

# Its SRO residents

## True stories from the DISH party

### DONNA FOWLER, 54

**S**he came to the Empress Hotel on Eddy Street eight years ago, after unsuccessful attempts to beat alcoholism and depression. Her 22-year marriage ended in 2002 and court orders severely limited access to her two teenage sons. She had no money and no job, but found a place to live in a faith-based recovery program in San Jose. It didn't work.

She returned to San Francisco, living outside during the day, using shelters at night. "I thought I'd do the hippie thing," she says. "You know, live outside, be free." But she didn't find a welcoming community in Golden Gate Park.

"I was scared, scared of being beaten, robbed, raped. I kept to myself," she remembers. When the winter rains came, she couldn't keep warm and dry. She



PHOTOS BY JONATHAN NEWMAN

**Donna Fowler**

volunteered at Coalition on Homelessness, initially as a way to cagde a few hours indoors away from the cold and damp. It was her first exposure to homeless services in the city and the first time she listened to some-

one's advice.

"When I was working at the Coalition, they saw I wasn't acting right. They said I could get help and I guess I was tired and scared enough to listen," she says.

Donna accepted a referral to Conard House and began therapy at the city's South of Market Mental Health Services. She got the proper diagnosis and eventually the right medications for her obsessive-compulsive disorder and manic depression. She learned that she qualified for Social Security disability benefits from her work 20 years earlier with the Theatrical Employees Union and she qualified for supportive housing.

"I'm safe here. I live in a clean and quiet unit. There are nurses on duty who help me with my medication and para-transit," she says. She hasn't yet seen her now-adult sons, but has stopped drinking.

### ROY IS 63

**H**e lives at the Pacific Bay Inn Hotel on Jones Street. "I get good help. These people know things. They're like my family," he says of the house staff and support personnel.

Roy came to the city from Chicago in 1973, already addicted to heroin and a cocaine user as well. Still, he managed with his wife to cobble a place to live and to find work in the shipyards, roofing and construction trades. "I wanted to change my lifestyle then, and I did for a while, but it didn't last," he says.

Roy turned to selling drugs. His wife became ill and returned to her family in Washington, D.C.,

where she died. Roy was homeless and selling and using drugs. "I'd hustle, stay in abandoned buildings, flop with friends when I could," he says. He got nabbed, charged with heavy possession, convicted and sentenced to San Quentin. In time the correctional system transferred him to Tracy. After five years he was released to San Francisco county.

Referred to Walden House, he sought stable housing through the city. "I learned to take responsibility for myself, to start choosing better things," he says. "Street life destroyed my family and it destroys other families, too."

Sometimes, Roy thinks of returning to Chicago's South Side where his brother lives. "There's a community there. I never saw anybody eating out of a garbage can in Chicago."

### 44-YEAR-OLD JOSHUA H.

**H**e has lived at the Star Hotel for six months, after a lengthy stint on the street. "I'd sleep in the shelters, take my meal-a-day at the free places and drink. I'd panhandle, scavenge cans and bottles, enough for the booze. I was self-medicating, but I didn't know it."

Before homelessness, Joshua, born in the city and raised in Sonoma County, worked construction, owned a commercial fishing boat and a home. When he and his partner split, the legal bills in the ensuing property dis-

pute mounted. The custody battle for his 8-year-old son overwhelmed him and he fled to the street.

"I couldn't see my son. The only place I had was the playground, and that wasn't good enough — not right for the boy," he says. Eight years later, a street brawl over alcohol left him with multiple stab wounds; he spent a long recovery at S.F. General, where he was eventually diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

He has a case worker now at the Star Hotel and he takes his medications regularly. He has stopped drinking, but he's ashamed to be eating his meals at St. Anthony's and Glide. "Too



**Joshua H.**

much like the street days. All I want now is a job," he says.

### SHE'S 43 YEARS OLD

**S**he doesn't want her name used. "You can call me Margaret," she says. She once worked in banking in the international offices of a global corporation in Hong Kong and Japan, but lost her job in 2008 when the economy tanked. She returned to the city, found odd jobs and parttime work. Then she contracted MRSA, a rare staph infection that can mutate to resist antibiotic treatments.

"Thank God for Healthy S.F. It got me through," she says, referring to the city's mandated private employer health insurance. Still, the disease ravaged her health and her small savings. She spent months at S.F. General and lost her apart-

ment. When deemed well, she was discharged with a voucher for extended stay at Lutheran Services' women's shelter, but the infection returned and back she went to General.

Margaret has lived at Pacific Bay Inn Hotel for three months. Her case manager monitors her Social Security disability income and Margaret is growing adept with her wheelchair, a necessity to offset weakness of her back and legs from her serious infection. On weekends she works with cats and kittens at the city's Animal Care and Control. "I love them," she says. "I don't trust people who don't like animals." She drops her voice. "If there's one thing I could change about DISH, it's their no-pets policy."

— Jonathan Newman

## Press Club honors Central City Extra

BY CENTRAL CITY EXTRA STAFF

**T**HE SAN FRANCISCO Peninsula Press Club recognized The Extra's contribution to local journalism, with three awards in its annual media contest.

The 198 awards presented at the May 19 event went to print and online journalists, radio and TV personnel and PR professionals in 11 counties around the Bay Area. The Extra's awards were in the nondaily newspaper category.

Tom Carter, The Extra's community reporter, took home second place in the Series category for his four-parter on the neighborhood's efforts to install free toilets. The stories appeared in the February, June, July and November 2011 issues.

Our ongoing coverage of this social concern that is peculiar to the Tenderloin continues on Page One with Carter's update on the collaboration between the S.F. Rescue Mission and the Tenderloin CBD.

Extra Publisher and Editor Geoff Link took home third place for his headline for Carter's June 2011 story about the TL CBD's three-month pilot program: "Free toilet cost over \$5 a flush."

Senior Writer Marjorie Beggs' March 2011 "Internet Limbo" story about the growth of computer training and Internet access in the Tenderloin won second place in the Business/Technology category.

In the face of the tech explosion south of Market, income continues to be a factor in the digital divide represented literally by Market Street, despite Twitter, Zynga, Zendesk and others moving to the boulevard boundary but not across it.

"It's gratifying to be honored by our professional peers for our coverage of the Tenderloin," Link said. "It helps keep a spotlight on the neighborhood and its concerns."

Central City Extra in October received the Society of Professional Journalists Northern California Chapter's 2011 award for Community News among nondailies. The Extra competed with newspapers from Sacramento to Salinas, including the Bay Guardian, SF Weekly and the San Francisco Examiner.

