

Homeless treasure the chance to get clean

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the next block.

Lee is still No. 1. The toothless man is No. 4.

The milling crowd of maybe 25 is volatile, the scene, at times, chaotic with yelling and cussing. One man bursts into ragged song at the top of his lungs, then stops a shapely young volunteer headed inside and starts dancing with her. She smiles, wiggles her hips and plays along. More than a score of young volunteers go through the door between 9 a.m. and 9:30 a.m., often using their own keys. An angry woman in the crowd screams obscenities for a full minute, then walks off in a huff. Nobody pays her any attention.

Away from the group, alone at the curb, is Molly Trejo. She's leaning on a parking meter, a large black travel bag slung over her shoulder. Five feet tall with white hair that once was auburn, she has beautiful blue eyes and a ruddy face like a pretty farm girl. Her smile is radiant. But usually she's expressionless. She's 50, and a two-year shower regular. Typically, she's the only woman in the shower line.

"It's nice to have this hygiene," she says. "Helps the confidence. It really does."

Confidence?

"Confidence to be positive, and in a nice way."

Trejo lived 34 years in Seattle, 12 in Hawaii and the last four in San Francisco. She says she lives in

Hayes Valley, eats at Glide or St. Anthony's, walks several miles a day and often spends weekends strolling along the Embarcadero. She loves listening to conversations, longs to be included, but is too shy to break in, she says.

Free showers are scarce for the 2,700 homeless whom the Human Services Agency estimates sleep on the streets. Trejo's nearest other choice would be A Woman's Place, open daily at 1049 Howard between Sixth and Seventh streets. For Lee, it would be the Ozanam Center for men, 1175 Howard, weekdays only.

Jennifer Freidenbach, executive director of the Coalition on Homelessness, believes showers are "basic for hygiene." Without them there are health risks, especially foot problems and infections, to say nothing of a deterrent to employment.

"It's a human necessity," she says.

Today, Lee comes in first and Trejo follows at No. 5. She sets her bag down and begins circling the room, waiting for her name to be announced. If there's a no-show she could move up before any of the wait list's three or four names are called. But there aren't many no-shows.

When called, the person is given soap, shampoo, a towel and the bathroom key to lock the door. Bathers get a five-minute warning door knock, then a final knock.

For privacy, the drop-in center bathroom is



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Lee likes to be first in line for the shower, so he arrives 1½ hours before the 9:30 a.m. signup.

closed and only one of the three showers is used. Otherwise, the showers are never used.

"You can't use the bathroom now when a shower is being used and we want to change that," Tim Svoboda, the center's director, told The Extra. He'd like to reconfigure and give the bathroom a separate door so there's access when a shower's in use.

"There's a shortage of bathrooms and showers in the neighborhood and we'd like to expand these," he said. "I think add another door. I'd guess it would cost \$30,000 to \$40,000, and we don't have it."

The Tenderloin Community Benefit District may help with funding. Director Elaine Zamora toured the center after hearing about Youth With a Mission's showers at a Friends of Boeddeker Park meeting.

"We're waiting on a proposal from (them) for a bathroom/shower project that would allow for more staffing of their restrooms and showers, for more accessibility for people who need to use them," Zamora said in an email. "Accessibility to restrooms will help address the public urination and defecation issues in the neighborhood. That, along with the showers, brings dignity to folks, as well."

The CBD contributed \$23,500 last year to the Tenderloin's Wonderland art project and gives \$7,500 annually toward the neighborhood's Safe Haven campaign.

A new guy, a tall, friendly man with a lengthening 5 o'clock shadow, was in line among the regulars on July 23. Ed, 51, who didn't want his full name used, lived in Florida 12 years and a year in Colorado before coming to San Francisco three weeks ago. He lives in his car and heard about the YWM showers from other car-bunkers.

"This is nicer than most," Ed said. "You get 20 minutes. It's wonderful, even better than one in a gym. It's private and you don't have to worry about people stealing your stuff. San Francisco has good services, a lot better than Florida."

The only other shower he tried here was at the Fifth Street shelter. It wasn't as clean, he said.

At 9:30 a.m. everyone scurried through the door toward the things that would brighten their day. In four minutes the shower list was full. Ed was No. 2 behind Lee and when Ed was at the table he blurted, "You've got the best showers in town!"

Trejo was No. 5. ■

How much is a shower worth?

RICHARD May, 52, previously took showers for granted. Then he became homeless Feb. 3 and was suddenly without one. He went 10 days before going in desperation to the Mission Resource Center on Capp Street. He didn't know he had to make an advance reservation. But staff made an exception and squeezed him onto the free show-

er schedule.

"Afterward, I felt like I had lost weight," May said one morning at the Salvation Army's Kroc Center. "I was so happy I was singing — clean, hot water and fresh underwear! Man, alive."

Now he showers regularly at the Kroc center on Turk Street, having landed a low-income scholarship, good for six months and renewable. He pays 25% of the \$20 monthly adult membership fee — \$5. It gives him run of the place, including pool, gym, fitness room, locker room and showers.

A shower, according to TNDC, is also worth from about \$70 a month to \$240. At TNDC's Dalt Hotel, for example, residents pay \$596 monthly with shower compared with \$526 without, and at the West, \$472 versus \$537.

When TNDC's renovated, eight-story Civic Center Residence at 44 McAllister St. advertised its rooms — \$435 no-shower to \$675 with — Michael Wise, 61, went for the shower.

"Very consistent hot water, too," said Wise, standing next to his shower in his SRO "sanctuary." It's the first time in 26 years Wise has been on his own. In residential care, he always had roommates. "Board and care showers weren't as consistent."

The Civic Center rooms aren't all the same size. Wise has a larger, nicely located room, and the \$240 difference reflects more than just the shower. There's one room with a shower renting for \$625.

But with no guide to follow, the pricing is arbitrary. "Who's to say if we're selling them exactly right," TNDC Executive Director Don Falk said in an email.

The renovation trend is to install showers in some if not all SRO rooms. For decades, the hotels have had communal showers, usually at the end of a floor, and some old SROs remain that way. ■

— TOM CARTER



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Michael Wise shows off the shower in his newly renovated room in TNDC's Civic Center Residence, a luxury for which he's willing to pay \$240 a month.



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