

Tenderloin station's public room brouhaha

Group gets space for private use — a policy breach?

By MARJORIE BEGGS

IT'S BEEN LIKE CLOCKWORK for 13 years: Every third Wednesday each month at 11 a.m. the Tenderloin Futures Collaborative has convened at the police station community room on Eddy Street across from Boeddeker Park.

Last fall, scheduling for the room hit a snag — and the collaborative had to shift its Wednesday meetings to Thursdays — hinting, perhaps, at administrative problems at the Tenderloin Police Station since Capt. Teresa Ewin took over the reins last summer.

Capt. Ewin, the station's ninth commander in its 15 years, has kept a low profile, notably forgoing the

informative, often downright chatty, weekly email newsletter featuring local crime stats, fraud alerts and community activities produced by three captains who preceded her — Jason Cherniss, Joe Garrity and Gary Jimenez. They, and others before them, were a presence in the neighborhood and often showed up at community meetings, or at least sent a station rep.

Right after Capt. Ewin took over the post in June, she attended one Futures Collaborative meeting, introducing herself and mentioning a few of her interests, such as Community Police Advisory Boards, but there's been nary a sign of her or an emissary since. Capt. Garrity, by contrast, was a regular at the collaborative, answering questions from the floor and offering police news and perspectives.

Attending the forum would be a useful part of community policing. Residents, nonprofit agency and business reps meet for an hour to hear about changes in the TL that run from potentially dire — a planned 10-story housing complex that would shade Boeddeker Park or a proposal to reverse a decades-old moratorium on new massage parlors — to moderately affecting, such as a new cafe moving into a long-vacant storefront.

Volunteers have chaired and administered this strictly informational forum since its inception in 2001, when it picked up where the Lower Eddy/Leavenworth Task Force left off scrutinizing neighborhood improvement plans.

The collaborative first met at a large, dim, reverberant room at St. Anthony's, then

► CONTINUED ON PAGE 3



VIDEO STILL: SF CITY WATCH, YOUTUBE

TL Capt. Teresa Ewin insists: "All meetings are open to the public."

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PAVING WAY FOR MASSAGE

Kim opens door Leland Yee shut

PAGE 2



TL TET FESTIVAL CANCELED

Gentrification ends 25-year tradition

PAGE 3

ORIGINAL BLACK PANTHER

TL obituary for John Patton

PAGE 6



CENTRAL CITY



SAN FRANCISCO

DIVERSE CITY



PHOTO: TOM CARTER

Ron Byers and son, Jason, have lived at Curran House one year. Single father and teen son is a rare household in the Tenderloin. The Byers' story and how they fit into the social tapestry of the neighborhood is another in The Extra's series that shows the TL as a Diverse City unto itself.

A place to call home

What a strange, long trip it's been to Tenderloin for single dad and son

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TOM CARTER

THE LONG ROAD HOME can be arduous, mixed with animosity and kindness, deceptions and generosity, good weather and blizzards, even shared with wild animals, or so it's been for single dad Ron Byers and his teenage son. They've seen it all, up close, and they've arrived.

Byers, standing in front of Curran House where he and son Jason live in a one-bedroom apartment, rolls a cigarette from a blue pouch of sweet-smelling Wildhorse pipe tobacco, a nasty habit for which the ever-polite Byers quickly apologizes.

"I know it's not good for me," he confesses. "Jason wants me to stop. He's right."

Yet he enjoys smoking and there haven't been many lasting pleasures in Byers' life. He's been homeless four times, on occasion with Jason as a young boy. But this is the end of it. Now, judiciously, he takes one day at a time.

"People tell me," he says, describing his journey, "that I have a fascinating story to tell."

A big man, 6 feet 2, his long, thinning hair falls well past his shoulders. Byers has soulful eyes and a soft voice like his son. At 52, his life has seldom lingered on a best-case scenario. Three times he chose the wrong woman for a wife, he has tremors from a disabling on-the-job injury, a chronically aching leg from his Navy

days that can give out and send him sprawling, and, from the pressures of his aggregate misfortunes, he hears voices that he has to fight off, diagnosed, as he was last year, with post traumatic stress disorder.

Just so, there is much to like and admire in Ron Byers.

"Raising a kid and being a single man, I've had to learn that," he says. "I changed (Jason's) first diaper and all the rest to the last."

It's a rare situation in a neighborhood characterized by older single adults and not many families. In 2014, the latest figures from the American Community Survey Census, as provided by Department of Human Services research, show 789 married couple households with children under 18 in the Tenderloin's census tracts, but just 167 single dads.

"I've been working since age 13. I remember dipping ice cream at the Muncie Mall for \$2 an hour. It was a lot of money. I bought a brooch for my mother. It was her favorite, the one she was buried with."

At 14, he was contributing \$100 a month to his parents after his dad lost his longtime job as a meat cutter when the company folded.

"I've been a manual laborer all my life, hundreds of jobs. I'm a jack-of-all-trades, master of none."

Hundreds may not be a stretch as he ticks off weed-pulling; shoveling cow shit; slaughtering chickens and turkeys; mining coal (for a week); operating carnival rides and sideshows; short order cooking. The list goes on. But disabilities have prevented him from working in recent years.

He and Jason, 18, have been at Curran House a year following a desultory existence chasing a better life in a half-dozen states. They are still adjusting to the sanctuary of stability.

► CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

GOOD NEWS

BY MARJORIE BEGGS

OUR PARK For the second time since it reopened in December 2014, Boeddeker Park has garnered professional kudos for a job exceptionally well done. When the California Parks and Recreation Society meets in Long Beach for its March 8-11 conference and expo, an S.F. Rec & Park rep will accept the Excellence in Design-Park Planning award. (A second San Francisco park, Cayuga in the Outer Mission, also will receive an award for excellence at the event.) That honor, says CPRS, goes to



SVEN EBERLEIN, 2013

Steel and net climbing structure is one of many award-winning amenities at the renovated Boeddeker Park.

projects that demonstrate “high standards of planning, design, community involvement, operation and maintenance, quality of aesthetics, usability, accessibility and versatility.” CPRS is a 4,000-member, 70-year-old public-interest organization that annually recogniz-

es outstanding achievement in facility design, park planning, marketing and communication, and community improvement. Last year, Boeddeker won the prestigious American Institute of Architecture San Francisco’s design award for its \$9.3 million makeover.

FORUM FOR ACTIVISTS Looking for ways to get more involved in central city politics and policymaking? Every Wednesday, Hospitality House, a Tenderloin agency founded in 1967, hosts a Community Organizing Work Group. The drop-in meeting, 2:30-4 p.m. at 290 Turk St., is open to anyone interested in learning about organizing, building community or just socializing with neighbors. “Topics are driven by whomever is in the room,” says Julia Gallyot, community organizing peer advocate. How to give public comment at City Hall, residential and commercial developments in the pipeline for the neighborhood, how to start a flea market in the Tenderloin and getting involved with the Central Market Citizen’s Advisory Committee

are some recent topics, Gallyot says. Info: jgallyot@hospitalityhouse.org.

PUBLIC ART 1028 Market Street, the proposed mixed-use residential and retail project near the intersection of Market, Taylor and Golden Gate, is moving forward. Once built, it will need large-scale public art to grace the site, say its developers. The long-vacant building is currently home of The Hall’s food and drink concessions and once held the popular second-story Hollywood Billiards, shuttered in 2003. It will be razed to create 186 rental units and 10,000 square feet of ground-floor retail. Developers Tidewater and War Horse are commissioning public art and proposals — from local artists or artist collaboratives — are due March 25. For the RFQ with all the info on the project and the commission, see <http://tinyurl.com/hsflqmk>. The Hall, which issued the RFQ, says it will host community arts workshops to consider guidelines for proposals for finalists. Info: Ilana Lipsett, community manager and culture curator, thehallsf.com. ■

Kim opens door to massage 18 years after Yee shut it

BY JONATHAN NEWMAN

SUPERVISOR JANE KIM in December, in one of her last acts as a member of the board’s Land Use Committee, introduced legislation that would amend a 17-year-old Planning Code provision prohibiting new massage parlors in most of the Tenderloin.

That 1998 rule, sponsored by then-Supervisor Leland Yee, was the result of heavy community lobbying against liquor and prostitution that was associated with storefront massage parlors of which there were 22 in the TL, all cited for solicitation, sex trafficking or racketeering.

Under Yee’s legislation, only health clubs and licensed physical therapists could provide new massage services within the broad boundaries of the North of Market Residential Special Use District, an area that encompasses the vast majority of the Tenderloin.

The first beneficiary of Kim’s ordi-

nance — if it passes after a Planning Commission hearing — could be Onsen Holistic Spa and Tea Room, a Japanese-themed restaurant and spa. Onsen’s owners, husband and wife Sunny Simmons and Caroline Smith, bought a 3,000-square-foot, single-story brick building at 466 Eddy St., formerly City Automotive, specialists in Volkswagen repair, in 2013. They have been rehabbing the structure in hopes that the code gets changed.

In January, the Planning Department found Kim’s ordinance did not trigger the need for an impact review under the California Environmental Quality Act. The next step is a public hearing before the Planning Commission, now scheduled for March 10, to determine if the ordinance fits the city’s priorities on the co-existence of neighborhood businesses and residential enclaves.

Kim’s proposed ordinance would allow a new business to provide massage as an accessory to its main business — in On-

sen’s case a restaurant — if it gets a conditional use permit from City Planning. Applicants for conditional use permits must persuade the Planning Department that their proposed use is necessary or desirable to the neighborhood, resolve any question of potential negative impact and demonstrate compliance with the city’s General Plan. A showing of balance between the neighborhood business and the surrounding residential footprint is basic to answering the conditional use question.

Michael Nulty, executive director of Alliance For a Better District 6, remembers the multiyear campaign to rein in the proliferating liquor licenses and storefront massage parlors back in the day.

“Great work was done by Jim Thompson, property manager of Aspen Apartments, David Baker of North of Market Planning Coalition and Ana Bolton of Adopt-A-Block,” Nulty said. “They collected statistics and presented evidence to the Planning Commission and the board, especially on the difficulties for the neighborhood’s kids navigating public intoxication and the street activity in front of the massage joints.”

But times and real estate values have changed. The Tenderloin is home to new businesses, many are well-funded, and new rules are being made for a city riding the tiger of economic development.

21 Club is gone and will be replaced by Big, a high-end cocktail lounge. Original Joe’s long ago left for North Beach. Its former fire-ravaged site on Taylor now

houses PianoFight Theater and Restaurant. Even in the Tenderloin, vacant buildings fetch millions at sale.

In their appearances at community meetings, Simmons and Smith describe Onsen — Japanese for “hot spring” — as “an environment of relaxation and peace.” They plan to serve Japanese-inspired food traditionally paired with sake, but also wine and beer. And they are constructing a steam room, sauna, communal tub and showers in their building with six rooms for massage and “rejuvenation treatments.”

Kim’s code amendments would allow massage to occupy no more than 25% of the square footage of the business, operate from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. and limit masseurs or masseuses on duty to no more than three at any one time. Kim also calls for practitioners to either get a Public Health permit or be certified by the California Massage Therapy Council. Both require individuals to have at least 500 hours of approved instruction.

The Onsen owners are also seeking a Type 41 liquor license, essentially a beer and wine license for a restaurant, which seldom gets denied.

Nulty seems skeptical.

“I don’t know — a place with a liquor license that offers massage? That might be a first for the neighborhood,” he said.

Onsen’s owners declined to be interviewed for this story. Supervisor Kim did not return The Extra’s requests for comment on her proposed ordinance. ■

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Gentrification casualty: Tet Festival

No celebration in the hood for 1st time in 25 years

BY MARK HEDIN

IN THE GENTRIFYING Tenderloin, the party's over for tens of thousands of Vietnamese Americans. For the first time in at least 25 years, there was no Tet Festival, the Vietnamese community's Lunar New Year celebration.

"Tet is a very big celebration," said Judy Young, Vietnamese Youth Development Center executive director. "Families come out, children come out." The festival would feature "food, flowers, entertainment and a fashion show showcasing the beauty and clothing of Vietnamese culture." After Little Saigon became a destination, the annual party would extend along a T-shaped constellation of closed-off Tenderloin streets, Larkin between Eddy and O'Farrell and O'Farrell from Hyde to Polk.

But the organizer of the Tet Festival over the past several years, the Vietnamese Community Center, shut down a few

months ago, and was unable to follow through on its grant from the city to help fund this year's event. Grants for the Arts had approved \$15,920, up from \$14,210 in 2015. The grant reimburses expenses, so with no festival the city money wasn't lost.

"This year is the first year that Little Saigon is not having the festival. It's not right, it's not good," Young said. "It's important that we continue to voice our need. We're really losing slowly the culture. It's bigger than just the closure, our folks just can't afford to be here anymore. It's been going on for a long time, but it's becoming more pronounced."

"Not enough people, not enough finance, not a lot of support, booth sponsors ...," Tony Nguyen, manager of community development at Southeast Asian Community Center, told The Extra.

When Tuong Vi of the Vietnamese Elderly Mutual Assistance Association

learned there would be no Tet Festival, she was "really sad. I did not know until last month," she told The Extra.

The association, with two paid staff, helps 135 disabled and low-income seniors each year, she said. For "at least 10 years" it has had a booth at the Tet Festival to highlight its presence in the neighborhood. "Usually, I can ask them for the booth," Vi said. But this year, they said, "Oh, no, we won't have it. No money."

"We still see the TL as a center of the Vietnamese community, whether that community is there or not," said Sonny Le, census expert, media consultant and San Francisco State extension instructor. "I know for a fact that people will come back to the TL to celebrate. I feel saddened."

Philip Nguyen, executive director of the Southeast Asian Community Center, told The Extra the festival's cancel-

▶ CONTINUED ON PAGE 7



PHOTOS BY: MARK HEDIN

Bao Nguyen (top), Garden Grove mayor, speaks at the Feb. 20 party. Twins Kayla (left) and Kayle join in the fun.

Brouhaha over Tenderloin Police Station community room

▶ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

two years later settled at the police community room. Centrally located, the station space has good lighting and acoustics, is accessible and safe, has spotless bathrooms, and, perhaps most important for a public-interest group with no funding, it's free and is neutral turf.

It's "available to nonprofit community-based organizations only," states the room request form. Among the more obvious caveats — no drugs or alcohol, no selling any items or charging admission fees — individuals or groups using the room "cannot exclude any member of the public."

Community activist Michael Nulty has co-administered the collaborative with TL resident Susan Bryan since 2013, the year that Rev. Glenda Hope stepped down after retiring as executive director of S.F. Network Ministries, a pioneer program that disbanded when she left. Nulty alerts a list of almost 200 by email about upcoming meetings, coordinates presentations and books the meetings a year in advance at the police station.

But he got a surprise when he went to the station in mid-November to book 2016's meetings: Another organization had been given the 12-month slot.

"I first went to schedule the collaborative meetings Oct. 21," Nulty told The Extra, "but they said they didn't even have the log book yet and I should come with my completed form the next month. I came back Nov. 18 and got the news some other group had already scheduled the third Wednesdays."

SCHEDULING SNAFU

Nulty phoned Sgt. Susa Black, who's handled room scheduling for a decade but wasn't there either Oct. 21 or Nov. 18, to explain the snafu. Nulty wasn't there to take her return call so she left a voicemail. She said she hadn't received his request and asked him to resubmit it to her attention.

A minute later, she left a second message: There was "a scheduling conflict," she said, naming a Community Housing Partnership staffer who had put in a request for third Wednesdays on Oct. 21 — the day Nulty first went to the station to book for the collaborative.

"Yours was dated in November, and my supervisor says I have to honor first-come, first-served," Sgt. Black said.

Nulty contacted CHP about changing its meeting date but was told it couldn't be changed. He had to scramble to cancel the January collaborative meeting via email and then alert people that meetings have been moved to third Thursdays.

"Changing our date isn't the end of the world," Nulty concedes, but it is an

inconvenience for community members who've been scheduling the collaborative gatherings on the same day for 13 of the Collaborative's 15 years, he says. He also wondered why CHP, a nonprofit that provides housing and job training to the previously homeless, needed the room as its office is just two blocks away.

CHP staffer Garrett Collins told The Extra that the agency booked the station room for monthly "nonviolence training" sessions for CHP clients. Asked if the meetings are open to the public: "No," Collins said, an apparent violation of police station rules.

When The Extra first phoned Black about the collaborative being bumped from its longtime slot, she reiterated what she'd told Nulty. A week later, this reporter left her a message asking why the community room was being used for a private gathering, but she didn't call back.

CAPTAIN'S OPAQUE DENIAL

Instead, Capt. Ewin rang us, a call we missed, followed by an unsuccessful round of telephone tag. Finally, in response to our email to police commissioners about the room possibly being misused, Capt. Ewin responded by email:

"All meetings that go on in Tenderloin Stations Community Room are open to the public. We will reach out to all of those individuals that use our space regularly and again point out that All users of the space shall have the meetings open to the public as required and indicated on the sign-up sheet. Thank you for your time."

We asked for clarification: Did her "reach out" to CHP generate any changes?

"We took care of the issue and it is resolved," she answered. "As I stated, all meetings are open to the public."

How? we wondered.

Capt. Ewin's answer: "I will not be responding in how I handled the situation other than say it is open to the public and if anyone believes otherwise we can connect them with locations where they can have a private meeting."

And we got no response to our query to CHP: Has anything changed with the meetings?

Meanwhile, the collaborative's Feb. 18 meeting was sparsely attended. On the agenda were two business relocations and a report on a neighborhood health initiative.


Pandora, a karaoke bar at 177 Eddy for seven years, is moving to 50 Mason. Attorney Mark Rennie, Pandora's entrepreneur, and Jeff Ng, its manager, told the group they're "being evicted" from their current location and have applied to move their liquor license for wine, beer and spirits to the new spot. Rennie said 50 Mason has an existing license, but it doesn't include spirits.

"We attract good people," said Ng. "Mark Zuckerberg is a regular."

Another relocation in the works is St. James Infirmary. The occupational health and safety clinic for sex workers and their families has to leave 1372 Mission, near 10th Street, where it's been for 14 of its 17 years, explained Stephany Ashley, executive director. The building has been sold and is being razed. St. James, which gets about 5,000 visits a year from clients, already has signed a sublease through the Department of Public Health for 234 Eddy, a now-vacant former clinic on the ground floor of the Windsor Hotel next to Boeddeker Park. DPH holds the master lease on the entire building.

Last on the agenda was a presentation by Abbie Yant, vice president for mission, advocacy and community health at Saint Francis Memorial Hospital. She summarized the work of Saint Francis Foundation's Tenderloin Health Improvement Partnership, a 2-year-old effort that coordinates neighborhood health data and makes significant grants — it funded \$1 million for TL health initiatives in 2015 and is committed to the same this year. "Seeding Change" is TenderloinHIP's 2015 report about its work. For copies, contact Yant: abbie.yant@dignityhealth.org.

The next Tenderloin Futures Collaborative meeting is at the Police Station, 301 Eddy, Thursday, March 17, 11 a.m. ■



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Tenderloin roots for single dad, son

▶ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Byers spends his days doing errands, going to medical appointments — he sees four doctors — walking around the TL or plopping down to watch old movies. He's a John Wayne fan. Jason worries that if his dad's not careful he'll become isolated. Byers is personable, but doesn't have close friends. His overriding priority as an inveterate "go-getter" is making his and his son's life work.

Having once worked in a grocery, Byers is a good shopper who knows deals. He'll take a bus to Lee's Meats on Haight Street because of the specials and he regularly shops at Foods Co. He was there recently, pushing his wire shopping cart after paying for his groceries, when the voices told him to leave everything and go outside, so he did. Suddenly, he snapped out of it and hurried back inside only to find his cart gone.

"That was \$50 (lost) right there," he says. "They (voices) are always there. It's freaky. But you have to ignore it."

Despite being at the federal poverty level and skimping with his limited funds, Byers shuns the weekly food bank supplies in the Curran Community Room. "I don't need it," he says. "I leave to others."

As socially polite as he and Jason are, they haven't yet built neighborly relationships in the building. Byers admits he wants "companionship," and adds, "Maybe I should join something." He hasn't forged a network like his son has as a senior at Mission High School.

"To be honest, I don't know a half a dozen people here," Jason says, as he sits in the lobby one weekend. But he acknowledges with a timid smile he's noticed the good-looking teenage girls who live here. "The neighbors leave you alone here," he says, "But every time you see them they say hello."

Jason is 6 feet tall, 129 pounds, pale, and wears the de rigueur backward baseball cap over stringy brown hair that falls below his shoulders. His peaceful face and modest smile make him appear shy but he's always forthcoming. At Mission High, he's making making A's and B's with one C in economics. He turns 19 this month and will graduate in May. This interlude is a soaring blip on his screen of life.

BAND THE LOVE OF JASON'S LIFE

"School is great," he says, having apparently won his tussle with attention deficit disorder. Beginning band is the love of his life and practicing music with his friends. He cherishes blues, rock, heavy metal, Black Sabbath, the Grateful Dead, and has an urge to write songs. "Did you know Carlos Santana went to Mission?" Jason played "Stand By Me" on his bass guitar in a school concert and says he's more than ready for advanced band. But with graduation looming, he's eager to study music at City College. "It's not that expensive."

His English class is reading "Siddhartha," "about a man trying to find the meaning of life." Not Jason. "For me, right now, it's about music. And being with my friends. That's everything to me."

Before San Francisco, the peripatetic travels of Jason and his dad landed the youngster in schools in Kentucky, Florida, Texas, Ohio, Tennessee and, finally in 2011, California.

"When I first came here (as a freshman) I was an outsider," Jason recalls. "I made friends with the ones who didn't have friends. That's how we get the connection. Music and skateboarding came into it."

Skateboarding has allowed him "to learn the city," from Sunnydale to Forest Hill Station to the ocean, preferring cruising to doing tricks at the skateboard park on Division Street, but never solo, always with a buddy or two.

"Back East it was just black people and white people. But here it's different. My best friends are black, Mexican and Filipino, skaters or musicians I met at school. You learn a lot of different things.

"I'm just glad we've settled now."

The first entry of the father-son tale is when Byers went off to work after high school in a Corbin, Ky., chain saw factory. He had no money for college. At work, a box of metal parts fell and "rearranged the seven vertebrae in my neck." His settlement went as fast as a young man could spend it. But nerve damage has worsened over the years. Now he has tremors in his right arm and leg.

The company folded and he joined the Navy. After a year, another piece of bad luck. He fell down a flight of metal stairs on a ship and shattered his left knee. An operation didn't fix it right. The Navy discharged him anyway — with no compensation. Byers' father filed the disability request for him, but the Navy denied it. The leg hurts constantly, worse in bad weather, but Byers won't touch either the cane or the walker he's been given. "It makes me feel old," he says.

He went back to Corbin, got a job pumping gas at a truck stop and fell in love with the clerk at the convenience store. They married. Their child was still-born and soon after his wife left him for another man. Deeply depressed, he pushed on and got an office job with IBM.

GOES WHERE GRASS IS GREENER

Next, he went off to Cincinnati where he heard there was work. It was to be his pattern. When job security was tentative, and fellow workers talked about ripe jobs in other states, he went after them. Sometimes it was a bum steer and he was worse off for the effort.

In Cincinnati he went homeless, the first of four times. He calls it "Cincinnati." Then, word was there was work back in Kentucky. He returned and married again in 1996. Jason was born in 1997. But he says his wife told him she married him "to get out of an apartment living with her mother." They divorced in 1998, after she left for another man. Jason never sees his mother.

"She never tried to contact us," Byers says. "Her loss, my gain."

"Yes, I missed having a mother, another weird topic," Jason says sitting in the lobby. "Oh yeah, I can joke about it. Why isn't she in the picture, too? I know where she lives — somewhere in Florida." Sometimes he wonders what she'd think of him playing music, having lots of friends, and graduating.

Byers and Jason traipsed around Ohio, Kentucky, Florida and Texas, following job leads and looking for decent child support programs. In 2001 they left Kentucky for Florida where Byers heard child support was better. It wasn't. His job there at a McDonald's paid \$5.15 an hour.

They went back to Cincinnati, hoping to find a winning combination.

"Very challenging, carrying all the bags and keeping track of a young child," Byers says.

In Cincinnati he wed for the third time, a woman he met at church. She already had a son a little younger than Jason. Then Byers' daughter, Grace, was born. This marriage lasted eight years, until the wife left him for "a state trooper." Byers says the divorce decree accused him of "abandonment" and banned him from seeing his daughter. He carries a charming picture of her in his wallet.

All this finally became too much. So father and son headed to San Diego, a familiar place to Byers. "I knew the weather from the Navy." Yet, in another of his grabs at hearsay, they pushed on to San Francisco.

"You always hear about the freedom



PHOTO: UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

Meme of the past: a prophecy about fatherhood rendered in a Victorian era anti-suffrage postcard.

The big picture

RON BYERS is part of "The Rise of Single Dad," as Atlantic magazine characterized the trend in 2014: 8% of American families in 2011 were headed by a single father with minor children compared with 1% in 1960.

There's a "growing acceptance of fathers as primary caregivers," the article says.

Well, yes and no. Acceptance is spotty, as Byers found on his travels. Such stereotyping dates at least to the opposition to the long campaign for women's suffrage when the opposition sometimes comically depicted a win as an emasculating role reversal for men.

A popular 1909 cartoon card showed a bewildered, at-home dad in an apron as Suffragette Madonna, feeding a baby.

The deadbeat dad image haunts the horizon, too. Fathers owe \$111 billion in unpaid child support, according to the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement, as quoted in the Atlantic.

Moreover, they've often racked up "tens of thousands of dollars in debt," but then most make less than \$10,000 a year and can't pay.

Byers, who never had a custody battle for his son, seems exceptional in the national picture as a poverty-level dad. He cleared up his debts and satisfied all requirements to get permanent housing.

— Tom Carter

here," Byers says, "and I wanted better medical treatment. I didn't ever try to find housing, though. I was so broke up after the divorce." They stayed in shelters and Jason started at Mission High School, his life a confusing pattern about to be jolted again.

"I had to go back to Cincinnati for a hearing on my disability," Byers says. "The judge wouldn't accept a video conference." Byers' brother, a retired truck driver, loaned bus fare for him and Jason, who was taken out of school because there was no place for him to stay.

"It hurt his (high school) credit," Byers says. "It's been hard on him. He's probably been to 20 schools. We've been all over the place."

At the hearing, the disability board offered him two jobs: a movie ticket usher, the other watching a security monitor. But it turned out those jobs weren't available, and he couldn't pass the physical for others. The trip was a bust.

Nearly penniless, they turned around and set off for California — hitchhiking.

"I figure we went 2,500 miles and walked 400 of it," Byers says. But something good came out of the experience: "We bonded."

Hitchhiking is illegal in many states, though police generally look the other way if you keep moving. Father and son stood at freeway onramps and, seeing a youngster, families picked them up, as did single men and truckers. But they could get stuck someplace for a week or more. On the road and homeless, they slept roadside, panhandled and asked for rides.

In Terre Haute, Ind., somebody gave them both heavy London Fog coats, "a lifesaver." But in Kansas City, Mo., a place "right out of the Stone Age," Byers was hassled by the cops because someone reported "a man molesting a child by the highway." "They say it's the Show Me state, well, it's the show-me-how-to-get-out-of-here state."

NO HELP FOR SINGLE DADS

In Columbia, Mo., he was at a McDonald's asking for a ride when a woman gave him \$20 and told him to see a priest across town.

"My health was deteriorating then, but we walked the 6 miles to see him, and he said they only accepted women with children. He offered nothing else. It was pretty much get-out-of-town with him. We had to walk 6 miles back to the highway.

"So many doors have been slammed

in my face. I'm a man. And child support, ha, that's another story.

"We walked through every city in Colorado," Byers says. "We crossed creeks and saw wild animals and snakes and slept near the road about every night from mid-August to the end of October." Occasionally, someone treated them to a night at a motel where they could luxuriate taking a shower and get a good night's sleep stretched out in a bed.

It snowed on them in Colorado. To get out of it, they went to a truck stop convenience store. The lady clerk gave them hot dogs and hot chocolate and said they could spend the night inside. In the morning it stopped snowing, and they left.

Salvation Armys along the way were no help. "Battered single moms were the only ones they'd help," Byers says. But Franciscans were always helpful with food, and once got them "a fine motel for a couple of nights."

Outside Denver they got a golden ride, straight to Los Angeles. They got a little help from a church in Burbank, then hitched up to San Francisco, making a beeline for Providence Church on Third Street where they had stayed in 2011.



In retrospect, father and son put a positive spin on their odyssey.

"On the road, we had a blast," Byers says. "In Kansas City, people were amazed we were doing this. I've always taken care of my son. We really became best friends. He's very open with me."

The gutsy trip could become a sort of badge of courage for Jason, or at least tale-telling esoterica.

"It's been an adventure," he says. "But homelessness sucks, in a way. It's over now. But I could do it again, if necessary."

It comes up at times with his friends. "You hitchhiked out here?" he says they ask. "Not many of my friends have done anything like that. And I learned a lot of skills, like how to sleep on the side of the road with two blankets, don't leave your food outside — the animals get it."

S.F. DIDN'T DISSAPPOINT

San Francisco proved to be everything Byers cracked it up to be when he and Jason arrived Oct. 30, 2014: "A beautiful place, kinder, freer, easier access to medical and, if you go hungry in this town, it's your own fault."

They were at the church briefly before going to Hamilton Emergency Shelter on Golden Gate Avenue where there's a 60-day maximum stay. Byers got on a waitlist for Compass Family Services and soon he and Jason were placed in its shelter for 22 families at 626 Polk St. as a homeless dad with disabilities.

It was mandatory then to clear up any issues that could prevent him from being permanently housed, such as outstanding

Top left: Jason Byers skateboards all over town with his buddies, and occasionally works out at the skateboard park (center) built under the Central Freeway. **Top right:** Ron Byers, 18-year-old Jason's father, shops at Lee's Meats on Haight Street, buying ground beef on sale. **Above:** Jason, a student at Mission High who is enrolled in beginning band, practices his bass guitar at home in the Byers' apartment in Curran House, TNDC's family housing in the heart of the Tenderloin.

utility debts and evictions.

Compass social worker Bertie Mandelbaum first met with them Dec. 20, 2014. Byers was compliant, agreeable, a pleasure to work with, she says. And he soon paved the way to permanent housing by passing all the tests, including paying off a small past debt in the Midwest.

"This is a man who is motivated," Mandelbaum says, with permission from Byers to speak to The Extra. "Easygoing, personable and very natural. Humble. And he does not give up. We connected. I met with him 98 times."

That's at least twice more than with any of other clients in her 35 years with Compass, formerly called Travelers Aid. She's seen "five to 10" single fathers and sons in her career. "Often they were successful," she says.

Byers never missed an appointment. "Sometimes he didn't feel all that well, either. At times, he couldn't get his medications because they weren't available. Occasionally he was depressed. He did have therapy," Mandelbaum says.

She worked with him on housing, VA disability, SSDI application and his mandatory budget. She got Jason a job at Mission High in animal care for a special program. "But he got an Urban Forest job on his

own" where Jason made \$70 a day and loved the work with trees.

Byers' connection at VA Hospital, where he now sees two doctors, "was the best thing that could have happened to him," Mandelbaum says. He and a counselor filled out a new disability application that was accepted, reversing a 30-year-old rejection and bringing him \$117 a month.

NEW HOME, NEW BEGINNING

Getting three references for the TNDC requirement so he could settle into Curran House was tricky because he had moved around so much. But that, too, was accomplished and he and Jason moved in Feb. 20, 2015.

"He's a man who made a new beginning and succeeded," Mandelbaum says. When Jason turns 19 he goes off Calworks assistance, and a full-time college student, which he intends to be, can't be enrolled in General Assistance.

But Mandelbaum will be in their corner. Compass just created a new aftercare program. Once housed, needs persist for such things as clothing and transportation to, say, Veterans Hospital. Mandelbaum was put in charge of the new program. "And Ron," she says, "is my first client." ■

OBITUARIES

Robinson said.

Friends and family gathered Feb. 16 for a memorial at the Raman Hotel in SoMa, his home since 2011. Lay priest Mira Ingram of Quest4Light invited the assembled to share their memories of Mr. Patton to mark his transition from this life.

Resident Mother Jones called Mr. Patton "My Honeybun. I'm glad that he's in no more pain. He was a very good person, always off looking for a place in the sun. He'd play jazz for me and talk about cooking. Jesus has a lot of reci-

pes in heaven, so I know John's happy," Jones said.

His son spoke of Mr. Patton's unending efforts on behalf of others. "Once we were on welfare. Things were tough. Dad would go to the bay and fish all day and half the night until there was enough for us and some of our neighbors who were hurting as much as we were. In summer, Dad would organize other drivers and he convinced Laidlaw to donate use of the buses and we'd caravan 10-12 of them across the city, picking up kids at the Point, Double Rock, in the Fillmore

and go out to the county fair in Pleasanton for the whole day. He'd give you his last dollar, if you needed it."

At one time the Patton home sheltered 14 rescued greyhounds. "Mom and Dad didn't worry when they left us home alone. The dogs wouldn't let us out and they wouldn't let anyone else in, either," Robinson said.

Mel Beetle, tenant organizer at the Raman, met Mr. Patton five years ago. "There wasn't a day since that passed we didn't greet each other and smile," Beetle said. "My own father loved to fish

the Atlantic Ocean. He'd bring home galvanized tubs full of flounder, most of which he gave to our neighbors. When I learned that John did the same thing out here, our bond was sealed forever. I know John's in heaven. He got to take the express lane in. I wonder how many people have already said to him, 'I loved that fish.'"

Mr. Patton is survived by his son, John, daughters Stephanie Robinson and April Patton, 12 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. ■

— Jonathan Newman

Gentrification kills Tet Festival

▶ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

lation was "a big loss to the community. We need this festival," he said. "We should have something to showcase the community, especially Little Saigon. Every time we have the festival there's a big promotion to support and attract businesses."

Losing the festival this year, in the wake of the demise of the Vietnamese Community Center, which Nguyen said had organized the festival since 1996, was a surprise. "We didn't know about it," he said. "Otherwise we would work together, to see how we can help support them. But that's in the past already."

The Tenderloin was the beating heart of the Vietnamese refugee newcomers in the '70s and '80s, their first stop out of the old country into the new, a starring role the neighborhood no longer enjoys.

Le said that a couple of years ago, 4,000 to 5,000 Vietnamese Americans were living in the Tenderloin. The 2010 census counted 12,800 citywide, about 10% the size of San Jose's Vietnamese community. Le remembers organizing the neighborhood's first Tet Festivals in the early '90s, when they offered free tele-

phone lines for refugees to make calls to family and friends in Vietnam.

Over the years, festival guests included Leland Yee — from his time on the Board of Supervisors through his stint as state senator — and Mayors Willie Brown, Art Agnos, Frank Jordan and Gavin Newsom. There was "deep access to the political machine," Le said.

In lieu of the festival this year, VYDC and Vietnamese Family Services hosted a modest celebration on Feb. 20 from noon to 3 p.m. at 201 Turk St. that was open to the community.

There, Young presented Garden Grove Mayor Bao Nguyen as the festivities began. "I'm here to inspire you to rise up and fight for justice," he said. "And it's worth fighting for. Our parents and grandparents risked so much for us to be here. We're the survivors."

Tet is celebrated differently in San Jose, where it's held at the county fairgrounds and organizers charge \$10 admission, said Danny Nguyen, brother of Margaret Nguyen of Vietnamese Family Services. He arrived in the United States 37 years ago, at 14. There's also a free fes-

tival in San Jose's Vietnamtown, he said.

"I'm sad a little bit," he said at the Turk Street party. "I think they should have the festival, new year, for the children. We miss it. Somebody should organize it, for the children."

Mac-Quoc-Cot, speaking through an interpreter, said, "We celebrate here to make sure the kids don't forget, know which day is the New Year."

"Tet is for the kids to learn about their traditions," said Linh, another celebrant. "Without this, they will forget their culture."

"It's really about remembering the past, paying homage and bringing in prosperity and luck in the new year," Young said. "The festival is meant to highlight the values and culture of the community, a way to create visibility and embrace the community, making sure we're honoring and respecting elders, those who came before us."

When the speeches on Turk Street had finished, partygoers lined up for food. Twins Kayle and Kayla, both dressed in pink, adorably worked their way through slices of melon and plates of rice with chicken, seafood or pork. But the gathering really rocked when the games of chance came out.

Seniors and teens, with strips of raf-



MARK HEDIN

Partygoers crowd the table to play *Bau Cua* at the small gathering to celebrate the Tet lunar holiday.

file-type tickets in hand, crowded around two tables: One featured a game called Bai Cao, played with a deck of cards, the other, Bau Cua, a dice game. When it was time to go, Margaret Nguyen had her work cut out for her breaking things up. ■

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COMMUNITY CALENDAR

SPECIAL EVENTS

Asian Pacific Islander American Women Making History. March 12, 10 a.m.-12:30 p.m., Main Library, Latino/Hispanic Community Meeting Room. Games and craft activities for all ages, APIA Women Wall of Fame, display of books by and about APIA women. Info: sfpl.org.

ARTS EVENTS

Thursdays@Noon film series. groundbreaking films by women directors, Main Library, Koret Auditorium: March 3, "Craig's Wife" (Dorothy Arzner, 1936); March 10, "The Hitch-Hiker" (Ida Lupino, 1953); March 17, "Lost in Translation" (Sophia Coppola, 2003); March 24, "Big" (Penny Marshall, 1988); March 31, "The Hurt Locker" (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008). Info: sfpl.org.

Conservatory of Music free concerts. 50 Oak St. March 6, 1 p.m., Hot Air Music Festival; March 7, 8 p.m., faculty recital; March 11, 8 p.m., alumni artists; March 15, 7:30 p.m. chamber music master class; March 16, 7:30 p.m., Borromeo String Quartet; March 29, 8 p.m., faculty recital. No tickets required. Info: sfcm.edu upcoming events.

WritersCorps Live at The CJM. March 10, 6:30-7:30, Contemporary Jewish Museum, 736 Mission. Free multigenerational readings by WritersCorps elementary, middle and high school poets, teaching artists and award-winning author Chinaka Hodge. WritersCorps is a joint project of the San Francisco Arts Commission and the Public Library Info: starts-commission.org

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 Client Council. 3rd Tuesday of month, 3-5 p.m., 1380 Howard, Room 515. Consumer advisers from self-help groups and mental health consumer advocates. Public welcome. Info: 255-3695. Call ahead as meeting location may change.

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 Ligia Montano, 546-1333 x315.

Hoarding and Cluttering Support Groups. weekly meetings at various times, conducted by Mental Health Association of San Francisco, 870 Market St., Suite 928. Info: 421-2926 or mentalhealthsf.org/group-search.

Legal clinic. 4th Thursday of the month, 507 Polk St., 10 a.m.-noon. Legal help for people with psychiatric or developmental disabilities who need help with an SSA work review, sponsored by People with Disabilities Foundation. Sliding-scale fee. By appointment only: 931-3070. Info: pwdf.org.

Mental Health Board. 3rd Wednesday of the month, 6:30-8:30 p.m., City Hall, room 278. CBHS advisory committee, open to the public. Call: 255-3474.

Tenderloin Healthy Corner Store Coalition. 4th Thursday, 3 p.m., Kelly Cullen Community Building, 220 Golden Gate Ave., 2nd floor auditorium or 5th floor gym. Public invited to discuss legislation that encourages corner stores to sell fresh food and reduce tobacco and alcohol sales. Info: Jessica Estrada, jessica.healthytetail@gmail.com, 581-2483.

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 IMPROVEMENT

Alliance for a Better District 6. 2nd Tuesday of 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. 3rd Thursday of the month, 3:30 p.m., park clubhouse, Eddy and Jones. Info: 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.

Tenderloin Community Benefit District. Full board meets 3rd Monday at 5 p.m., 55 Taylor St. Info: 292-4812.

Safe Haven Project. 4th Tuesday of month, 3 p.m., 519 Ellis St. (Senator Hotel). Contact: 563-3205, x115, or centralcitysafehaven@gmail.com.

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 Thursday of month (note new day as of Feb. 2016), 11 a.m.-noon, Tenderloin Police Community Room, 301 Eddy. Presentations on issues of interest to neighborhood residents, nonprofits and businesses. Info: 820-1412.

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.



PHOTO: ANDRIA LO

Eziyah, *Sanchez Elementary student, reads from his story, "I Remember," about his grandmother in New Orleans, at the 2015 WritersCorps Live at The CJM.*

Senior & Disability Action (formerly Planning for Elders/Senior Action Network), general meeting, 2nd Thursday of month, 9 a.m.-noon, Universal Unitarian Church, 1187 Franklin St. SDA Housing Collaborative meeting, 3rd Wednesday, 1 p.m. HealthCare Action Team meeting, 2nd Wednesday, 1010 Mission St., (Bayanihan Community Center). For info about SDA's Survival School, University and computer class schedules: 546-1333, www.sdaction.org.

DISTRICT 6 SUPERVISOR

Jane Kim, chair, Public Safety and Neighborhood Services Committee, Transbay Joint Powers Authority Finance Committee and S.F. County Transportation Authority Vision Zero Committee; temporary member, Budget and Finance Committee; member, Association of Bay Area Government (ABAG)

Legislative aides: April Veneracion, Barbara Lopez and Ivy Lee. Jane.Kim@sfgov.org 554-7970

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