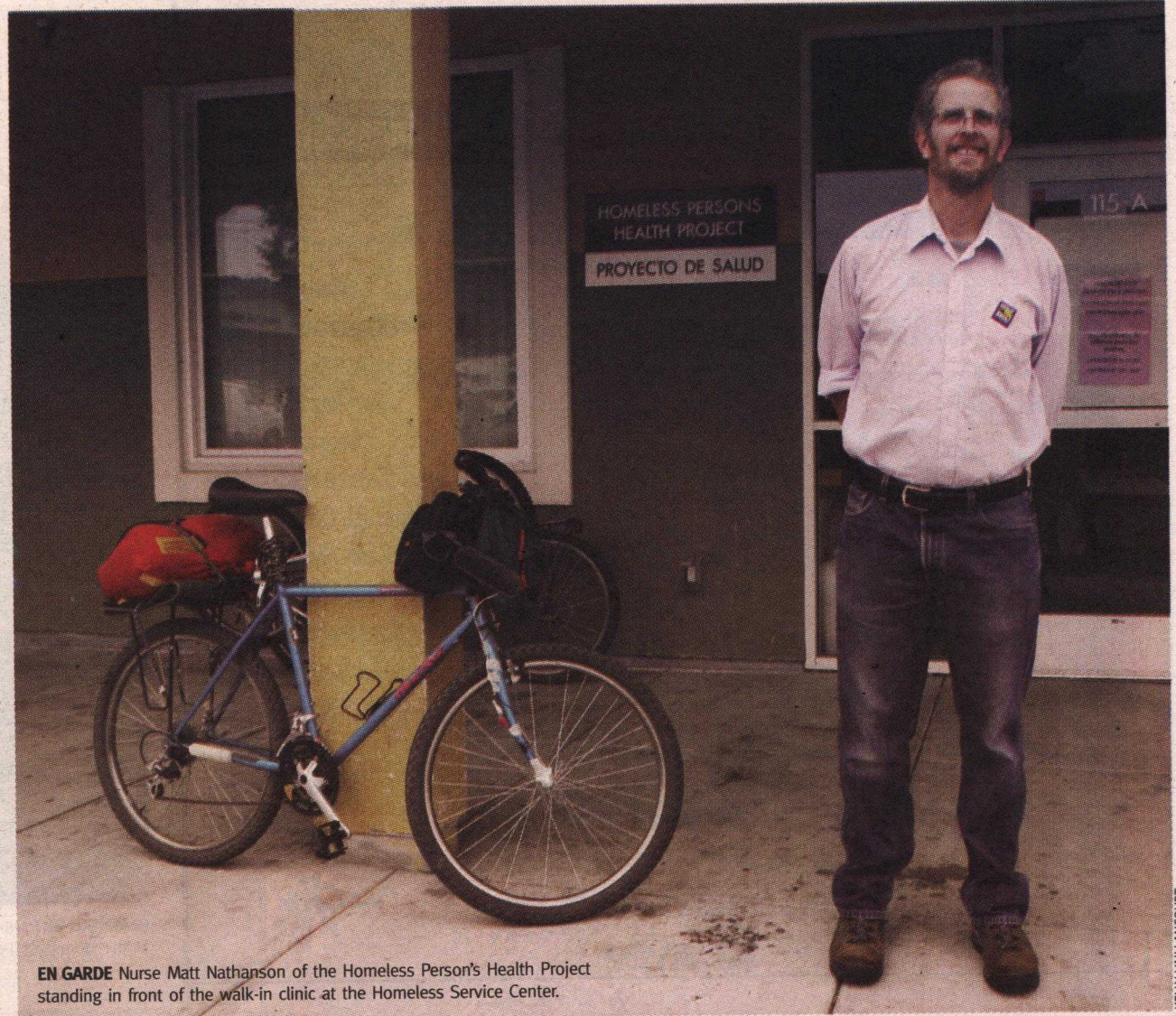
"It was real hard," Rusty says of his participation in ISSP. "You're sleeping in a different place every night and they only give you a 1.5-inch-deep mat to sleep on the floor. Some of the places feed you, but you have to get up at 5 a.m."



“Don’t kid yourself and think that people can get a free ride. It’s extremely competitive. Those that are interested in shelter can’t get it. So people triple up in motel rooms and hide in abandoned buildings. We just don’t have enough emergency shelter for everyone.” —Ken Cole

After two years of ISSP Rusty and his wife decamped to Washington state where they managed to find an apartment. “We got jobs and things were going just fine until 2000, when my dad died. Then while I was dealing with that, my wife of 13 years passed away—a year to the day after my father.”

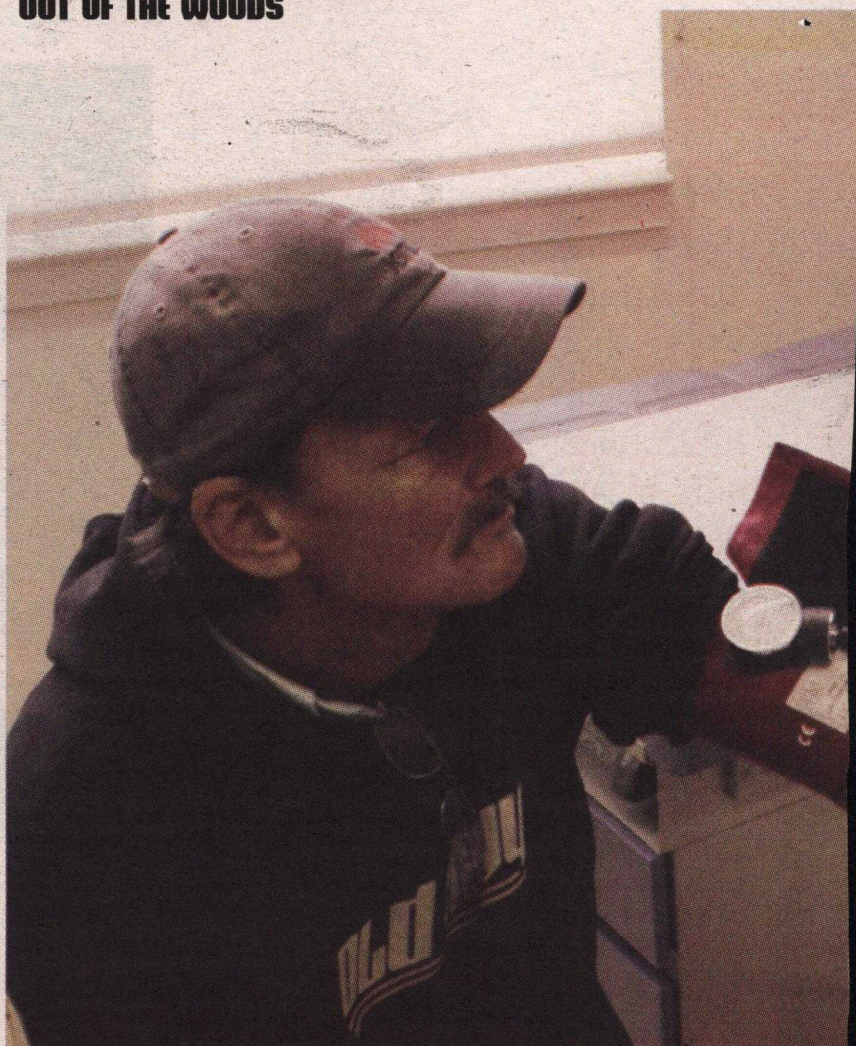
The grief was just too much to bear for Rusty. “I lost everything and went back into homelessness. I hit the tracks hard and was drinking heavily. I came back down here in 2004 and went back into the church groups while I waited for a space in Page Smith.”



**EN GARDE** Nurse Matt Nathanson of the Homeless Person’s Health Project standing in front of the walk-in clinic at the Homeless Service Center.



## OUT OF THE WOODS



**REACHING OUT:** Nurse Jean Graham checks Michael's blood pressure at the Homeless Person's Health Project.

Nestled up against the cinder block wall that separates the Homeless Service Center from the tail end of Highway 17, Page Smith Community House is a collection of interconnected mobile trailers that can house up to 40 men and women transitioning out of homelessness.

Named after a history professor at UC Santa Cruz who was responsible for some of the earliest studies of homelessness in Santa Cruz, Page Smith Community House is designed to give persons a stable place to call home while they make the delicate and difficult decisions that can lead them back into mainstream society. Residents accepted into the program receive individualized attention from a case manager that allows them to connect with vocational training, psychotherapy and even personal financial advising.

It's that personal connection that first attracted Letitia Schwarz to seek the directorship of the house. "Overseeing the site and taking care of all the requirements to make sure that we continue to receive HUD (Housing and Urban Development) and County funding is only part of my job," she says in the cluttered but cozy kitchen of the facility. "I appreciate the balance between overseeing the program and direct service."

"We serve all kinds of people here, and there is a huge range of issues that people are dealing with when they come in," she says, ticking off alcohol and drug abuse, mental and physical illness, insurance coverage and domestic violence within the space of several seconds. "For many, Page Smith is the first permanent address that they have had in years."

And permanency has distinct advantages, when you're trying to get back on your feet. "Doing a job search while you are on the streets is extremely difficult," says Lee, sitting on the porch of the house with a cup of coffee in her hands. With long blonde hair and sharp eyes, she's lived through the pain of stigmatization of homelessness—even when she was trying desperately to get out of it. "It's so hard to even get clean enough to go in for an interview when you're sleeping outside," she says. "You have to have a shower and a stable place to receive phone calls and send out resumes."





KELLY VAILLANCOURT

“On a good day, we have 5,000 individuals that we are responsible for, but we really control less than 300 beds of housing. It’s so challenging to find housing for our clients.”

—Rama Khalsa, director, County Health Service Agency

Even larger than job placement, the biggest issue that Schwarz and her staff have to deal with is finding their residents housing on a limited income. “It’s the same as in the general housing market,” she laments. “There are limited resources.”

Even with the difficulty of this market factored in, Page Smith boasts an astounding success rate for placing its residents into apartments and homes. Ninety percent of Page Smith graduates manage to make their way into permanent housing. Some, like Rusty, plan on staying locally, while others, like Lee, are planning on moving away from the area—and its crushing housing market.

“My case manager is helping me find places up in Sacramento that are in the \$450-\$500 a month range,” she says. “At the end of next month I am going up there to interview for jobs.”

In between trolling on Craigslist for positions, filling out paperwork to connect with housing assistance and getting referrals to other service agencies for assistance with physical or mental ailments, residents are able to reconnect with a sense of community that is stable, loving and supportive. And that spirit is not lost on Schwarz.

“The community itself is the most supportive thing for people that live here,” she says. “People watch out for each other, and you can feel that upon arriving here.”

“It takes a place like this and a strong desire to get out of homelessness to overcome it,” Rusty tells me later. “You have to want it. You get so down being out there in the open and start to think that you don’t deserve anything better, but if you believe in yourself you can do it.” ■