

# Camp Boot

*Bridge squatters evicted as bulldozers raze shantytown*



A sobbing Vanessa Tisdale leaves her home in the shantytown at the foot of the Manhattan Bridge.

By Tara Shioya

STAFF WRITER

Bulldozers rolled over the Manhattan Bridge shantytown early yesterday, scooping up clothing and mattresses as residents watched their homes disappear in a crunch of plywood and metal.

Police and city outreach workers arrived to clear the remaining 15 squatters from the shantytown shortly before 7 a.m. yesterday, before the Department of Transportation began bulldozing. The 10-year-old shantytown, known as The Hill, had been home for more than 50 people.

But the first bulldozer began its work almost four hours later. The evacuation took longer than officials expected, as some residents stayed despite last Thursday's notice and last-minute offers of shelters or rehabilitation programs.

Some residents, like Vanessa Tisdale, were sobbing and almost hysterical. "You can't take me and throw me among all those clean people," yelled Tisdale, 31, who said she has tuberculosis, is HIV-positive and is seven months pregnant. "Now they want to take my own little room away."

As bulldozers rumbled nearby, police officers went to check for any remaining squatters.

A handful had already been taken to detox centers at Queens General Hospital, Bailey Seton Hospital in Staten Island or the John Heuss drop-in Center on Beaver Street, outreach workers said. Two men went to the Bellevue Men's Shelter on East 29th Street.

But yesterday morning, most of the remaining holdouts said the city's shelters offered more restrictive, more dangerous conditions. "I'd rather live on the streets," said John Johnson, 35.

Several city agencies were on hand to monitor what outreach program director Howard Salk described as "a sensitive situation." Parks enforcement officers were there "to ensure that the homeless people don't migrate toward the park," said borough supervisor Henry Lee, referring to Sara D. Roosevelt Park across the street.

Department of Transportation spokesman Joe DePlasco said the city plans to erect an 8-foot fence around the 20,000-square-foot piece of land, located beneath the bridge on the Manhattan side, until officials decide what to do with the space.

Until 1 a.m. yesterday morning, homeless advocates had been arguing for a restraining order to stop the demolition. After that was rejected, the Coalition for the Homeless reached a compromise that would allow shantytown residents a place to store belongings for one month at the Pier 76 tow-pound.

But only two residents accepted the offer. Most preferred to walk out carrying only a few belongings or left their possessions inside.

Though some local residents and merchants expressed sympathy for the squatters, most were relieved at the demolition.

"It's a good thing for the community," said Steven Polizzi, 47, who watched the demolition from across the street with his 9-year-old son. The Polizzi family lives two blocks away from the shantytown, on the Lower East Side. "When the drug dealers started moving in there, then the situation became unsafe."

## Freedom Beyond the Hill

"Slim," who is tall, rangy and wore a pair of dark shades, poured an early morning shot of Wild Irish Rose and spoke his ultimate fantasy.

"I ought to build a hut right out there by Gracie Mansion," he said, cackling, and snorted the whiskey down.

Standing on the corner of Forsyth and Canal Streets, Slim cast a scornful eye at the activity across the street. That was where cops in blue, men in yellow helmets from the Department of Transportation, and a pack of press people were attending the razing of his shantytown home.

"It's a waste of taxpayers' money, harassing homeless people," he said. "We're not in anybody's way. We've been here 10 years. Why all of a sudden now?"

Slim came to the Hill, a jumble of wooden huts and one giant tepee, four years ago, when he got down on his luck.

"I'm not the kind of person who's going to let somebody tell me where to live, what to do, what time to get up and what to eat. I'm not an institutionalizable individual. The shelter system



The Hill's shantytown meets its crushing demise yesterday.

is not for me. That's why I made my way out here."

None of the Hill people is institutionalizable. Talk to them, people with nicknames like Panama and Sammy, and they'll tell you how they tumbled out of their previous lives.

"Me and my wife couldn't get along, so I left," Panama, 49 and the father of six, told me. Then: "Me and my boss got into an argument and I left."

"I lost my apartment," Sammy said.

"Family problems."

The Hill people used to work regular jobs, and they still work at odd jobs — loading and unloading trucks in Chinatown, peddling fake designer watches, hustling soda cans, discarded furniture and old clothes. "I've got a nice watch right here for \$20," Slim said, whipping a fake Seiko out of his pocket.

But it only takes some bad luck, com-

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Sheryl McCarthy

# Finding Freedom Beyond the Hill

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bined with some messing up, to land you on the street. It takes a job to get an apartment, but to keep an apartment requires a certain adherence to rules. You have to do the same dull job every day, appease the boss, pay the rent on time, stay off the booze, be polite to the wife or husband. This can lull a truly free spirit into what feels like a coma.

To the Hill people, the rules of life were like a tight-rope, and they kept falling off. In the shantytown they could be themselves. They built their huts, furnished them with beds and tables, hitched their TVs to a cable hanging from a lamppost, and hoisted an oil drum to make "running water."

It wasn't Sutton Place, but at least nobody told you what to do.

For the most part, the Hill people didn't bother anybody, either. They kept to themselves and formed their own self-supporting community. But there were enough incidents to annoy other folks in the neighborhood and at City Hall — several fires, including one in which a Hill-dweller died, and a shootout last week. And there was some drug activity, too.

There probably weren't any more fires or shootouts or drug sales on the Hill than there were in the rest of the Lower East Side, or on the Upper West Side for that matter. But the Hill people had signed no leases, held no deeds and paid no taxes. And let's face it, if a fire broke out and caused multiple casualties, the city could be blasted to hell for not having closed it sooner.

When it comes to the homeless, City Hall stands astride the chasm between a rock and a hard place. Homeless activists, rabid with indignation, demand a home for everybody now. A few go into city government, convinced they can solve the housing problem. They can't, and go slinking off to other jobs, leaving a new generation of activists to keep on raging.

"We have been doing outreach on that site for years," Michael Kharfen of the mayor's office said of the Hill. "We've found places for more than half the people believed to be originally on the site. We have provided services to nearly 80 people from the site and around that area."

But the Hill people snort at the word "services," knowing that it means a bed in a shelter or a slot in a rehab program that makes you follow rules so you can get an apartment of your own. You can't blame them for spurning the shelters — and as for the programs, well, there's that freedom problem again.

"I don't use drugs and I don't drink," Panama told me. "If I could get an apartment at a good reasonable rent, say \$300 a month for a kitchenette, I would take it. But I haven't heard about anything like that."

The terrible fact is that in New York City, reasonably priced, clean, safe housing is like gold ore. The city tries to provide it for those who can't get it themselves; but whenever it does, it sets off a gold rush. The line of prospectors — the homeless, the ill-housed — now stretches halfway around the mountain.

So the true free spirits — like Sammy, Panama and Slim — migrate to places like the Hill. It looked sordid to some, but to them, it was home. And it was freedom.

Where would Slim sleep last night? I asked him. "To tell you the truth, I do not know," he said. "Maybe I'll ride the train all night, so when people come get on in the morning I'll be lying there with my shoes off, with my feet stinking."

He chuckled at the thought of it, and downed another shot of whiskey.