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BREAKING CAMP

Until last week, 26 people lived under tarps in the shadow of the Arena District

By Sara Smith

If you've ever taken I-670 to a Blue Jackets game, you've passed within a couple hundred yards of the Babarchu Spriggs residence. Like many of the people in the Arena District and the Short North, Spriggs outfitted his home with some extras. His visitors stepped over a heart-shaped welcome mat and up a brick-bordered walkway. The 67-year-old Spriggs, who's proud of his Native American heritage, had a small outdoor shrine and his own version of a working Indian sweat lodge.

But it was the things that were missing that occupied his mind Saturday morning. He had no deed or lease giving him a legal right to be there.

Spriggs lived under a tarp on property owned by the CSX Corp., in a stand of trees against railroad tracks that lead west out of town. Monday, whether he liked it or not—and he did not—would be moving day.

“Out here, I can do whatever I want,” he said. “This offers more freedom, privacy and autonomy.”

A few weeks ago, there was a community of 26 homeless men and women on a finger of land on the west side of Neil Avenue, just north of the Lifestyle Communities Pavilion. It wasn't the only significant homeless encampment in Columbus, or the biggest. But of the dozen or so camps in town, it was the one that city officials most wanted gone.

The word went out eight weeks ago that the camp would be cleared in a large-scale collaborative effort under the Community Shelter Board. At the city's request, the CSB organized a task force of 10 social agencies to take stock, count heads and disband the close-knit group of friends and neighbors who refused to call themselves homeless because they considered the cluster of shanties their home.

While the task force helped some residents resettle into apartments, most were sent to the YMCA, which many said they dreaded after spending time in a camp that they regarded as a safe and comfortable community.

“I've been in a shelter. It's more like prison,” said Russell, who lived in the camp with his girlfriend of eight years, Jackie. Like most residents of the camp, they asked that their last names not be published.



“Out here, you have the freedom to come and go as you choose, like everybody else,” Russell said. “At the shelter, they treat you like a child. That’s why we prefer to live here in the woods.”

For many residents of the camp—and their most devoted advocates—this forced move indoors as colder weather sets in is greeted with a complicated mix of emotions.

There is suspicion that their camp is being targeted because it is inconvenient. Within months, ground will be broken for Huntington Park, the Columbus Clippers’ new ballpark, less than a quarter-mile down Neil Avenue from the settlement.

“If you’re going to have a baseball stadium, you’re going to need a parking lot,” said Kent Beittel, executive director of the Open Shelter, which two years ago morphed from a physical shelter to a homeless service and advocacy organization when Beittel refused to join the Community Shelter Board’s team.

“When the issue became, ‘Deal with this camp because we need the parking lot,’ money miraculously appeared to make this possible,” he said.

Yet Beittel believes getting the camp residents into housing, no matter the motive, was a good thing.

“I’m glad money was found to do this,” he said, “because for many people, it’s a blessing in disguise which wouldn’t have happened if we hadn’t needed a baseball stadium.”

Carl Landry, who headed up efforts to find housing for the camp residents, took a similar view.

“I don’t know if it’s a question of visibility with this camp,” said Landry, team leader for homeless outreach services at Southeast Inc., a recovery and mental-health services provider. “The phenomenon of homelessness is one thing; the politics and questions of ‘Why now?’ is another issue.”

“The bottom line is when a person is housed, they’re better off than being on the land.”

The city, the shelter board and CSX all said conjecture about a parking lot is wrong; there are no plans to develop the site.

“The moving of the homeless has absolutely nothing to do with the building of the stadium,” said Mary Carran Webster, Columbus assistant public service director. “That is an area that we received complaints about from the public and the police.”

For instance, she said, police told her department that people were sometimes seen running toward the camp after car break-ins in the Arena District.

Without the police complaints, Webster said, “we probably wouldn’t have gone to this area first. They were really behind this.”

Barbara Poppe, executive director of the shelter board, said no other homeless camps in the city have been marked for cleanup at this time, and she didn’t know why this particular encampment was targeted by the city. But she noted there are health and safety concerns because the camp is located alongside railroad tracks.

A homeless man was killed by a train in June, and a homeless woman was critically injured by a train in September, but both were believed to live south of Downtown, not near the Neil Avenue camp.

Webster said that several months ago, she went to the camp with City Councilman Mike Mentel and representatives from CSX, Southeast Inc. and the CSB.

She said Mentel personally posed a question to everyone in the camp: If homes can be found for you, will you take them?

“They said yes,” she said.

But as the final campers packed their belongings into large, blue plastic containers Friday and Saturday, some said the task force’s definition of a home doesn’t match theirs.

A woman named Angel said she planned to move to another outdoor camp to avoid being separated from her boyfriend, James, and her Chihuahua, Buddy.

“James and Buddy and I are a family,” she said Saturday as she sat near a campfire with her neighbors, sipping a mug of coffee.

Angel and James don’t want to marry, and their unattached status would likely disqualify them from getting a place together through the task force. What’s more, many housing arrangements don’t allow for pets.

“In order for me and James to stay together, we will go pitch this tent somewhere else,” she said as she cuddled her shivering dog in a blanket. “I will not be separated from him under no circumstances. Just because James and I are homeless doesn’t mean we’re not partners. I love him.”

No-trespassing signs were posted on the abandoned 15-acre campsite Monday, and the site is scheduled to be cleared early next week.

“If anybody was interested in purchasing it, we would be willing to start discussions about that,” said CSX spokeswoman Meg Sacks.

Contractors hired by CSX will remove the vegetation that sheltered and concealed the makeshift tents of Babarchu Spriggs and his 25 neighbors.

For Spriggs, it was important to be among the last to leave.

“I’ve put up my mark here,” he said Saturday. “I don’t want to leave because I’ve stayed and put up a fight.”

But Monday, Spriggs gave up the fight and moved into an apartment on Livingston Avenue, a few doors down from a couple he knew in the camp.

“The apartment is decent, and there’s a nice yard,” he said.

“It’s a start.”