

Tony beer bar, smokehouse set for tough block of Mason

Barbary Coast PR also in the building

BY JONATHAN NEWMAN

TO THE BEDRAGGLED scene on lower Mason Street, the Tenderloin's eastern boundary, add three new elements — an upscale beer cafe, a mural depicting the glory days of the street a century ago and old-fashioned police work.

A group of investors, including Alex Clemens of Barbary Coast Consulting and Chuck Stilphen, an East Bay purveyor of high-end Belgian ales, paid \$3.2 million for 34-38 Mason St., a brick-and-masonry four-story built after the quake and fire.

They say they're spending \$450,000 to renovate the top two floors for Barbary Coast, a public relations agency with clients from the Central YMCA to Jewish Home for the Aged and the Mayor's Office of Economic and Workforce Development.

The high-ceilinged, two-story-high ground floor is being made over to Stilphen's precise specifications to operate a tony beer emporium and authentic North Carolina-style smokehouse restaurant. He hopes to open before May 1 but has no name for it yet.

Barbary Coast has about a dozen employees. Stilphen says he'll need a staff of 25-30 to run the kitchen and bar from noon to 2 a.m. daily.

"A going business means eyes on the street and history shows that it brings neighborhood improvement," Clemens said during a community meeting at the site in mid-November. For residents at the meeting, Stilphen's promise that he'll keep video cameras trained on the street and a doorman/security guard during business hours came as good news.

Then a man who lives at TNDC's Ambassador Hotel across the street decided to test Stilphen: Would his new restaurant honor "an old neighborhood tradition of providing free food to SRO tenants?" he wanted to know.

Stilphen looked queasy and remained silent as others in the crowd of two dozen laughed.

"What about rowdy crowds?" someone asked. Clemens answered, "These

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CENTRAL CITY

EXPLORA

SAN FRANCISCO

AUDUBON CENSUS



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Mary Liz Harris, conducting the Audubon Society's annual bird census in the Tenderloin, stops at the U.N. Plaza Fountain that, as usual, was populated by ravenous sea gulls.

BIRDS OF THE TENDERLOIN

12 species seen, but neighborhood counter is 1 of a kind

BY TOM CARTER

A RELUCTANT morning sun made it numbingly cold at U.N. Plaza Fountain one Thursday in late December, but that hardly daunted Mary Liz Harris. Bundled up with gloves and hat, she's seated on a granite slab, binoculars in her lap, next to her backpack. A gaggle of white and brown sea gulls the size of chickens stand imperiously on taller slabs, ignoring the frothy waters and Carl's Jr., yet ravenous for its fast-food refuse.

Harris is there to count these gulls and other birds and she's ready for anything. Indeed, she yearns for surprise and adventure as part of the Audubon Society's 113th Christmas Bird Count that takes place over three weeks in December and into January. This year's count in San Francisco was two days after Christmas.

"We're trying to get an idea of the kinds of species and populations," Harris explains, slipping on the backpack, notebook in hand. "But the count's not scientific." Too much territory, too few counters. "Maybe you could get an accurate count if you had one person on every block counting at the same time."

San Francisco, one of 1,739 bird census centers throughout the nation last year, has been sending avid volunteer Audubon counters into the city and northern San Mateo County since 1983. This year, 140 signed up to count birds, but only 112 showed, among them Harris, a 10-year veteran.

The Tenderloin has few parks with trees

that birds love for nesting. It makes counting difficult and certainly not as riveting as, say, bird-rich Hunters Point Park or the Presidio that may yield 50 to 100 species.

"Nobody wants the Tenderloin," says Harris, who lives on Turk Street. "I do it because it's my neighborhood, and I always find surprises." Younger people, who dominate the city's dozen other larger groups of counters, walk too fast, she says, adding that she's "a bit over the hill." She's 78.

Harris is the sole counter for the Tenderloin. Last year there were five. Her territory is Division Street to Van Ness Avenue to California, then east, taking in the Financial District. But she'll only hit five areas, while counting along the way. Counters typically gravitate to water and parks but her district, light on parks, doesn't abut ocean or Bay and hence fewer species. Her husband, Richard M. Harris, has the more interesting area, SoMa to AT&T Park, including the Embarcadero starting at the Ferry Building. She'll join him later.

Dan Murphy, one of two Audubon members who compile the city's grand totals, knows Harris' value. "She's a godsend," he says, to cover downtown, what others derisively call the "pigeon route."

Volunteers counted nearly 61,000 birds in the city last year and 176 species, the tip of an iceberg of unknown size, yet helpful to gauge avian growth and decline. The TL, which was combined last year with much of SoMa, had 38 species then, but this year has shrunk drastically.

The 2012 count will eventually be a record 179 species and 55,247 birds, a drop but well within the city's average 40,000-60,000 range. The record year was 1986 when schools of herring showed up as a "natural phenomenon" in the Bay behind what is now AT&T Park, laying their eggs on rocks, pil-

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The building
used to house
the Polo
Lounge, the
poor man's
Original Joe's.



PHOTO BY JONATHAN NEWMAN

Mason Street A 30-by-20-foot mural, depicting a band scene from an early 1900s postcard of the location, was painted on the side of the Bristol Hotel near the site of the planned beer emporium.

Tony beer cafe being readied on Mason St.

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will be beer geeks. They are different.”

By day the junction of Market, Turk and Mason streets is a site for low-level drug dealing, usually quiet sellers — despite their ominous hoodies and busy cell phones — and tranquil buyers.

That first block of Mason Street is also home base for six or seven street drinkers. Most days find the group down on the sidewalk sharing pulls on tall-boy malt liquors or Royal Gate or Taaka vodkas, their backs propped against the Bristol Hotel or 50 Mason Social House next door. As the drinks kick in the crummy metal pipes appear and somebody passes along a hit.

At night the play gets more serious. Dealers are in competition, buyers seem desperate. Voices rise, arguments spill from the sidewalk past parked cars out into the street. Threats of death and violence are openly shouted. It's a mess, but if you're not on Mason Street to buy or sell drugs, or sex, you can sidle past the action.

Sean Lee, who lives in his condo at the nearby Garfield, is familiar with the problems of Mason Street. “It isn't the prostitution so much, it's the drug dealing that makes it difficult,” he said. After Clemens' and Stilphen's brief presentations, Lee left the meeting satisfied: “It would be good for the street to have another well-run business.”

The building used to house the Polo Lounge, the poor man's Original Joe's, back when restaurants served ample portions and nobody was there simply because the chef was having a quarter-hour of fame.

Years after Polo's succumbed, Terrance Alan, then an Entertainment Commission member, opened his Blue Cube at the site. The Cube was known primarily for its glass-walled smoking room that snubbed its nose at city officials bent on enforcing tobacco bans.

But the Blue Cube faded to be eventually replaced by the Crash Club — three floors of music and bars — described by one clubgoer as “a true cesspit” — that lasted less than a year.

Crash Club's two-story-tall electric sign remains hanging over the street. Clemens says he likes it, so it'll stay.

At Eddy, Academy of Art University students led by instructors Carol Nunnely and Martha Wade are finishing a 30-by-20-foot mural at the base of the Bristol Hotel. The students have re-created a promotional postcard from the early 1900s depicting the Breakers Cafe at that corner and its orchestra led by Rigo, a self-styled “Hungarian Gypsy.”

The mural is a project of Uptown Tenderloin Inc., a 3-year-old nonprofit that touts the historic architecture and cultural outlets that once flourished in the Tenderloin, and the Bristol Hotel, whose owner donated the paint. The Main Library's San Francisco History Center supplied the postcard and fleshed out the historical data.

Passers-by have stopped to kibitz and to praise the work. “People seem genuinely pleased to see the mural and a scene of a part of their neighborhood from long ago,” Nunnely said.

TL Capt. Joe Garrity announced in

a recent newsletter: “An all out effort has been made with plain clothes operations in the Turk and Mason corridors to abate the street level drug dealing by outsiders.”

Using information residents provide as well as observations from a “vertical patrol” of police stationed on the fourth-floor roof area of the Warfield Building at Market and Taylor, foot and bicycle patrol officers from Tenderloin Station have targeted dealers at Turk and Mason. Also, plainclothes officers have been conducting drug “buy and busts” on Mason.

Garrity expressed confidence that the arrests coupled with the stay-away orders, will help ease the problems near the beleaguered intersection.

“I urge people to call in the activity on the street. You don't have to leave your name, just a call-back number. We'll get working on it,” Garrity told The Extra. “You know, the vast majority of people we arrest for dealing don't live or work in the Tenderloin.” ■

Blue-ribbon beginning for St. Anthony's new digs



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

A grand crew of celebrities, including Mayor Lee and Rep. Nancy Pelosi, descend into the pit where St. Anthony's once stood to conduct a celebratory ground-breaking for the new building. Father John Hardin blesses the ground.

BY TOM CARTER

The building of St. Anthony's new dining hall officially began when ground was broken Jan. 24 before a big neighborhood crowd, staff, financial supporters, a few supervisors, Mayor Ed Lee and Rep. Nancy Pelosi, who once brought her children and grandchildren to volunteer as food servers at the old dining room.

The new building with a bigger dining room on the main floor will rise 10 stories above the Golden Gate Avenue and Jones Street intersection. The first two floors will also have a free clothing program, a social work center and an

emergency food pantry. Above that, St. Anthony's partner, Mercy Housing California, will manage 90 units of housing for low-income, formerly homeless seniors.

Officials called the \$22.5 million project a “miracle,” but were quick to add that it still needs \$2.5 million more to complete, which they expect to raise by June 13, the Feast of St. Anthony's.

After speeches, the entourage traipsed gingerly down the soft dirt road to the bottom of the site's pit where gleaming shovels awaited. Father John Hardin blessed the ground. Completion is expected in fall 2014. ■



PHOTO BY MARJORIE BEGGS

A fond farewell to Tom Carter

This issue of Central City Extra is the last with Tom Carter as our full-time community reporter, the backbone of our award-winning operation. Tom is retiring after eight years to spend more time with his young grandson and the rest of his family, and to work on his personal writing. Tom will continue to write for The Extra, but his daily presence will be sorely missed.

— The Staff



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Birds of the Tenderloin

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ings and shore structures, practically spoon-feeding birds.

With gloved hands, Harris marks 50 gulls and eight pigeons on her 3-by-5 cards, then walks west. Her workday started at 8:30 a.m. when she left her Turk Street apartment, spotting eight sparrows on the way to U.N. Plaza. Over her 15 years in the Tenderloin, the count has been aided by birds she sees in the sky and perched outside her windows. She knows what to look for, but sometimes is surprised. Two years ago, she saw a black-crowned night heron in a tree that caught her breath. It was so far from the water.

"This is like a meditation for me," she says, glancing up at building ledges as she walks, bent slightly to counter the backpack, a breeze jostling her shoulder-length gray hair. "And I think it's good for older people."

She tries not to count the same bird twice. But the birds move around. Already she has scores of western gulls and rock pigeons and the one yellow-rumped warbler she saw on her walk from Jones Street.

RAVENS, CROWS GAINING

Gulls have moved into the inner city because of our changing habits. Open city dumps used to attract huge flocks, count-compiler Murphy says. But the dumps got covered and fast food exploded. Urbanized birds now follow the people, swooping in where crumbs, buns and fries hit the pavement.

"Ravens and crows are growing by the greatest percentages," says Murphy, a retired special education history teacher at Alameda County juvenile hall who once taught field ornithology at the California Academy of Sciences. Maybe 700 of each nest in the city now, he says, but he doesn't know why, though they're smart enough to follow any food source, and are adept nest raiders.

"But birds have really taken a hit in

San Francisco," Murphy says, "They're on the skids." As buildings supplanted open spaces, dove and blackbird populations plummeted about 50% from the 1980s, and quail almost went extinct. Removing underbrush in city parks and fallen limbs — prized bird hangouts — takes a toll along with feral and domestic cats. Poisons outdoors, for rats in particular, also kill lots of birds. The survivors are "building-adapted birds" such as peregrine falcons, pigeons and cliff swallows, birds that treat skyscrapers like hills.

"We've taken more and more of the birds' habitat as we build in the inner city," says Mike Lynes, executive director of Golden Gate Audubon Society. "We're faced with how we manage what's left." Data from the counts help determine the direction of the association's advocacy.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRDS NEW

Harris nears the northern edge of the plaza, opening to Leavenworth, and reminisces about being 9 years old and listening to birds outside her window in Chicago and singing back to them. More memorable, while getting her master's in biology from the University of Illinois, was an ornithology class in 1954 when the professor took the students to a graveyard where birds were attracted to the vegetation. She's been in solid with birds ever since.

"I'm a person of prayer," Harris says, squinting as the glasses come up, "and to me this is like entering into their world. I'm moving between people, yes, but I'm shutting that out and being in their world."

What's new in the Tenderloin is red-winged blackbirds, Harris says. The first showed up in June.

"We used to only see them in Yerba Buena Gardens and Justin Herman Plaza," she says. "They like water and reeds. But they can't nest here. I don't know what they eat."

She stops at Hyde and Fulton and looks at the trees next to the Main Library as the sun is fully on nearby City Hall. There's movement in the trees.

At the end of the plaza, in a forlorn tree, she spies her first bunch of red-winged blackbirds of the day. They're singing. She brings the glasses down and starts counting them out loud, pointing her pen at each.

"I love those birds," a vendor at his stall a few feet away says with a big smile. "Their song, well, it makes you laugh. I told them, 'You're a little loud for winter!'"

"I love hearing their song, too," Harris says, jotting down a number. She turns to cross Larkin, but at the curb is startled by frantic chirping that fills the air.

Red-winged blackbirds in the barren trees at the library are spooked. Some flutter off, flashing their colorful wings in flight, thrilling her.

"They're scared," Harris says, marking 12 on the card. "When they get excited, a hawk is around. I don't see it. But they're afraid they'll be eaten."

"I love it when they're active."

Among the red-wings, Harris counts three Brewer's blackbirds, which thrive in the Tenderloin. "See?" Harris says, "This can be exciting. I think blackbirds are increasing."

She counts 25 western gulls in the street, then looks north into the trees with the binoculars.

"See those eyes?" she says to no one in particular. "They're white, and, oh, there's a starling — two starlings in that group, male and female. Oh, I love that sound." Starlings can imitate other bird songs and also whistle and warble. "That makes nine species."

She sees crows in front of the Main Library and at Civic Center Park playground, more that are on dirt ground. She admires their shiny blackness. Her cold hands, arthritis and backpack laden with three days of food in it (the Marines survival package she always carries "in case of an earthquake") are forgotten burdens as she circles the



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Mary Liz Harris sees movement in the trees by the Asian Art Museum and trains her binoculars on the spot—red-winged blackbirds, neobies in the neighborhood.

"Oh, there are so many ways to amuse yourself in the Tenderloin. You don't have to shoot drugs and drink. There are simple gifts."

Mary Liz Harris

block, making more counts of red-winged blackbirds, rock pigeons, western gulls and Brewer's blackbirds after threading through a homeless encampment on the sidewalk.

"Pigeons are decreasing at City Hall," she notes. "Of course, it's against the law to feed them."

With the binoculars she scans a second-story fire escape for house finches that a woman was feeding there last year. "She must have moved," Harris says, seeing none, and meanders over to the Community Garden at McAllister and Larkin. This year she missed seeing any white-crowned sparrows at City Hall, too.

Harris says birding is a great activity "when you get old." She sometimes spends an hour just watching a flock of birds. But with teaching Sunday school and singing in her church choir, lectures she attends, memberships in all the city museum associations, plus volunteering at St. Anthony's and doing occasional tai chi, she hardly lacks for action. She believes that learning is something you do every day.

RAPTORS IN THE HOOD

She has seen a lot of hawks in her 15 years in "the extremely interesting" Tenderloin. The first peregrine falcon she saw was sitting on top of the cross at St. Boniface.

"I was eating breakfast, looking out my kitchen window," she recalled. "They were nesting at PG&E South of Market and people were taking work breaks — bird breaks — to watch them."

Hawks, for all their predatory aggression, would likely stay away from the abundant gulls, repelled by their intimidating size. A peregrine falcon, though, is more likely to tear into one. But their speed can be literally breakneck. Six peregrines have died from collisions in seven years in the downtown area, according to the society. The last one was Dec. 7 near Market and Van Ness, very likely after colliding with a building.

Diving at 200 mph, these raptors — the fastest member of the animal kingdom — are doomed when hitting clear glass they can't see. City legislation in October 2011 required new buildings and renovated ones within 100 yards of the Bay or ocean to install all windows from ground level up to 60 feet high with "fritted" ceramic and silica specks that birds see and humans don't.

SPECIAL SIGHTINGS

She has seen a Cooper's hawk, too. "It's funny," she says, "all these special sightings have come from my apartment. Some years ago I saw a red-shouldered hawk, unusual for the Tenderloin. They're looking for rodents, and they're here for food."

Red-tailed hawks are pretty common. She often sees a pair on the St. Boniface cross, "like their activities are being blessed." And at various blessed times she has seen a great egret and double-crested cormorant when she was close to the Bay, and "more food for hawks" — barn swallows, red-masked parakeets ("they're tourists down from the hill") and the stunning black and white phoebe that "wears a tuxedo."

"Oh, there are so many ways to amuse yourself in the Tenderloin," Harris sighs. "You don't have to shoot drugs and drink. There are simple gifts."

Harris' trek leaves out a lot of territory. It's an established route and takes in the most likely places to see birds. Ignored is the small garden adjacent to the temporary YMCA on Golden Gate Avenue. In October, The Extra ran a picture of a garden resident, Maxine the hummingbird, but Harris won't see her on this round, though eager to add species.

Harris won't be using any tricks to lure birds, either, as Dr. Harry Parker did in the Presidio during her second year counting. He played a recording of the winter wren's song and some came flying. "I was assigned to him. It was wonderful."

At the corner of Larkin and McAllister — "now, I'm really enjoying the sunshine" — she counts the "clacking" Brewer's blackbirds on the opera blue railing near the garage and more of them strolling on the pavement, plus a dozen brown-headed cowbirds. "I'm very happy I walked to this gate," she says.

At the Community Garden she picks up litter off the sidewalk and disposes of it in a nearby trash can. She points to a fuchsia plant that could attract hummingbirds and a purple bougainvillea, admires the verdant garden, counts two Brewer's blackbirds, a pi-

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CENTRAL CITY

EXTRA!

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Laurie Lazer and Darryl Smith let a thousand artists bloom in the central city

Their 509 Cultural Center is a wide-ranging wellspring of art and inspiration in the neighborhood

BY MARJORIE BEGGS

WITH RAIN threatening on a cool winter day, Tenderloin residents Thomas Griffin and Cheryl Conti waited in a short queue to get their favorite pants fixed — at an arts venue like no other in San Francisco.

Seamster Michael Swaine, who teaches ceramics at Mills College and UC Berkeley, monthly sets up his treadle-operated White Rotary sewing machine on the sidewalk as you enter the Tenderloin National Forest. He repairs neighbors' clothes for free, calling his 11-year-old brainchild the Free Mending Library.

Swaine personifies the Forest and its nonprofit parent, 509 Cultural Center: artistically professional, uniquely modern and whimsical. Co-founded by Laurie Lazer and Darryl Smith 23 years ago, 509 Cultural Center has grown into a trio of enterprises that also includes the 509 Ellis gallery and the Luggage Store Gallery on Market Street.

"Laurie and Darryl have a rare, special thing," says Swaine, who, besides his mending service has had several solo ceramic shows at 509 Ellis and contributed to group shows at the Luggage Store Gallery. "They have a completely different relationship to their artists than other curators. It's all about what they're willing to say 'yes' to."

Besides saying yes to an eclectic collection of more than 1,000 artists, they've managed to persevere in the central city, a tough location for any small enterprise.

"Having lasted 20 years is in itself an accomplishment, I guess," Lazer said in a video celebrating the anniversary of their art venture. "But it may have just been our stubbornness."

Today, Lazer and Smith are rising stars. The December issue of San Francisco magazine calls them "pioneers in the mid-Market revival" and among the "cultural mafia — the 63 most influential impresarios, mentors, fundraisers and visionaries" in the San Francisco arts community.

Since Lazer and Smith moved to 1007 Market St. just after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, they've transformed a fledgling visual and performing arts venue into a destination that nurtures artists, many from the neighborhood, while drawing in audiences from the central city and far beyond — 2,000 people a month — and mounting 10 shows annually.

Lazer and Smith also made a silk purse out of sow's ear Cohen Alley, once a garbage-strewn, drug-infested cul-de-sac off Ellis Street near Leavenworth that they've been developing since late in the 1980s. Dedicated as the Tenderloin National Forest in 2009, it's a surprising green spot in the heart of the Tenderloin. As a dirty, dark alley rife with rats, the police averaged three calls a day about nefarious goings-on. Now, Smith estimates that 10,000 people yearly wander in to browse or attend performances, art openings, food fetes.

The space, 23 feet wide and 136 feet deep, is enclosed by residential buildings. It boasts lush plantings, a clay oven, an artistic stone path, birdhouses, dramatic lighting and murals that run several stories up the sides of the buildings.

The Forest, the Luggage Store Gallery and its gallery annex next door draw 25,000 people a year, numbers that enamor artists and funders, who are pleased but not surprised by Lazer and Smith's success.

"I love those guys," says Frances Phillips, who directs the Walter and Elise Haas Fund's arts grantmaking and its Creative Work Fund, which has twice funded projects of 509 Cultural Center, the official name of Lazer and Smith's nonprofit organization.

"I deeply admire their commitment to artists that's all a piece with their commitment to the neighborhood," Phillips says. The Forest? "A beautiful, quirky, playful addition to a dense streetscape."

Sculptor and installation artist Mi-



PHOTO BY MARK DONEZA

Laurie Lazer and Darryl Smith, 509 Cultural Center co-founders and directors, stand near a collapsible Pacific outrigger canoe — the handmade "baby" of artist Michael Arcega's "Baby and the Nacirema" exhibition at Luggage Store Gallery.

chael Arcega, whose "Baby and the Nacirema" exhibition at the Market Street gallery ran last year from mid-October through November, has known Lazer and Smith for eight years. He's impressed at how relaxed and professional they are.

"When I approached Laurie about this show, we bounced ideas around, let them marinate a bit, then nailed things down just two months before we opened," recalls Arcega, who has exhibited at the de Young, is an art department faculty member at Stanford and was a 2012 Guggenheim Fellow in Fine Arts in New York. "The special thing about Laurie and Darryl is that they're so casual, but they gave me permission and encouraged me to do whatever I wanted with the space." Such trust in the artist is rare, he says.

Over two decades, many major Bay Area foundations have supported 509 Cultural Center. So, too, have the prestigious Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, California Arts Council, and the city's Arts Commission and Grants for the Arts, top arts funder in the Bay Area.

"Laurie and Darryl are so mission-driven, so pure, so clear about what they're doing," says Kary Schulman, executive director of Grants for

the Arts, a Luggage Store funder since 1991. "They're all about linking the community and the artist. They've fashioned a template that makes the creator of the art and the audience or participant resources for each other."

ARTISTS MEET

Lazer and Smith, more than business partners, were a couple, briefly, in the mid-1970s after they met in a photography class at City College. She'd come to San Francisco from the Bronx, where she grew up. He, a native San Franciscan from the Ingleside, had been studying sociology on the East Coast, but returned to the city just as the nonprofit sector was exploding.

"Laurie and I connected in the class and, afterward, did some arts projects together," Smith recalls. "We stayed in touch, but we weren't a couple again for about 10 years."

During that time, Smith studied photography at the Art Institute. In 1986, he moved into the Aarti Hotel, the building that forms the east wall of the Tenderloin National Forest, their fancifully named art venue that has come to symbolize the neighborhood aesthetic.

TNDC bought the Aarti in 1981 — the nonprofit's first venture into rehabilitating deteriorating Tenderloin housing — and developed it as a place of

POET'S TOUR



PHOTO BY MARK DONEZA

BY ED BOWERS

There is a Tree of Life located at Cohen Alley off Ellis St. called The Tenderloin National Forest. It is a little forest filled with a diversity of plants, just like a big forest, only in miniature.

It is planted where the leaves live before falling off.

Everything was once something else here; the Tenderloin National Forest grows from what was previously a cesspool filled with the last sob and squeeze of broken hearts and discarded syringes.

The Forest is a gated community now, protected much of the time by a huge iron fence; when it is opened to the public, a millennium of wisdom is revealed to those who stand outside. It gets good reviews from people who give the overall ambience of the Tenderloin a zero. Forests are sneaky that way.

You see, some trees live for thousands of years. That's a lot of wisdom absorbed in one little life form. They've seen a lot, the plants.

Nature sanctifies us, reminds of our origins.

The supernatural is natural.

Gaze at your face in the mirror then at a flower in the forest. What's the difference?

You are as nature made you and that is as weird and supernatural as it gets, especially if you

THE TENDERLOIN NATIONAL FOREST

were forged in the Tenderloin.

Wild things run around Central City, reduced to ground zero by the earthquake.

But in The Tenderloin National Forest, nature is served and it points to and nurtures.

People stay home and tend to their own, abandoning those in the Tenderloin.

As for nature in its primal form, it is possible to produce a new civilization.

So, some in the Tenderloin National Forest.

But no matter what happens, life is a womb until you're born.

Your origins are Earth and Tenderloin.

Even when homeless,

alive or dead,

you are Home.



PHOTO BY MARK DONEZA

In the heart of the neighborhood, the Tenderloin National Forest's murals and lush plantings have replaced a squalid alley between residential buildings.

its time: a self-help, cooperative model with tenants improving the building themselves and sharing day-to-day management. Smith joined a handful of artists living there in a collective that took over the ground-floor space next to the alley, a former bar, as their work gallery.

(The Aarti was reshaped again last March, opening after being rehabbed as housing for formerly homeless, at-risk 18- to 24-year-olds who are seriously mentally ill.)

Smith was still an Aarti co-op artist in 1988 when he had the idea that Lazer might be interested in joining the collective.

"I invited her to come check it out," he says. And the rest is history — their history.

"I never lived at the Aarti," Lazer explains, "but what they were creating there was so interesting — the people

were so diverse and I was really impressed by the co-op meeting."

In 1987, TNDC had become the collective's fiscal sponsor, allowing donations to it to be tax-deductible. Its first support came from Franciscan Charities, then soon after from Vanguard Foundation, Lazer says. Two years later, the Luggage Store Gallery got its own nonprofit status.

That was a busy year. At its height, the arts collective had 17 members, mostly Aarti residents, but by 1989, most had moved on. Lazer and Smith kept 509 Ellis going, dubbing the gallery the 509 Cultural Center.

The gallery was active, and Cohen Alley began emerging, albeit slowly, as an outdoor venue. Smith's room at the Aarti faced the alley, and he remembers bemoaning the waste of space, a precious commodity in the Tenderloin. He

and others cleaned it up, enough to use it to host birthday parties for neighborhood kids.

"Then we got involved with SLUG (the erstwhile S.F. League of Urban Gardeners) and started by planting a redwood tree and a Japanese maple," Smith says. "We did some live art events and some installations, all pretty temporary." But Cohen was still basically an alley, a concrete slab with curbs.

When the AArti was damaged by the '89 earthquake, the artists were ousted from 509 Ellis. About that time, Lazer was pedaling along Market Street, she says, when she saw the For Lease sign on 1007 Market, an elegant, two-story building constructed in 1907. A clothing store occupied the basement, ground floor and mezzanine, but the top floor, the one for lease, was flooded with light and much bigger

than 509. Gold script on the frieze below the Victorian cornice dubbed the building "The Complete Luggage Store."

"It was absolutely beautiful," Lazer says. She and Smith signed a 10-year lease, naming their new home, of course, the Luggage Store Gallery. When they were able to reopen 509 Ellis, in 1995, it became the Luggage Store Annex.

ALLEY IS TRANSFORMED

Back at Cohen Alley, neighbors began participating in its transformation, letting Smith know what they'd like to see there. In 1990, Smith met Mohammed Nuru of the Department of Public Works, now its director.

"He found ways to help us develop the space," Smith says, "even giving us access to DPW's landscape artist for ideas and help." After years of negotia-

➤ *CONTINUED ON PAGE 6*

NATIONAL FOREST — Where the supernatural is natural

oin.
 ntral City, roots pulled up long ago, their endangered species status
 those who would ignore them.
 ral Forest wild things are cultivated, tended to, watered and pre-
 pays homage to our mother the ancient Earth.
 to their own gardens, protect themselves,
 nderloin to the wild life of ghosts, demons and angels.
 orm, when greenhouse gases put a human heat on the globe, making
 w stone age, nature like many of its residents needs protection from
 think that if crack doesn't get you, global warming will.
 ns we go back to the source.
 born and then it's up for grabs.
 Sky.

The life force doesn't give a damn if you die. It just wants to play.
 Yes, The Tenderloin National Forest is not big; neither are you, so it is possible for you to relate.
 Preserved behind bars is what you are too; the bars may be invisible, but they are there.
 When you look beyond the bars, you see yourself protecting yourself from yourself.
 A few plants, birdhouses, palms, and some peace is what you will find.
 If that's not good enough, go somewhere else; which you obviously have done as you read this
 from an important building that may be as large and distant from wilderness as yesterday's
 dinosaur.
 But if you are a poet, check out the Tenderloin National Forest.
 The spirits of the trees cut down to build San Francisco will bless you, or at least leave you
 alone.
 This will offer you the opportunity to write about beauty before it wore a human face.
 Follow the fallen homeless leaves scattered on the sidewalks of the neighborhood.
 Perhaps they will lead you home.
 Or to The Tenderloin National Forest.

Tenderloin stars

➤ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

tions with the city, and after then-Mayor Willie Brown threw his support to the site in the late 1990s, the alley was leased to 509 Cultural Center for \$1 a year as a neighborhood commons.

Today, the Tenderloin National Forest and annex have about seven shows a year, most by artists in residence. Residencies, for three or four artists a year, last up to three months. The artists can mount their final project at either the Forest or the annex, or, sometimes, use them as staging areas for a larger exhibition at the Market Street gallery. That was the case last fall with the “Hinterlands” show, a collaboration of four artists, two from an experimental arts space in Hanoi.

509 Cultural Center also presents regular music programs, spoken-word performances, poetry slams, readings and Swaine’s monthly Free Mending Library.

Choreographer and dancer Amara Tabor-Smith, Darryl Smith’s sister, is another Forest regular. She’s been developing a dance-theater piece called “Our Daily Bread” that she performs at other local venues. But once a month, she sheds her performance mantle and invites Forest neighbors to “Fresh From the Oven” — a cob oven, made of stones, molded wet sand and clay built in the center of the Forest.

“It’s a community-engagement event that brings people together to break bread,” Tabor-Smith says. “I make a big pot of what I call ‘recession stew,’ people bring bread and pizzas to bake and ingredients to make a salad, we share stories about food, listen to some music and just get to know one another.” Those who partake are a microcosm of the neighborhood, she says, and it always seems to work. “The Forest is a magical place — people seem to know that, even if they can’t articulate it.”

Lazer says that she and Smith regularly navigate the five blocks between their two main venues, though he spends more time at the Forest and she at the Luggage Store Gallery.

They bought the Market Street building with several investors in 1999, forming an LLC, a move that was a little nerve-wracking, Lazer says, but “felt like the right thing for us to do.” They’re hoping to buy out their LLC partners soon, put in an elevator and a roof garden, among other dreams.

And they’re hoping to fit into a mid-Market that, after decades of false starts, is becoming hot. Old buildings are being razed for a new shopping complex one block east, Zendesk and Zoosk have set up offices in that same block, Twitter, 800-employees strong, opened up three blocks west, Dolby Labs moves nearby this year and the list goes on.

Lazer wonders if they’ll fit in. “Some people may want our building to disappear,” she says.

Amy Cohen doubts that. As director of neighborhood business development for the Office of Economic and Workforce Development, Cohen says the Luggage Store has been a “catalytic institution” in mid-Market for a long time.

“The city has helped create a new brand for the area based on what was already there, like the gallery,” says Cohen. “It may be under the radar of the traditional arts scene, but it has a built-in, international following. That’s going to attract new businesses looking for a more cultural, perhaps edgier, environment so they can compete for the best employees.”

The artistic eclecticism of the urban, second-floor gallery can seem worlds away from the ground-level Forest, deep in the Tenderloin with its abundant, inviting flowers, ornamentals and trees.

“It’s all-inclusive and welcomes diverse visitors, just like the neighborhood,” Smith says. “If there’s any



PHOTO BY MARK DONEZA

Tenderloin resident Cheryl Conti, left, watches seamster Michael Swaine at Tenderloin National Forest repair one of three pairs of pants she’s brought him to fix for free. “I used to sew myself,” she tells Swaine, “but now I’m legally blind.” Pauline Autet, a student of Swaine’s at Cal, watches him work.

challenge there, it’s that people might have issues being comfortable with otherness — other classes and other cultures.” It’s a challenge he relishes, as does Lazer.

Diversity — “otherness” — figures strongly in their curatorial style. They seek out artists for shows and consider proposals from artists with the goal of “mixing it up,” Lazer says.

“We’ve changed a bit since we start-

ed out — we used to identify artists we wanted to show and gave priority to those from the neighborhood,” she says. “Now, we also look for artists just starting their career, and artists of color and women and transgenders, and some who’ve begun to succeed in the art market. Mostly, we want artists to experiment and do their vision. That’s our strong point.” ■

OBITUARIES

RALPH KEVIN URBANCIC

Found dead in his room

Jackie Ikeda flashed a mischievous grin and her eyes sparkled as she described how she and Ralph Urbancic “hit it off right away” when she moved to Civic Center Residence a year ago.

“Oh, what times we had Friday and Saturday nights out by the garbage cans,” said Ikeda, one of 14 residents who attended the Jan. 24 memorial for Mr. Urbancic. “I’m sure gonna miss him — we talked about serious stuff but also had some really good times. He gave me \$25 and I still have it up in my room.” Now that he’s gone, she didn’t think she’d spend it, she said, but instead keep it as a memento.

Mr. Urbancic, a Civic Center resident since 2009, was found dead in his room Jan. 14 by property management staff. He was 55.

Resident Abraham Fleming said he was used to seeing Mr. Urbancic daily, somewhere in the hotel, and was concerned when three days had passed without any contact.

“Kevin sure was a character, sometimes sad, sometimes morose, but with a wonderful sense of humor,” Fleming said. “We all make mistakes. He made his share of them, but he was a generous person who cared about his friends. On some of my worst days” — Fleming paused to wipe his eyes — “he was patient and there for me.”

Richard Beard is one of many residents who, like Mr. Urbancic, moved into the Civic Center after it was renovated in 2009. Beard told The Extra that Mr. Urbancic had liver cancer and



was receiving no treatment for it, but he believed that Mr. Urbancic had died of a drug overdose, not cancer. Social worker Erin Pidot later said the cause of death still was unknown.

“Kevin certainly had his own demons, but he also was childlike in many ways,” Beard said during the memorial. “Memorials like this are important — we see people around us pass, and realize we’re in a line and someday it will be our turn. We need to step up and see who’s around us now.”

Those gathered gave that sentiment an “amen,” adding that Mr. Urbancic was “always a wild child and a perfect gentleman at the same time,” “the life of the party,” “a man who couldn’t express what was going on inside him” and, simply, “someone who really understood what you meant.”

Homelessness, familiar to most residents here, often is reflected in what they share when they come together to say good-bye to a fellow resident. This day, one said he didn’t know Mr. Urbancic but had come to the memorial anyway.

“I can’t remember him exactly. Still, I’m happy these memorials take place. There’s lots of love and respect here for people who’ve died — and I’m glad he didn’t die on the streets.”

— Marjorie Beggs

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12 bird species counted in Tenderloin

► CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

geon and walks east on McAllister.

She talks about birds she hasn't seen in the TL, among them the Townsend's warbler, "spelled just like the street." Its head is patterned in striking yellow and black. Like the Brewer's blackbird, it's a common visitor in the winter months. "But I've never seen one here."

At the Turk and Hyde Mini Park she counts 25 more rock pigeons, "ropies," she's now calling them, a nickname she and her husband invented. They are shockingly "omnivorous." She tells a droll story, without breaking a smile, about being on a bus near a woman looking out at a pigeon eating vomit in the street and exclaiming, "Only in San Francisco!"

Harris, over the years, has counted more than 70 species that have come

to her fire escape, "and that's pretty wonderful."

At Turk and Leavenworth, she pauses to count four ropies while a brown-and-white, leashed pit bull a few feet away stares at them coldly.

On Jones, coming up to the Tenderloin Police Station, Harris is momentarily staggered. Her heart is a-flutter. Up come the binoculars. She glimpses a mysterious bird in the tree right in front of her.

"I don't know what it is. I'll just stand here. Oh, he's got yellow. There, you see?" She's leaning forward, binoculars glued to her eyes. "Oh, a surprise! There, some black and white." Absorbed in the aviary world, she drifts on thoughtless feet to the left.

"The first Townsend's warbler in the Tenderloin — and in a Brisbane box!" she announces, also nailing the

tree species in a way that would impress Edward R. Murrow. It's a male. The warblers are easily found in Mission Dolores garden and Sue Bierman Park, but not in the Tenderloin. "So exciting. That's why I do this work," Harris says.

Peering into Boeddeker Park at the locked gate is a comedown, only a handful more ropies. The final species count: 11. Then she adjusts the backpack for her trek south to Yerba Buena Gardens to work a section of SoMa not covered with her husband, eventually spending 5½ hours on the project and walking nearly 3 miles.

But as she heads down Leavenworth, two blocks away she spots two red-tailed hawks flying near the old Federal Building, probably those she has seen on the St. Boniface cross. It brings her species total to 12.

A few blocks away, in the gritty first



PHOTO BY MARK DONEZA

Maxine, the Anna's hummingbird that frequents the garden next to the YMCA, was not seen during the latest bird census and thus not counted.

block of Turk, people idle near the 21 Club's open door and 30 ropies mill about in the gutter, uncounted, eating abundant garbage in the sunshine before a police car pulls in and scares them off to who knows where.

And soon, in SoMa, things were continuing to look up for Mary Liz Harris. As usual. ■

The Tenderloin tally of species

Mary Liz Harris counted 602 birds in the Tenderloin during the Audubon Society's annual avian census. Here are the 12 species she recorded, their numbers and a few of her comments.

BY TOM CARTER

RED-TAILED HAWK

"They are always in the Tenderloin and you can see them often on the cross of St. Boniface Church." The red-tailed hawk is the most common hawk in America among 14 species. It dives for rodent meals at 120 mph.

PHOTO BY DEREK RAMSEY



2

MEW GULL

"It's not always here and comes in when it's cold after the first rain. It sounds like a squeaking door. You see them at Fifth and Powell, U.N. Plaza and on light fixtures." It's the smallest of North America's white-headed gulls.

PHOTO BY AMAR AYYASH



15

WESTERN GULL

"This is the big gull. Its eye is black. I think they've decreased in the Tenderloin." Average weight is 2.2 pounds, wingspan up to 58 inches. A red spot marks the lower bill near the tip. They eat everything from little sea creatures to garbage and have even been known to nurse on sleeping mother seals.

PHOTO BY DSCHWEN WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



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TOWNSEND'S WARBLER

"Not common in the Tenderloin — my first in 15½ years! But I've seen them on Telegraph Hill and at Laguna Honda. I never have heard it sing. It's a nervous bird. Beautiful head, yellow, black and gray. I think we'll see more as the Tenderloin gets more trees and vegetation as it has been doing."

PHOTO BY KEITH BAUER KEITHBAUER.SMUGMUG.COM



1

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER

"They're all over the city and up on Telegraph Hill, very beautiful. They are an energetic bird and hop from branch to branch, hard to see — warblers are like that. But its sound is very familiar to me and that's how I first recognize it's here. I love their coloration. They have a yellow rump." In winter, it will visit feeders for sunflower seeds, suet, raisins and peanut butter.

PHOTO BY DAN PANCAMO WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



1

ROCK PIGEON

"It's the most prevalent bird in the Tenderloin but they are decreasing, too. I don't see them on my fire escape anymore. I think the Tenderloin CBD's cleaning (sidewalks) has done it." Pigeons have been accused of carrying human diseases, but no attempt to eradicate the prolific beggars from city life has succeeded.

PHOTO BY ALEXANDER GAMAUF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



299

AMERICAN CROW

"They've always been here and they're recognized by their caw, caw sound. They're easily confused with the larger ravens. Totally black. They're gregarious. I see them on my fire escape." Used for years as symbols for impending doom, crows are the smartest of all birds and have demonstrated toolmaking ability and self-awareness in mirror tests. Their total brain-to-body mass ratio is equal to great apes, slightly lower than in humans.

PHOTO BY WALTER SIEGMUND WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



5

EUROPEAN STARLING

"They came from England, I think, and I see more of them than I do red-winged blackbirds. They're in Tenderloin trees and all over the city, iridescent, I love seeing them." And what's startling about starlings is their ability to absorb sounds from their surroundings — including car alarms and even human speech patterns — and vocalize the stuff into their own calls. They are part of research now into human language evolution.

PHOTO BY LINDA TANNER WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



13

BREWER'S BLACKBIRD

"Very common in the Tenderloin and you can tell them from the red-winged. The males are purplish and the females brownish. They're also found all over the city — very successful at living — and are gregarious." They are the West's version of the grackle but striking bright yellow eyes make it spooky and its raspy song isn't pleasant.

PHOTO BY LEE KARNEY USFWS



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RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD

"I'm real happy to see more of it in the Tenderloin. It's in U.N. Plaza and Civic Center and near the Asian Art Museum where trees are. When they're together they make magnificent sounds and you can be serenaded." It's also the most abundant and best studied bird in America, some say. But during breeding season, watch out: Males swoop humans walking nearby.

PHOTO BY WALTER SIEGMUND



52

HOUSE SPARROW

"They're not as common as they are in Chicago, but I think they're increasing and will with more green space. Very common to see them with pigeons and gulls. They're black, gray and white and my husband says it looks like they're wearing a Greek soldier's helmet."

PHOTO BY FLAGSTAFFOTOS.COM.AU



10

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD

"They seem to be expanding their territory in the Tenderloin. I used to see them just at Market and Jones and now I see them near the Asian Art Museum. Once I saw a hundred at the library." The female doesn't have a very nice profile. Bold and promiscuous, she flies to other nests to kick out an egg and leave one of her own. That baby shoves others out or takes most of the food. It's said cowbirds got this parasitic way by following roving bison herds and had no time to stop and nest.

PHOTO BY BEAR GOLDEN WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



12

COMMUNITY CALENDAR

ART EVENTS

Diva or Die Burlesque. EXIT Cafe, 156 Eddy St., Saturdays, 8:30 p.m., Feb. 16, Mar. 16 and Apr. 13. Danny and the Deep Blue Sea, one-act play by John Patrick Shanley, 8 p.m., Feb. 21, 22 and 23, EXIT Stage Left, 156 Eddy St. Info: theexit.org.

Art on Market Street Poster Series. celebration of San Francisco in film by S.F. artist Christina Empeocles. The posters, based on the films Dirty Harry (1971), Harold and Maude (1971), What's Up Doc? (1972), THX 1138 (1971), So I Married an Axe Murderer (1990) and The Times of Harvey Milk (1984), are on view between the Embarcadero and Van Ness through April 8. Presented by S.F. Arts Commission.

Take Me Away. S.F. Arts Commission Galleries and PhotoAlliance's juried exhibition at City Hall, ground floor, Mon.-Fri., 8 a.m.-8 p.m., through May 10. On a theme of real or imagined spaces that escape from the everyday into adventure and fantasy, more than 100 works by regional photojournalists and fine artists and larger bodies of works by photographers David Gardner, Rebecca Horne and Alice Shaw. Info: starts-commission.org/gallery/2013/take-me-away/



PHOTO COURTESY OF S.F. ARTS COMMISSION

David Gardner's Dry Camping, part of the juried "Take Me Away" exhibition.

SPECIAL EVENTS

Weekly Women's Support Group. Tenderloin Self-Help Center's support and social group for women, 290 Turk St., Thursdays, 11 a.m.-noon. Kickoff was Jan 31 for weekly drop-in sessions led by peer staff on topics relevant to women living in the Tenderloin. Requires no registration. Info: Jan Couvillon, 749-2143.

COMMUNITY: REGULAR SCHEDULE HOUSING

Tenant Associations Coalition of San Francisco, 1st Wednesday of each month, noon, 201 Turk St., Community Room. Contact Michael Nulty, 339-8327. Resident unity, leadership training.

HEALTH AND MENTAL HEALTH

CBHS Consumer Council, 3rd Monday of month, 5-7 p.m., 1380 Howard St., room 537, 255-3695. Consumer advisers from self-help groups and mental health consumer advocates. Public welcome.

Healthcare Action Team, 2nd Wednesday of month, 1010 Mission St., Bayanihan Community Center, 11 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Focus on increasing supportive home services, expanded eligibility for home care, improved discharge planning. Light lunch. Call James Chionsini, 703-0188 x304.

Mental Health Board, 2nd Wednesday of the month, 6:30-8:30 p.m., City Hall, room 278. CBHS advisory committee, open to the public. Call: 255-3474.

SAFETY

SoMa Police Community Relations Forum, 4th Monday of each month, 6-7:30 p.m. Location varies.

To receive monthly email info: 538-8100 x202.

Tenderloin Police Station Community Meeting, last Tuesday of month, 6 p.m., police station Community Room, 301 Eddy St. Call Susa Black, 345-7300. Neighborhood safety.

NEIGHBORHOOD IMPROVEMENT

Alliance for a Better District 6, 2nd Tuesday of each month, 6 p.m., 230 Eddy St. Contact Michael Nulty, 820-1560 or sf_district6@yahoo.com, a districtwide improvement association.

Central Market Community Benefit District, board meets 2nd Tuesday of month, Hotel Whitcomb, 1231 Market St., 3 p.m. Info: 882-3088, <http://central-market.org>.

Friends of Boeddeker Park, 2nd Wednesday this month, 3 p.m., Police Station Community Room, 301

Eddy St. Plan park events, activities and improvements. Contact Betty Traynor, 931-1126.

Gene Friend Recreation Center Advisory Board, 3rd Thursday of month, 5 p.m. Works to protect SoMa resources for all residents. Gene Friend Rec Center, 270 Sixth St. Info: Tim Figueras, 554-9532.

North of Market/Tenderloin Community Benefit District. Full board meets 3rd Monday at 4 p.m.. Call 292-4812 for location or check nom-tlcbd.org.

SoMa Community Stabilization Fund Advisory Committee, 3rd Thursday of month, 5:30 p.m., 1 South Van Ness, 2nd floor. Info: Claudine del Rosario, 701-5580.

Tenderloin Futures Collaborative, 3rd Wednesday of the month, 11 a.m.-noon, Tenderloin Police Community Room, 301 Eddy. Presentations on issues of interest to neighborhood residents, nonprofits and businesses. Info: 928-6209.

Tenderloin Neighborhood Association, 2nd Friday of month, 842 Geary St., 5 p.m. Nonprofit focuses on health and wellness activities to promote neighborly interactions. Info: tenderloinneighborhood@yahoo.com.

SENIORS AND DISABLED

Mayor's Disability Council, 3rd Friday of month, 1-3 p.m., City Hall, room 400. Call: 554-6789. Open to the public.

Senior Action Network, general meeting, 2nd Thursday of month, 9 a.m.-noon, Universal Unitarian Church, 1187 Franklin St. Monthly programs, 965 Mission St. #700: Senior Housing Action Committee, 3rd Wednesday, 1:30 p.m. Call for health program and Senior University: 546-1333 and www.sfsan.org.

DISTRICT 6 SUPERVISOR

Jane Kim, chair of Rules Committee, member of Budget & Finance Committee and chair of Transbay Joint Forces Authority. Legislative aides: April Veneracion, Sunny Angulo and Matthias Mormino. Jane Kim@sf.gov.org 554-7970.

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