Living in Tents, and by the Rules, Under a Bridge

By DAN BARRY
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PROVIDENCE, R.I.

The chief emerges from his tent to face the leaden morning light. It had been a rare, rough night in his homeless Brigadoon: a boozy brawl, the wielding of a knife taped to a stick. But the community handled it, he says with pride, his day's first cigar already aglow.

By community he means 80 or so people living in tents on a spit of state land beside the dusky Providence River: Camp Runamuck, no certain address, downtown Providence.

Because the two men in the fight had violated the community's written compact, they were escorted off the camp, away from the protection of an abandoned overpass. One was told we'll discuss this in the morning; the other was voted off the island, his knife tossed into the river, his tent taken down.

The chief flicks his spent cigar into that same river. There is talk of rain tonight.

Behind him, the camp stirs. Other tent cities have sprung up recently around the country, but Rhode Island officials have never seen anything like this. A tea kettle sings.

A heavily pierced young person walks by without picking up an empty plastic bottle, flouting the camp compact that says everyone will share in the labor. The compact may be as impermanent as this sudden community by the river, but for now it is binding. The chief speaks, the bottle is picked up.

The chief, John Freitas, is 55, with a gray beard touched by tobacco rust. He did prison time decades ago, worked for years as a factory supervisor, then became homeless for all the familiar, complicated reasons.

Layoffs, health problems, a slip from apartment to motel room. His girlfriend, Barbara Kalil, 50, lost her job as a nursing-home nurse, and another slip, into the shelter system. A job holding store-liquidation signs beside the highway allowed for a climb back to a motel, but it didn't last.

Weary of shelters, the couple pitched a pup tent in Roger Williams Park, close to a plaque bearing words Williams had used to describe this place he founded: "A Shelter for Persons in Distress." But someone complained, so Mr. Freitas set off again in search of shelter. The March winds blew.

Down South Main Street he went, past the majestic court building and the upscale seafood restaurant, over a guardrail to a gravelly plot beneath a ramp that once guided cars toward Cape Cod. Foul-smelling and partially hidden, a place of birds and rodents, it was perfect.

He and Ms. Kalil set up camp with another couple in early April. Word of it spread from the shelters to Kennedy Plaza downtown, where homeless people share the same empty Tim Hortons cup to pose as customers worthy of visiting that doughnut chain's restroom. The camp became 10 people, then 15, then 25. No children allowed.

"I was always considered the leader, the chief," Mr. Freitas says. "I was the one consulted about 'Where should I put my tent?' "

By late June the camp had about 50 people. But someone questioned the role of Mr. Freitas as chief, so he stepped down. Arguments broke out. Food was stolen.

"There was no center holding," recalls Rachell Shaw, 22, who lives with her boyfriend in a tidy tent decorated with porcelain dolls. "So everybody voted him back in."

The community also established a five-member leadership council and a compact that read in part: "No one person shall be greater than the will of the whole."

It is now late afternoon in late July, a month after nearly everyone signed that compact. The community remains intact, though the very ground they walk on says nothing is forever. Here and there are the exposed foundations of fish shacks that lined the river long ago.

Some state officials recently stopped by to say, nicely but firmly, that everyone would soon have to leave. The overpass poses the threat of falling concrete, and is scheduled for demolition. The officials have shared the same message with a smaller encampment across the river.

For now, a game of horseshoes sends echoing clanks, as outreach workers conduct interviews and raindrops thrum the tent tops. The chief lights another cigar and walks the length of the camp to tell residents to batten down, explaining its structure as he goes.

Here at the end, nearest the road, are the tents of young single people and substance abusers; this way, rescue vehicles won't disrupt the entire compound.

Here in the center are a cluster of couples, including two competing for the nicest property, with homey touches like planted flowers. Here too are the food table, the coolers, the piles of donated clothes — what can't be used will be taken by camp residents to the Salvation Army — and the large tent of the chief. Plastic pink flamingos stand guard.

Farther on, the recycled-can area (the money is used for ice and propane); the area for garbage bags that will be discreetly dropped in nearby Dumpsters at night; and, behind a blue tarp hung from the overpass, a plastic toilet. The chief says the shared task of removing the bags of waste tends to test the compact.

Finally, near some rocks where men go to urinate, live a gay couple and some people who drink hard. Timothy Webb, 49, who says he used to own a salon in Cranston called Class Act, cuts people's hair here. Then, at night, he and his partner, Norman Trank, 45, sit at a riverside table, a battery-operated candle giving light, the moving waters suggesting mystery.

“It’s what you make of it,” Mr. Trank says.

Dark clouds have brought night early to Providence. Heavy drops thump against tarp. Water drips from the overpass, onto the long table of food.

In the last couple of hours the chief has resolved a conflict about tarp distribution, hugged a pregnant woman who mistakenly thought she had been kicked off the island, conferred with outreach workers and helped with dinner preparations. He is also thinking about tomorrow.

Tomorrow, an advance party for the chief will leave to claim another spot across the river that turns out not to be on public property. Many in the camp will decide it’s time to move on anyway, to a spot under a bridge in East Providence. Camp Runamuck will begin its recession from sight and memory.

At least tonight there is a communal dinner: donated chicken, parboiled and grilled; donated corn on the cob; donated potatoes. People line up with paper plates.

The rain falls harder, pocking the river’s gray surface, surrounding the dark camp with a sound like fingers drumming in impatience. The chief hears it, but what can he do? He finishes his dinner and lights another cigar.