



WEEKLY

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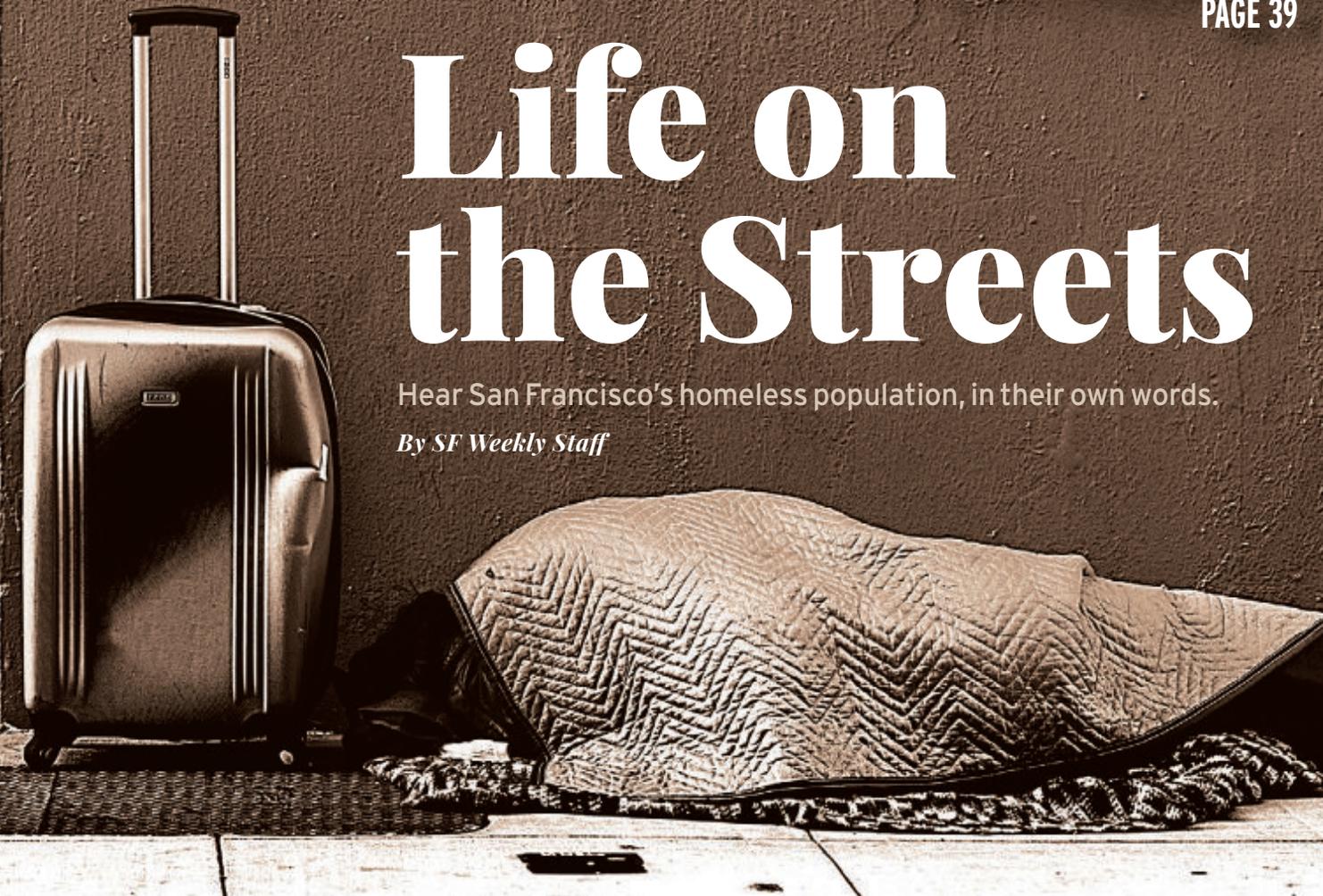
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# Life on the Streets

Hear San Francisco's homeless population, in their own words.

*By SF Weekly Staff*





## Erin

**Age: 21**  
**Hometown: California**  
**Homeless 11 months**  
**Location: Civic Center**

I'm from a little town in Marin called Novato. It's not as high class there as people would think. I was a military brat. My father was in the Coast Guard, so we moved around a lot. When we came back here, like three years ago, I found this man, we found each other actually, and we thought we were soulmates. Nothing could ever tear us apart. We decided to move to New York together, which is where he was from. I lived there for a year and half, doing my thing, enjoying life. I partied a lot but I worked a lot, too. I lost a lot of jobs. I worked at this sports bar on Long Island for about six months. I was a hostess. They had like 55 TVs there. And two bars. It was the second or third busiest restaurant on Long Island. It was nice. But me and the guy broke up, which

was hard. It was like this part of me was suddenly gone, and I kind of lost myself for a while. I went out to Seattle to get clean. I had a really good job at Red Lobster that paid \$10 an hour just for opening and closing doors, and greeting people when they came in. It was a good time. I had my shit together then.

At the same time, I had just got out of that relationship, which lasted three years, and I couldn't get a grasp on taking care of myself. It was like part of me disappeared and I kept looking for it. I went back to my immature ways. I felt a sense of freedom, and I wanted to party.

Ever since November 2014 I've been homeless off and on. Couch surfing. I've been in San Francisco about a month. The weather couldn't be better here. Definitely better than Seattle. Being homeless in the rain isn't much fun. But the wind and fog here can sure mess up your day.

I haven't made any friends yet. I found a roadside buddy, but I keep losing him. He's like my boyfriend — I don't even know what to call him. I'm

very socially awkward. It's hard for me to talk to people. I rely on my buddy to make money. We panhandle or find little knickknacks on the street to bargain with. Like, "Hey, can I trade this bag of food I found for your soaps and razors?"

I've never been so grateful for those times in my life when I had a roof over my head or food in my stomach or a family who loved me and never gave up on me. But I got to the point where me and my family just didn't see eye to eye. We're different. They don't understand why I'm out here or why I live the way I do. So I distance myself from them. At the same time, I try to stay in touch. But it's hard because my bag got stolen and I don't have a cell phone right now. They know I'm here though. I have this feeling inside where I know they're sending their thoughts and prayers. And that's a good feeling, but it makes me sad, too.

Throughout my experiences I've grown a lot stronger. I've found out what my strengths and weaknesses are. Mainly my weaknesses. I couldn't be more thankful though.



## Tommy

**Age: 53**  
**Hometown: South Bend, Indiana**  
**Homeless off and on 26 years**

## Doreen

**Age: 46**  
**Hometown: Illinois**  
**Homeless four months**  
**Location: Rainbow Grocery,**

**Tommy:** We're married. We met on a corner.

**Doreen:** Hyde and Golden Gate.

**T:** I was just rolling by on my wheelchair and I saw her standing there. And I asked her, because I smoke a lot of weed, I asked her if she wanted to party.

She said yes. And I'm a chef — or I used to be — so I started fixing her a lot of meals. And here she is right now.

We used to stay at the Harlan Hotel. That's at Geary and Larkin. We were there for five or six years and then we got into a little problem with each other. The hotel tricked her into signing a restraining order against me and they put her in another hotel. But then she couldn't pay her rent, and so she had to go homeless.

**D:** I was a caregiver. I was paying rent. But all my clients were in the [first] hotel. I was 86ed. And they knew that, so when they kicked me out, that was all of my income.

**T:** I have a room. But I sleep out here with her. My place is full of bed bugs. I haven't slept there in like two months.

We stay up on Van Ness between Geary and O'Farrell. We just run up on it one night, and the police don't bother us. We sleep in a doorway.

**D:** There's a partial roof so the wind don't get us.

**T:** We usually try to get to bed before 11 p.m. That way we get up, we have to get up by 7 a.m. because we're in a doorway. The stores open and we have to move along.

We're trying to get affordable housing. We're on a list, so we can get inside and be together.

Every day we go to St. Anthony's and Glide to get something to eat. We sell Street Sheets out here, it's like our survival thing.

Street Sheets, like today, we've been out here since 9:30 this morning [it was 4 p.m. at that time]. She only made \$13. And I made \$10. Six and a half hours.

**D:** Some days it's a little more. Some days, it's even less than that.

**T:** I panhandle all the time. She can't do it. Panhandling, people think it's easy. It's not easy. I've been Tazed, I've been spit on. People have even tried to grab me and wrestle me to the ground.

And I'm in a wheelchair! But I can handle it. If someone does that to her, I'll just go berserk. So it's best if I do it.

Here at Rainbow, all the workers know us. They don't bother us as long as we don't go on the property. They even let me charge up my chair sometimes.

I got a night spot if this spot don't work out. I can go to Mason and Geary, or Sutter and Powell, at that Walgreen's. There's more people there, and it all depends what you're asking for. And you have to mean what you're asking for. If you're hungry for food, you ask for a meal. I have to be sincere in how I'm asking.

I tell them, I don't drink or do drugs. I'm just out here trying to get something to eat like everyone else. And sometimes they laugh. And that's not funny. And I gotta hold back.

We even give other panhandlers some money when we have it. If we give extra food, we pass it onto them.

**D:** It's like a union, sort of. Everyone looks out for each other.

I've been homeless before. I was homeless in Illinois. I lost my job and I was on unemployment. I asked my landlord if I could get extra time, but the unemployment check came the week after my rent was due. So I had to go outside.

Now, it's harder. It's harder when you've been inside before.

**T:** And when you get older.

I got a son here. I don't really do shelters. I don't ask him for much because his life is his life. But we do go over there to take showers. He's on Turk Street. I got two sons, they live in the same building. Three sons, actually.

I don't really ask them for anything. When they were younger, I didn't really ask them for anything. I've always been a loner-type person.

My family's poor. They don't get much. The thing of it is, I'm not going to lean on them. Even if they wanted to help me I wouldn't let them. They don't really have the money to help me. » p16

# Life on the Streets

Hear San Francisco's homeless population, in their own words.

By SF Weekly Staff

## San Franciscans are experts in homelessness.

We step over homeless people, over their belongings, over their shit just to get to work. We know exactly why people are on the streets, we tell each other. They're mentally ill. They're addicted to drugs. They made bad choices.

But unless we have been outside ourselves, we have no idea.

Officially, there are 6,800 homeless people in San Francisco. That figure doesn't include people sleeping in cars, motel rooms, or on friends' couches. It also misses some of the 2,100 homeless children in San Francisco public schools whose concern for school-work competes with the worry about whether they will have a shelter bed that night.

Homelessness in San Francisco has proven to be remarkably stubborn. There has been little change in the statistics over the past decade, despite the steady flow of press releases from City Hall about the latest innovation — supportive housing for veterans, the Navigation Center, a new app — meant to assuage one of American capitalism's most intractable social ills.

Much has been written about how to "solve" the "problem" of homelessness. Mayor Ed Lee's dictum that the homeless will have to "go" by the Super Bowl has injected anxiety into the lives of people on the street and urgency into the task of finding that elusive solution.

For once, we wanted to let this "problem" be what it is — people — and we wanted to let some of those people do the talking.

What follows are testaments to living on the streets of one of the richest and most expensive cities in the world. We do not offer any solutions, opinions, or expert critiques. Given the choice of talking or listening, we decided to listen.

In this issue, we give space to people society has failed, and hope you will listen to them too, and see them for what they are.

People. People who, at some time, perhaps not too long ago, were just like you: safe inside.

## Anne Marie

**Age: 47**  
**Hometown: North Carolina**  
**Homeless four months**  
**Location: Highway 101 underpass**

I've been homeless almost five months. We were living on 68 6th Street. It's called the Shree Ganeshai Hotel. The manger there is a thief. He's a liar. He had everybody that we cared about 86ed. He came in our room after we'd been there four months, and we'd been paying him not only on time, we'd been paying him a day early. And then we missed one week's rent, and he came in our room and took everything we owned and threw it in huge garbage bags and threw it down three flights of stairs.

We found this little box. We were living in that box until we got this tent about two weeks ago. It's just a little box. We walked up on it. It was there; it was empty; it had hardwood floors. I think we gave a guy \$80 for it.

I pee in a bucket and I go to the bathroom at McDonalds. [My boyfriend] goes to CalTrain. Where do we shower? We don't. I washed my hair here yesterday. It took a lot of water. We use too much water as Americans. I wake up now and my face is swollen. And my

eyes are swollen. It feels like the warrant ran out on me and my body.

I got here in '89. January 13th. I didn't want to wake up one day and be 50 years old and still be wondering, you know. I came out here and became a stripper. There was lots of money. Then I got involved in the counterculture, and I haven't done anything. I've sold drugs, and I've stripped. Never been a prostitute. Now I hear they do sucking and fucking in strip clubs. They weren't allowed to do that back then. The guy that was the manager had a heart attack and died, and his girlfriend became the manager of the girls. She started getting rid of everybody's weekend hours. So I told her she was a power hungry bitch and asked if she'd ever read *Animal Farm*. She didn't know anything about *Animal Farm*, but she knew what bitch meant, and I was the first one on the list to be fired after that. So that was the end of my stripping career. After that I became a drug dealer. So that's about it. That's what I've done. I always managed to have money.

This city was embarrassingly easy to be in for a while. Now it's...everything has changed.

The lady at HOT Team was really honest with me. She said if I want a place to live, I need to find a vacant building.



Because if we don't do it for ourselves, who's going to do it for us?

A while ago, there was a big warehouse on Jessie Alley, and this guy James opened it up. It was so big I got lost. We had water and electricity. We had everything. We had so much space everybody had their own room. When we finally got thrown out of there two or three months later, forty-some people walked out. And the cops were like,

that's why no one has been in Civic Center. He housed like forty-some people.

We got to do that again. To get people off the street. There's way more chance of James getting people off the street than there is of Ed Lee. Ed Lee doesn't know these people, and he doesn't care about these people. And James does. We'll find a place, and we'll disappear for a little while, and you guys won't see us, and that will be a good thing.

## George

**Age: 53**  
**Hometown: Maine**  
**Homeless 18 years**  
**Location: Civic Center**

I came here from Maine. I was in the navy and went to school a couple times. Mostly I did warehouse work. A glass factory had a garage door division, so I worked there putting together kits with door panels and remote controls. After about four years, a new company bought it and shut down the garage door division. So then I cleaned carpets for a while. And then I started moving people — did that for 15 years. It was a decent living. I got paid under the table and did side jobs. On a good weekend I made \$600 or \$800 profit. I'd come out to San Francisco a couple times a year on vacation, get a motel, spend money, and have a good time.

When I became homeless, I didn't have a clue how long it'd last. It's been 18 years now. Maine was rough because in the summer there's mosquitoes and blackflies. In the winter, there's blizzards and ice storms. I stayed in shelters or crashed on friends' couches. One day I thought, "If I'm gonna be homeless, I'll go out to California." So in '96 I took a Greyhound across the country. I stayed around 2nd and Market, 1st and Market. They used to have these bridges in SoMa that I'd stay under. I didn't have any enemies there, so I must have had at least one friend.

When you first start out on the street you think it's a temporary thing, but as the years go by and you carry more stuff,

and you get older, you start to break down. I tried to keep my bedding as clean as possible. Usually someone stole it or DPW took it. Sometimes I'd get up in the morning and go to get a coffee and take a leak right around the corner, and when I'd come back all my shit would be gone. I just carry a bedroll or a backpack now. Maybe rolling luggage if I find it.

Early on I learned the BART system. I'd get on a train and ride all day, sleep on the train. Or I'd walk underground through the stations. I'd make extra money by helping people buy their ticket. I checked the machine slots for money. To tell you the truth, it's not hard if you figure out a system. There's a guy down there in BART, a friend of mine, who partners up with somebody and plays guitar, but his partner keeps dying on him. Me, I run a whole routine here with my sign: I'm fun for the whole family, I say. Or: I'm cheap, but I'm worth it. Sometimes I sell *SF Weekly*. I tell people straight up, "I got free newspapers for a dollar. You just pay shipping and handling."

I'm in a veterans' home that Swords to Plowshares got me in. Been indoors for four months now. I got a decent room with its own toilet, shower, sink, microwave. But I still come out here to kick back in the sun, not expecting much. I'm just killing the day until it's time for me to lay down again. Look, I'm homeless. I'm in public all the time. People are going to come and go. You're okay with me if you haven't stomped me in my sleep or set me on fire. Even if you wanted to do something like that you kept going, and that's a redeeming quality in my eyes. » p12

