

City again comes to fire victims' aid

PHOTO: TOM CARTER

14 more days of housing vouchers

by Tom Carter

Two hundred survivors of the June 2 Baldwin House Hotel fire on Sixth Street, some of them no strangers to such fiery trauma, were shunted to 32 other downtown SRO hotels after the Baldwin was shut down. Frequently there are fires along Sixth Street, so several had experienced SRO fires before.

The survivors are using the city's voucher system. The Department of Human Services finds fire victims other hotel rooms — "the cheapest DHS can find," according to the SRO Collaborative's Sam Dodge. Survivors then pay the same rent they were paying when they were burned out, and the city makes up any difference.

After several extensions, the Baldwin vouchers were due to run out July 31. But the hotel renovation wasn't scheduled to be done until mid-August, and the city was playing hardball.

"July 29 they said they wouldn't give the fire victims any more help," Dodge says. "We called the Redevelopment Agency — they control the vouchers and are very tight-fisted — and DHS and the mayor, who has the final say-so. And we went to see the supervisors."

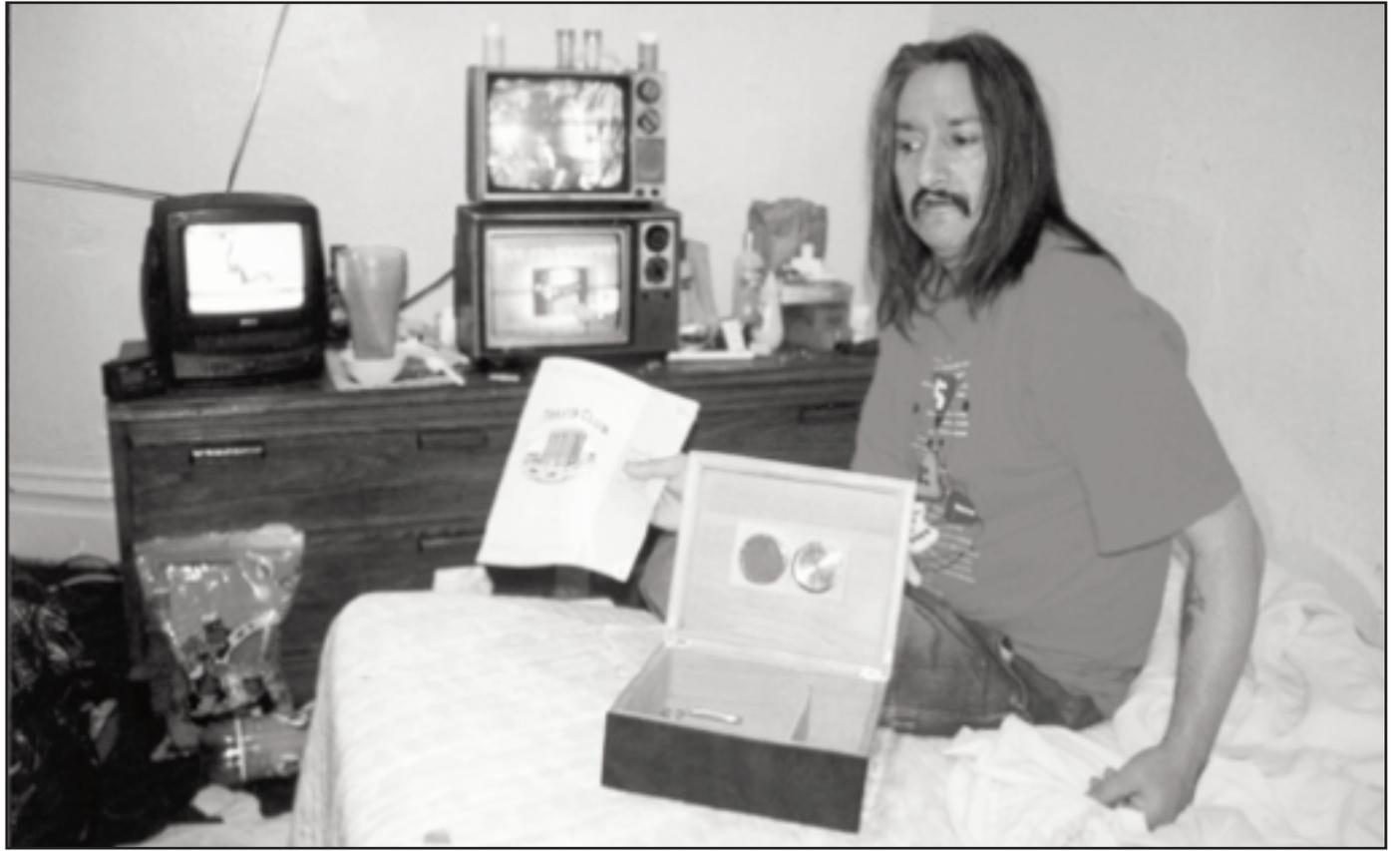
On July 31, the SRO Collaborative hit pay dirt. "Tom Ammiano came through like gangbusters for us," Dodge says. "While we stood there with a bunch of Baldwin tenants he called Redevelopment, DHS and the mayor."

July 31 the city extended the vouchers until Aug. 14. The Baldwin was scheduled for a walk-through Aug. 6. Final inspection should be complete a week later, Aug. 13. Too close for comfort, Dodge says.

There were no fatalities in the Baldwin House fire, yet the trauma is so great among the tenants that all are survivors of what amounts to a disaster when your resources are so meager. Mark Ocken has a special distinction. You could say he is a triple survivor, a lucky guy. The Baldwin was No.3. He was burned out of the Minna Lee last year and the Alder before that.

"It was maybe five days after the Baldwin fire, after our interviews," Ocken says sitting in his new room, "and they sent 10 of us down to that hotel on Sixth Street, name starts with an A, you know just down from Fred's."

"But there were only five rooms. So five of us came back. The unlucky five stayed and the hotel burned right after that." He pauses. "I am sur-



Mark Ocken in his temporary digs: Baldwin House blaze was the latest chapter in this lucky man's novel life.

prised it didn't burn up earlier. The place gave me the creeps."

The Alder was the hotel. It caught fire on June 7 at 10:42 p.m. and was under control 25 minutes later, according to Fire Department records. Only a couple of rooms were lost and the hotel didn't close. Two people were hospitalized. The Red Cross helped 10 others relocate.

After the Baldwin fire, Ocken was sent to the Allen Hotel at 1657 Market. The dingy gray sidewalk entryway downstairs that leads up to a metal-gated second story is a contrast to the bright, outdoor Delessio Cafe next to it. On the second floor, Ocken, 52, is sitting in the middle of his unkempt, low-slung queen-size bed that dominates the room. With his long scraggly hair, drooping mustache and red T-shirt, he looks like a hippie.

It is 9 a.m., and Ocken has the thin red curtain pulled over the window in the corner and the lights are off. Paula, who shares his bed, is off distributing flyers to make a buck.

The room is illuminated by three small flickering television sets stacked on a tiny dresser. They blare with different stations, cartoons leading the jumbled charge. In one dresser drawer is Ocken's diminished cigar box collection, his hobby in life.

The 12-by-12-foot room is better than a cell. It has a small sink on one wall and a cracked, 18-by-20-inch mirror above it, no chairs. The walls are white and clean and stark. Rumpled clothes and dirty paper plates litter the floor, leaving hardly room to walk. Ocken says the hotel charges \$850 a month for the room.

"The night of the Baldwin fire some woman was yelling,

"This is real! This is no joke!" Ocken recalls. "She went around pounding on doors. I smelled smoke and opened my door. It was like fog, man. I mean three, four feet high, thick. I looked up the hall and at the end flames were shooting up.

"The firemen were coming up the back stairs. They said, 'Leave your room! Leave your room!' Well, I did. They kicked the door in anyway."

Ocken smiles at the grim irony of runaway destruction. It's the first time he has smiled during an interview that becomes a series of poignant vignettes. He has a noble way of telling a story, though. With his eyes wide, he easily spins a story thread until he stumbles on a date or a name, or sequence. He won't push on until he tries hard to get it right. But when memory fails, he can let go with no regret.

SRO hotel fires are devastating. And they have hit hard that condensed area of Sixth Street below Market. People on government assistance and other low-income residents are not only uprooted, they are often dispossessed and have to start all over. The fires, usually caused by hot plates, smoking in bed or carelessness with trash and garbage, are a major cause of homelessness.

"I lost everything in the Baldwin," he says. "Lost my antique cigar box collection. Some of 'em were worth a couple hundred."

He started smoking cigars five years ago, he says. In a drawer he keeps a fancy wood humidifier. It has a little metal compartment in the lid that's dry and needs a half cup of water if it is to enrich any classy smokes Ocken can scare up when he's got money to burn. It won't

be soon.

Ocken gets \$829 a month from SSI. The Baldwin rent was \$650.

It took him years to get on SSI.

"A worker helped me get it," he says. He studies the wall. "In 1988, I believe. It should have been retroactive, but it wasn't. They owed me \$42,000."

He lets it go.

It's hard to say when Ocken's tailspin in life started. He was born in San Francisco and went to Lincoln and Polytechnic high schools. His longest stretch of work was in the 1970s. He was a barker on Broadway for all the topless joints at one time or another except the Chi Chi and the Bagdad. He says he rose to manager of the Condor in the Carol Doda-Davey Rosenberg days. He has the details.

He doesn't volunteer the story about his wife, but when she's mentioned, questions bring it out. She was Elizabeth Hon Young, he says. She'd be 53 now.

"I met her when I was working on Broadway in '73," he says. "No, excuse me, '72. It was Paula I met in '73. She worked on Broadway, too."

They all lived together at Paula's place at 16th and Guerrero for a while. Elizabeth was murdered in 1974. She and Paula took a trip to a little town near Reno and some guy they knew there threatened to kill them. Paula came back and Elizabeth didn't. The guy killed her and buried her in the desert and Ocken told the police and they did nothing. That's the story.

Ocken was working double shifts on Broadway when he had a brain aneurysm that put him in the hospital for a while. It was a bad year. He got nailed for a liquor store robbery he says

he didn't do. He did a year and a half. He says a guy in jail confessed to him that he had done it.

He lets it go.

In 1980, he had throat surgery.

"All that yelling and screaming, man, I had lymph nodes the size of grapes," he says. "When I came back I couldn't talk for six months. I told them they could have my manager job."

Then his father died, then his mother. He had a nervous breakdown and he developed seizure disorders that afflict him still. He has had as many as five a day, shaky hands, trembling body, great weakness. He had one the day before, but it was the first in a month, he says. Twenty-four hours of rest usually gets him out of it.

In 1999, Ocken was living with Paula at the Baldwin, small room, tiny bed, \$550. The manager across the street at the Minna Lee promised him a bigger room, larger bed, at \$525.

"Hey, a bigger room is a lot nicer," Ocken's eyes shine. "And less money. And the bigger bed."

The Minna Lee caught fire in January 2001.

"Some guy who knew Paula yelled up from the street. We kept the window open for fresh air. I ran downstairs and told them to call the Fire Department. You could smell it everywhere. We went outside. Firemen took an hour and a half to put it out. At the Baldwin it was an hour, maybe less. Yeah, 45 minutes."

It looks like Ocken will soon be back in the Baldwin. Maybe he and the other returnees can continue to stay one quick step ahead of the fires that seem inevitable along the city's Fire Alley that is Sixth Street. ■