# Safe Haven Tent Community in Retrospect

ABIGAL HARMON

*This story is about a tent community that was begun in 2009 by a group of street-sleeping individuals in Champaign, Illinois. Three weeks into the tent community's existence, members of the tent community asked me to assist them in planning to meet their goals. Over the next year, I worked with members and two other advocates/organizers to achieve the group's goals, in the process forming close working and personal relationships with many of the original and later members. I write this story to document our struggles, dreams, and achievements as a group of like-minded survivalists and idealists.*

## TENT CAMPER MEETING 6/29/09

AUTHORED BY SAFE HAVEN TENT COMMUNITY MEMBER

Sitting in the Illini sun
on a Champaign afternoon
Homeless campers in a tent
as the summer blossoms bloom

where shall we sleep
in the wake of homeless blues
singing sad songs of broken hearts
in worn-out dilapidated shoes

you can have this job
with a title for your name
each with some authority
and a function for your brain

we'll divide the list of chores
among the members of the group
and when we meet and gather
we'll enjoy bread and soup

and when we are well-organized
each task allotted out
a fine machine of social change
we'll have a powerful clout!

In the spring of 2009, a small group of individuals, some coupled and some single, began camping together in the backyard of the Catholic Worker House in Champaign, IL. This act alone was not unusual. People had covertly camped in this backyard and in the one next to it (occupied only by a vacant house) for years, coming and going at night, leaving only small traces of their existence behind. What made this group different was their visibility. Refusing the bare survival of sleeping under a tarp, with water, mud and spring snows running freely into their sleep space, they began erecting tents. In the process, they laid claim to the space in its entirety, running off some individuals they perceived as "troublemakers" who they claimed "just wanted to drink and drug."

In the beginning, the tent community was comprised of 8–10 individuals, six white and two black, with some additional people staying with them for a few nights. For the most part, each individual had their own tent, with the two couples sharing a tent. They arranged themselves on either side of a path that led from the main St. Jude's Catholic Worker House to the smaller resident house at the back of the property. A campfire lit up at night but was always extinguished by 10:00 p.m., their "lights out" time. The individuals who comprised the tent community formerly had been "on the street" by themselves or in pairs. A few of them had been victims of multiple physical attacks, perpetrated as they tried to sleep. They rejected the passivity of this position, choosing instead to create a visible community, which offered safety and security while they slept. In the process of establishing their safe space, they became an organized body with a central mission to house and care for themselves in a manner deemed acceptable by and accessible to them. Forming this group coalesced individual homeless people into a public that began to articulate its own goals, and developed the potential to garner

community support—financial and otherwise—as a recognized entity, rather than individual nuisances.

The group's vision was formed collectively over the early months of the tent community's existence. People were on the street for myriad reasons, but the reasons that brought them to the tent community were not so different. People wanted safety and a chance for self-sufficiency beyond mere survival. Individuals repeatedly shared their common stories of being jumped while sleeping in parks and alleys. One man spoke to city council about his trials of the past year, remarking that after the death of his wife and loss of his three children to the state, he had little to keep him going until the tent community formed. There was often an optimistic atmosphere, with many members of the group reiterating the common belief that they could accomplish their goals if they worked together and tried hard enough. Our bi-weekly meetings were often a combination of goal setting activities plus motivational speeches from members to bolster the group's newly formed identity.

Rallying around mutual goals set the stage for formulating a plan for the future. During the bi-weekly meetings, I presented Dignity Village's[1] approach to becoming a legal semi-permanent village, offering various options and facilitating discussion about what the group wanted most. As we solidified pieces of the community and the future plan, I developed a written document that represented the group's goals and strategies. As a harnesser of resources and a University of Illinois graduate instructor in Urban Planning, I was able to bring in a former Urban Planning student to assist with developing technical aspects of the plan, in particular zoning requirements and recommended modifications. Together, we created a plan titled "A Proposal to Champaign City Council Urging the Amending of Code to Accommodate the Humane and Dignified Treatment of Marginalized Communities," which offered the group's goals and strategies, along with illustrations of the housing they sought and precedents from other tent cities. Many of our ideas for the physical structuring of the buildings and overall lay-out of the tent community came from conversations with Dignity Village in Portland, OR, as well as Dignity Village's "Tent Cities Toolkit," an interactive DVD that details how groups could set up their own village. These plans were completed in early July 2009 and presented to individual Champaign City Council members over the month of July.

***Mission***

*To create a safe, clean, self-governed community environment for economically distressed residents of the State of Illinois, through establishment of an open-air place where people living on the streets can have their basic needs met in a stable, sanitary environment, until they are able to access another form of housing more in keeping with said resident's personal goals and aspirations.*

***Vision***

*Safe Haven is a village model, integrating all functions of daily life at a local scale, because when numerous challenges are brought together they can be met together. Safe Haven is a place where a person can learn more about what it means to be a participant, engaged in a big picture that includes them. They get to "be somebody." Safe Haven strives to foster community and self-empowerment while providing transitional housing for its members. One of our main goals is to provide a safe, drug-and-alcohol-free alternative to the streets for homeless adults every night. To that end, we implement a variety of operational activities needed to maintain a safe, diverse, and empowering community that provides support for members to pursue their own goals while working interdependently toward a vision of the Safe Haven community. Our longer-term goal is self-sufficiency though the creation of micro-industries, which will develop the Safe Haven economy and provide skills and training for people in need.*

***Location, Site Amenities, and Structure***

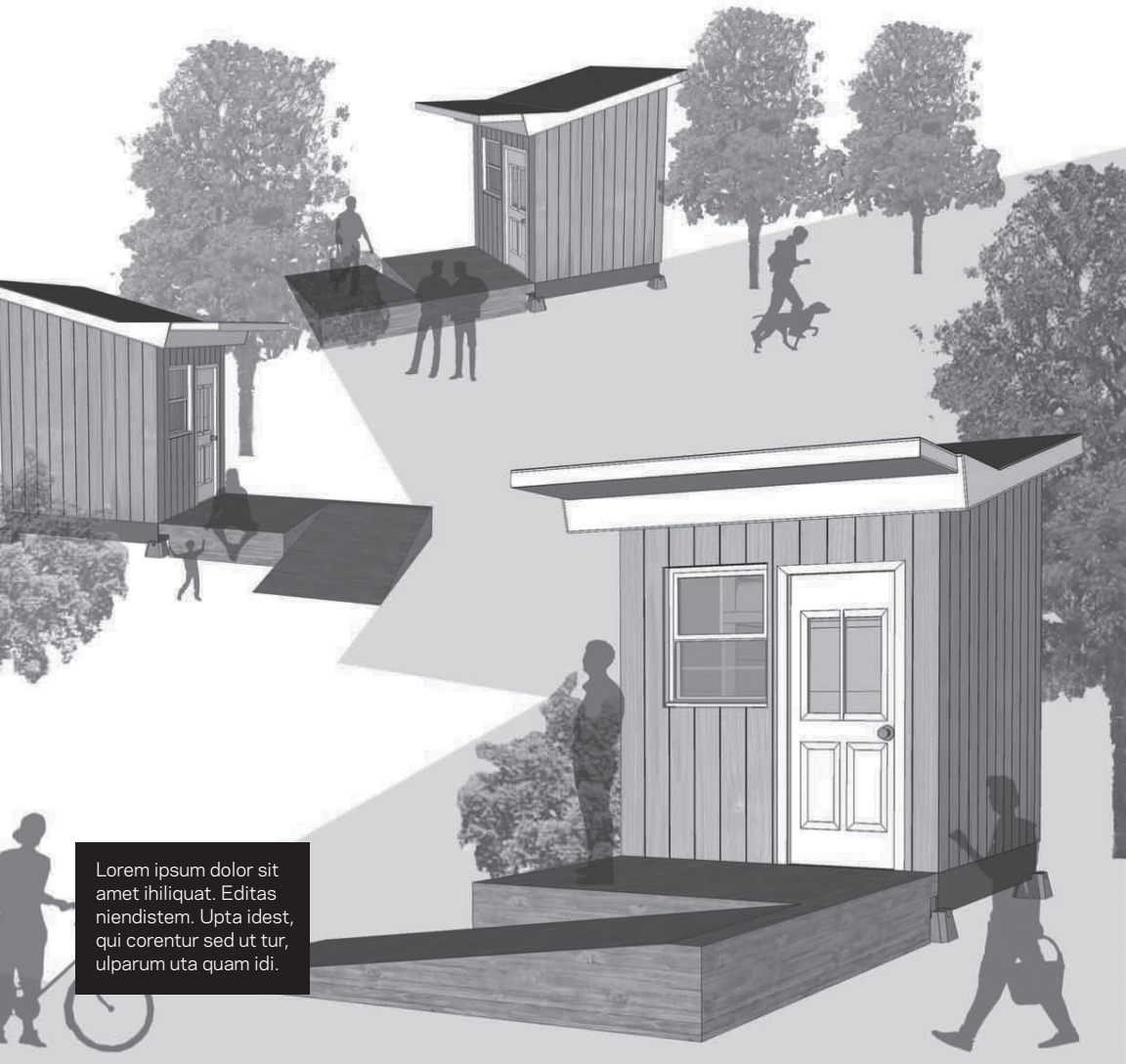
*Ideally, we seek a site that offers one or more acre(s) of land that is located in a lower density area with access to a bus line within 2 blocks of the site. With the proper location, Safe Haven can become a service provision "neighborhood" with appropriate space to maintain self-sufficient practices, including food production, solar water heating, and energy-efficient housing construction methods, as well as micro-enterprises for economic self-sufficiency.*

*Safe Haven has established a Sanitation Crew who is responsible for keeping the site and surrounding area clean of trash and waste. Safe Haven maintains one Portalet, at a total cost of $60 per month, paid with private donations and our own funds. As the community grows, we will rent additional Portalets. Safe Haven has a Security Crew who maintains and ensures security and respect within the site. No alcohol, drugs or disrespectful or aggressive behavior are allowed in Safe Haven. Heating will be accomplished in accordance with the City of Champaign Fire Code. Future phases of our community include more permanent structures that can be outfitted with heaters that meet standards set forth in the Fire Code. Safe Haven does not currently have shower facilities. As one of our first construction efforts, we will be constructing a solar shower for residents.*

The proposed semi-permanent structures measured 8x8x8. These units utilize small electric baseboard heaters and are lined with blown-in insulation. Each of these units can be constructed with volunteer labor for approximately $1500. We anticipated building units based on need, given the low cost of each unit and their individualized nature. The units were designed fairly simply, and as many of the members had construction skills, we felt confident that we would be able to build the structures on our own or with other volunteer labor.

At the beginning, the group would have required 6-10 units. In the first month of existence, we received nearly $1000 in donations from individuals seeking to support the group. Later in the summer, we developed a Faith Coalition of nine churches (five initially) to support Safe Haven that would have been able to fund the construction of these buildings. Given the low cost of the group's needs, we requested no funding from the City of Champaign, only a zoning variance and a vacant parcel of land.

The group never intended to stay in the Catholic Worker House backyard permanently. Members recognized the limitations of the site, and, wanting to provide shelter to others in their position, they sought a larger site where they could expand and build heated semi-permanent structures. In fact, the plan excerpted above also devoted attention to identifying potential city-owned locations within city limits. Media coverage, however, focused mainly



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on the moments of conflict—between Catholic Worker House and neighbors, between homeless "drunks" and neighbors, and between the city's standards of living and the flagrant denial of them by the campers. News coverage was fast and fierce in those first few months.

Emerging from the combination of tent community members' and organizers' efforts was a serious and viable plan. The problem was that the public never saw this plan in all its detail. From the first few weeks of the tent community's existence, the local newspaper and two local television channels were covering the group, often several times a week. We welcomed the chance to tell the story of the tent community but quickly found that the news outlets were interested in a particular framing. The story that the media presented to the public was a controversy over the takeover of a residential backyard (and by implication, the neighborhood) by homeless campers. The media's understanding of the tent community's plan was best exemplified in the June 23, 2009 edition of the *News-Gazette*, where reporter Mike Monson wrote that the tent city "is drawing fire from some neighboring residents, who say the residents are often drunk and make noise late into the night." This idea that the tent community was a bunch of drunken miscreants appeared in the majority of the news coverage in the first two weeks of the tent community's existence. Talk of zoning violations dominated the remainder of the coverage, with the *News-Gazette*'s editorial board submitting their own opinions: "Time to fold up 'tent city'" and "Tent living is not acceptable."

By the time the *News-Gazette* ran a story that focused on the actual plans of the tent community, public sentiment (in the form of online comments on the article) was highly skeptical and gave little merit to the plan. Even then, the reporting gave scant attention to the plan's details, and many aspects of the plan came under fire, such as the exact heating plan, fire codes, bathrooms, and the like.

The conflict-driven news coverage and editorializing suggested that the tent community transgressed community standards: sleeping in tents, using a port-a-potty as a bathroom, and bathing with a hose made people uncomfortable. But beyond these surface transgressions, the community tapped into a deeper vein of thought about homelessness. The spectacle of a self-consciously independent and politicized community that made demands upon the local government challenged the belief that "good" homeless people submit to what is offered public and non-profit organizations by confessing their wrongs, developing habits of personal responsibility, and promising to reform themselves.

Two major implications extend from this belief—the first is that the shelter system is the place to be "good," and the second is that to be "good," one must act as an individual, submitting her/himself to the will of experts that will help

her/him. Here was a group of homeless people that, for various reasons, were unable to access the local shelter system, but they weren't asking for money, housing, or help from the experts. I think one of their most eloquent statements was "not a handout, just a chance to be self-sufficient." But most important, was the simple fact that the group had the audacity to camp as a *group*. As one member of the tent community observed early on, in response to the city's unwillingness to negotiate, the assembly of an intentional community represented power to city officials—as long as homeless people remained individuals, they presented no threat to the status quo, but when they banded together, they became a public entity, that threw into question, the myth that homelessness is an individual, rather than communal, problem.

Homeless individuals are often viewed as nuisances by their very existence in visible spaces in the community. They are regarded as interrupting the atmosphere of "appropriate" civic behavior through meeting their bodily needs. Pissing in the bushes, sleeping on benches, and rummaging through dumpsters challenge the assumptions about what behaviors are appropriate to public space. But individuals do not piss in the bushes to actively challenge standards of living—they do so because they must. Here in Champaign, the tent community went from existing in public space to challenging the normative appearance of that space by making contentious a few of the issues surrounding standards of living. In the past, many people had turned up to city council meetings protesting actions like an anti-camping ordinance and supporting actions like opening new housing for the homeless, but the council had not faced efforts to this extent by homeless and housed together to challenge the community's philosophy and method(s) of shelter provision. City staff and officials' public comments about the tent community often were, "We have shelters; just tell them to go to the shelters." But for members, the tents offered a quality of life that exceeded that of the shelters, despite the lack of permanent structures and indoor plumbing. Members publicly argued to the City Council that the tent community offered them dignity, safety, and self-sufficiency, calling shelters into question in the process. The City reacted to this challenge by threatening hefty fines, up to $750/day, for violating zoning ordinances Sec. 37-102 and 37-103 that state "Unless otherwise provided in this chapter, no structure or land may be used, erected, converted, or structurally altered in the IT-MX Districts, except for one (1) or more of the permitted uses listed above or one (1) or more of the following provisional uses, provided the provisional use meets the requirements of this chapter." The ordinances list two dozen permitted and provisional uses, including emergency and transitional shelters/housing for the homeless, yet these uses are required to be *dwellings*, defined by the City Code as "any building or a portion of a building, occupied or designed to be occupied by one or more units each of which is used or designed to be used as a permanent place

of abode for human occupancy." These fines were premised on the belief that tents do not constitute dwellings.

These threats of fines led to the end of the tent community, but the fines represent much more than city ordinances. Governmental regulations like building and zoning codes are predicated on a particular set of beliefs: 1) that the standards are at an acceptable, agreed-upon level for people to live safely, 2) that everyone can reasonably achieve the standards set forth without undue hardship, and 3) that local governments should actively put standards like these in place. There are many problems with these beliefs. Most fundamentally, the notion that any of these standards are fixed is false. For instance, in 2009, the City of Champaign granted twenty-one zoning variances. The frequency of zoning variances suggests that the City uses the zoning code as a template, rather than an unbreakable set of rules. Yet, city staff and officials refused to entertain a zoning variance for the tent community. In a City Council meeting in August 2009, a debate emerged between two city council members over the role of city ordinances. As Champaign City Councilmember Tom Bruno remarked,

*Our building codes and our zoning ordinances were motivated and their original intent is to protect the less fortunate, it's to protect against substandard housing. Wealthy people weren't the ones who needed rules about indoor plumbing and safe electricity and a solid roof over their heads. It was a protective device that communities implemented, so that the disadvantaged could live in the same sorts of safe housing that other people did. So has that become so perverted now that we are hurting the disadvantaged because we expect them to live in a structure that has indoor plumbing and safe electricity and isn't going to be a fire hazard and isn't going to spread disease, are we imposing a condition on poor people or disadvantaged people or homeless people that we expect their homes to meet a certain standard?*

However, dissenting Councilmember Mike LaDue argued that,

*In my years of experience doing this I've been made aware of many situations that suggest that there is precedence for negotiating enforcement strategy and timetables where building codes, housing codes, maintenance codes are concerned. I know that there are the landlords who have one way or another had unabated or partially abated code violation situations drag on for several years. I'm not suggesting that's good, I'm suggesting it's a precedent for the kind of slippery situation Councilman Bruno refers to, because there are many situations where getting traction, legislatively or with respect to enforcement, is inevitably difficult and this may be one of those but negotiation of this kind on the staff level, I believe, I hope precedent is not too legalistic sounding a word, I hope not to be misunderstood when I choose that word, but I do believe that should we find among ourselves a will there would be a way.*

The point that seemed to be lost on the Council was that the tent community's "substandard housing" was personally acceptable and not the end goal. The group was working toward construction of semi-permanent structures that followed international standards for fire safety, as well as designs to anchor them for up to 200 mile/hour winds. But more importantly, Council members simply seemed unwilling to entertain plans from homeless people who were making decisions for themselves, and who had chosen a standard of living that was in keeping with *their* economic status and *their* own comfort level.

Negotiations with the City stopped abruptly in late August 2009. By this time, the group had endured four rapid moves between temporary sites over the course of two weeks. The group finally settled in the yard next to the parish center of St. Mary's Catholic Church, only to be given one week to cease and desist (by the City). These further threats of fines forced the group indoors, where its members stayed for the remainder of its existence. People continued to be housed in a peer-run environment, but some of the magic left when the tents were abandoned for a more shelter-like atmosphere. The tents were an important dwelling form that contributed greatly to the sense of community; they made it feel like a small interdependent neighborhood was being created and made the sharing of meals and other resources more obvious. The result was a sense of optimism; the tents signaled the presence of big plans for the future. Within the tent city, the roles of helper and helped formulated by public policy were not only rejected, but also even reversed.

Once indoors, with the weather turning cold, I heard a marked shift in the discussion of collective action among members toward conversations about *other* people on the street that need *our* help. Clearly this help was necessary, as the number of people who joined the community climbed to 45 as the winter stretched on, but much of the feeling of becoming empowered equals was lost in the physical shift from individual tents on common property to a shared floor in an open room. As one member stated, "When we was at St. Mary's I kept saying, man, I'd rather be back in my tent cause at least I had... it was just canvas sides but it was like I had privacy, you know, you change your clothes in there and not worry about it. And then when we was in St. Mary's...if you was laying out in the dayroom, if that's what you wanna call it, you was under everybody's eye... it was like we were all in like a little fish bowl." For this man, and other members, the tents offered a space of one's own akin to a private residence, with visual privacy, delineated lines of private and public space, and capacity for organizing a space according to your own needs and/or whims. The open room blurred the lines between private and public, causing members to exhibit territorial behavior in an attempt to police those boundaries. In addition, there was no possible visual privacy. These conditions create a seeming paradox: while members had individual

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*Photo by Lorem Ipsum*

tents, they were able to live communally, while living in close quarters eroded feelings of communality and increased individuals' territoriality.

Though the group's efforts officially ended in May 2010, those first three months of outdoor living allowed us all to tap into a vision that exploded many people's ideas of what is possible through collaborative action. Safe Haven Tent Community members wanted to do for themselves and each other. While there were certainly feuds that arose between individuals, as in any household or neighborhood, the tent community atmosphere was one of camaraderie. Most importantly, the members considered themselves to also be legitimate members of the broader Champaign community and genuinely felt that they were performing a valuable service for it. As tent cities continue to proliferate across U.S. cities, it is incumbent on the broader communities to acknowledge the efforts of their tent-dwelling citizens as legitimate actions within the housing constraints of the community.