

Paradise In Tent City?

An Interview with an Unhoused Resident of Ki-Low-Na's Tent City

Anonymous

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The following interview took place in Tent City just hours after a “raid” by Bylaw and City of Kelowna employees, in which items deemed prohibited — like insulated tarps, pallets, mattresses, and other essential living materials — are confiscated and disposed of. Large-scale raids seem to occur on a bi-annual basis and residents are forewarned several days in advance that such an inhumane procedure would be taking place. However, the raid which took place the morning before this interview was unannounced and unexpected by Tent City residents, leading many of them to feel unsafe and rightfully enraged. Below, R, a Tent City resident who agreed to be interviewed and have this transcript published for public distribution, describes some of his experiences living in Tent City — and how he tries to create a “paradise” out of such a challenging situation...

Interviewer:

I got a cigarette — you want one?

R:

Yeah. [Lights cigarette] You know, I got a piece of wood with charcoal on it, so I wrote “PARADISE” [on the concrete barricade] with arrows pointing towards our place — so when everybody’s like, “Oh how’s your day?” I always say, “another day in paradise...”

Interviewer:

Do you have a name or an alias that you want to go by? Pronouns?

R:

I’m [Redacted] he him. Yeah. Around here everyone knows who I am. Same with my wife. Her name’s [Redacted]... then [in our tent] there are two people who are [Redacted], and the other two are [Redacted]..

Interviewer:

How long have you been here in Tent City?

R:

Since September the 9th [2022].

Interviewer:

Oh okay. That means, like... you were here for the “cleanings” they’ve done, or whatever the fuck they call them?

R:

Yeah. We’ve been here for three “raids.” The first one they told us — we had a little two-person tent — they told us that it was unlivable and they would take ours and give us a new one. And, they never gave us a tent. Night time comes and we were like, “What the hell?” and we had to move all our stuff over here [points across the Rail Trail]... Everything that was left they tossed out with that big back hoe thing. You know what I’m talking about? They have a dump truck that follows behind it and they’ll just take full shopping carts — they don’t care what’s in it, they’ll just grab it and toss it out. They’re supposed to check for life first because...

Interviewer:

Check for life, you mean like, if someone’s inside first?

R:

Yeah. But once they scooped up a kennel from my cousin’s place, and his dog was in it. A big dog. And they picked it up and dropped it into the trash [truck] and [my cousin and his friends] were like, “HEY OUR DOG’S IN THERE!” I went running over there and said to the operator, “Dude there’s a dog in there, there’s a dog in there!” And he said “No there isn’t.” So I climbed into the truck and pulled out the kennel and sure enough he was in there. And I yelled at the operator “What the fuck!” and he said, “Well, we couldn’t hear it over the sound of the engines”...

Interviewer:

Can you tell that story about when they came for you in your tent?

R:

Well, because they took our tent we were staying with our friend and she had like five tents put together and we were in the one closest to the road [Rail Trail], sleeping. And suddenly we heard “RRRAAYYYNNN” [R makes machine sounds] and the claw comes through the roof and we were like “what the fuck!?” and then we could feel it start to lift — so we ran out into the other tent, and the others were still in there. And they asked, “what’s going on?” and all of the sudden the tent was picked right up and they dropped it into the dump truck... And once they did that we were all exposed now, and they were looking right at us — 10 cops that time and a bunch of bylaw.

[During the raids] they all park right there [points to East end of Tent City] and it’s full of cops and bylaw, for some reason. The cops are there in case we say no. They enforce it. And they don’t need to do that. They say it’s because people go into survival mode — so like, whatever they get, they keep...

Before the first raid, we didn’t know anyone here. And they [points at tent next door] had tons of bikes, you know, in order to sell them... Well, they [cops, City workers, and bylaw] came in and grabbed all their bike stuff collected in all their shopping carts and tossed it all out while they weren’t there. And they said to them, “What the hell? That’s all our tools!” — I think about \$10,000 worth of tools, like welders — [interview interrupted by neighbour]

Interviewer:

And that’s the dude’s whole livelihood, probably? His way of making money?

R:

Yeah... and they give us stupid rules like “No tarps,” and it’s like, how are we supposed to keep warm? And so they took away all our tarps the first raid. They also initially said, “No generators”

so they'd been stealing everybody's generators. "No propane tanks" — so they were stealing everybody's propane tanks. "No open flames" — and, for example, I had a propane BBQ and I ran out of propane so I just butchered it and repurposed it as a little fire-pit. I knew they were going to try to take it, so I put it inside our tent. Well, they reached in our tent while we were asleep and my wife shook me to wake me up... I opened up the tent door and it was the fire marshall. He said, "I'm confiscating this" and I asked, "Why." He said, "obviously you guys had a fire last night, and it's like, "Yeah, everybody was cold so I decided to make a fire..."

Interviewer:

Yeah, obviously!

R:

Yeah, so everybody could warm up...

Interviewer:

He fucking went in your tent? Like reached inside?

R:

Yeah! And he had the cops behind him, to back him. And I was like, "You guys can't do that." "Oh the zipper was open," they said. No it wasn't! We don't leave our zipper open.

Interviewer:

Of course not.

R:

So now we've got a tent cover over our tent.

But the worst is the racism...we have a 12'x12' square [144sqft] within the rules of Tent City. And you know, I see people down the way breaking that rule and getting away with it — but if we [him and his wife] don't listen they'll write us up a citation and stuff like that, or fine us. So, it's selected people... Like, having a homemade structure in the back [points at white neighbour's tent] — you're not supposed to have that; or, I guess, I'm not supposed to have that. You know. It's racism. It has to be.

Interviewer:

Are you Indigenous yourself?

R:

Yeah yeah. Me and my wife are Indigenous...

And, you know, there's no Community Watch here, there's no maintenance for the people, we don't even have clean water — the water in the hand washing station reeks of piss, it's gross. And the outhouses... I bring my skateboard in there and sit on that. I won't sit on the toilet...

Interviewer:

So, earlier you were telling me that today you said you woke up and...

R:

We woke up and there was a cop car right out front here, and I guess these guys [points at neighbours' tents] weren't there, and they take their stuff. And, you know, anything around the garbages is considered trash, and definitely anything on the other side of the road [Rail Trail] is considered trash too. But now, bylaw has been going to our tents... You know, after they grabbed my fire-pit out from our tent, I got vocal with them.

Interviewer:

Oh wait, was that today?

R:

No. That was two raids ago. And you know, I was talking with one of them [bylaw] and he said, “Three months ago, you were compliant. You were nice. And now since you’ve been living here, you have found a voice for yourself, and we don’t like that. And if you don’t like the way we’re operating, you can just move back where you came from.” Well, we got pushed out of town — there’s a zero-homeless tolerance where we came from in Cache Creek. We got dropped off in WestBank with nothing by the cops.

Interviewer:

Fuck. They took you from Cache Creek and just dropped you off in Westbank with nothing.

R:

Yeah. They wanted to just drop us off in Kamloops and, like, it was either that or we get arrested... And I told him I have family out here, and so they brought us out here...

You know, here we have “tourists,” I call ‘em. You know the rich, privileged people — they’ll come by and video tape us.

Interviewer:

Yes yes, I know I’ve seen them.

R:

Yeah. Or they’ll go by honking their horns telling us to get jobs or whatever the fuck... We’ve also been warned about “vigilantes,” they call ‘em. But they’re not vigilantes, they’re assholes and they target the homeless people. I know a couple people who have been picked up and they’ve been beat up just for being homeless. And it’s like, this isn’t right. And you know, we’d rather not choose this — well, I know a couple people for who this is their “end game” actually..[interview interrupted by neighbour]

But you know, there are certain days you look forward to out here — the one with burritos, and the chili.

Interviewer:

Yeah yeah.

R:

Yeah. The burritos are always awesome. I’m always looking out for them right away.

[Bylaw begins to drive by and film people’s tents from 10ft away on the Rail Trail]

That’s the only nice bylaw officer, I call him [redacted], he looks like Woody from Toy Story. But he’s the only one that’s decent, everybody else are prudes, they act like cops — you see, they’re taking pictures.

Interviewer:

Yeah how often does that happen — they come by and they just film you?

R:

All the time...

Interviewer:

Such an invasion of privacy.

R:

Yeah. They give the footage to their higher ups and that’s how they determine which tents are bad [not regulation]. But all the outhouses, if you go look in ‘em, they’re destroyed — the toilets are gone, they’re...

Interviewer:

Does the City take care of them?

R:

The septic truck comes and sucks up the blue liquid and refills the toilet paper. But that's it.

Interviewer:

Just leaves it destroyed?

R:

Yeah. All of 'em. Some people don't have tents so they come down here to buy drugs and they go in the bathrooms, light a fire in the urinal — or there are burns everywhere and they're all written-in — yeah they light them up on fire... One morning we come out and see that porta-john on fire [points West] and the guy comes out and he's like "ughhh ugghhh" [makes coughing sounds] and we asked, "What happened?" And he said, "I was just trying to keep warm." And he ended up lighting it up...

[A car driving along Weddell Place drives by and honks continuously just to disturb Tent City residents]

R:

Like that! That guy's honking his horn. He's not from here...

Interviewer:

What the fuck...

R:

Yeah, they do that all the time. Middle of the night...

Ya know, they designated this space as a "shelter," and outdoor shelter. So we went up to bylaw and were like, "If it's a shelter, where's the showering accommodations..." because guidelines to be a shelter, they have to take care of us. But they don't. There's no Community Watch, there's nothing — people are stealing from each other, people are robbing each other, people are burning their tents down. I guess in the last two weeks, eight people have died. And they don't tell anybody about that. We see it like — the cops come up and down, and they'll sit there with the lights on; and we'll go ask what's happening...[a neighbour interrupts the interview]

Yeah, the tent me and my wife got is a very small tent. We set it up inside our other tent because it's that cold — the whole roof was mesh. So, we put a tarp on it. But then they take our tarp! It's like, what the fuck, we can't have fires. No fires, but you still see people with fires. Like I got a semi-truck rim and I bring it out and I'll have a

fire. In the morning I push it right back in [to my tent]...The rules are up on that one sign right there [points West down the Rail Trail to a 1'x2' sign on a post 9ft high off the ground], so small that nobody can read it.

Interviewer:

It's literally ten feet high. It's literally 10ft off the ground.

R:

And I don't get why it's up there, nobody's going to use it.

Interviewer:

You couldn't even read that without binoculars.

R:

I asked them for a leaflet or something. But no...

[bylaw officer comes by in truck and interrupts interview and tires to get information on another Tent City resident from interviewee and then leaves]

R:

...All the other bylaw are assholes...

Interviewer:

What do you think would be most needed out here. Community Watch, and then services like water...what would you say is needed out here?

R:

Some type of shower, ya know. They [bylaw] always say, "Go to Metro"

Interviewer:

But then you have to leave all your shit and risk it getting taken.

R:

Yeah...They're talking about building tiny homes — there's like 60 of them.

Interviewer:

They're going to go up right across the street, right?

R:

Yeah. But we're told that they're going to people in shelters, and not us. So it's like, why the fuck would they tell us then and make it so impossible for us to get them.

Interviewer:

Why do you think they don't give those services to folks here, in Tent City?

R:

I figure it's like social, kinda like racism but about social class. Like we're all lower class people. We can't go work because we don't have an address. I've tried to go get a job, you know — like right over there [points to SunRype factory] there's a big sign saying "We're Hiring." Canco [also] won't hire me. Like, I'm a welder — I've got my certificates and qualifications. No, no one will hire me because I don't have an address. So I google-mapped the address: 700-725 Baille Avenue, it's right here. But taxis won't come to Baille Ave. Pizza won't come to Baille Ave — we tried to order a pizza the other day — because they know this is Tent City...We're under-serviced. I don't get why the services aren't here, because they [The City of Kelowna] have the money.

Interviewer:

Why wouldn't they let it just be just like an outdoor campground here?

R:

That's the way I thought it was supposed to be!...

We're trying to get out to rent a place. But landlords, they don't like homeless people. You know, they want college kids, or single moms or... you know, if there's an open space you should be able to rent it!

Interviewer:

Okay, you've told me a lot of things — a lot of day-in-the-life type things. But what would you call everything that you just told me? What would you say about life in Tent City?

R:

Um... Hell in one sense. But I always say it's another day in paradise. It could be worse... But I don't think it's right. I think it's messed up. We're hopefully going to get out of this.

Do you think I could get another smoke off ya?

Interviewer:

Of course.

[R's dog Porkchop runs out of the tent to greet interviewer and licks interviewer's hand]

Interviewer:

Okay, thank you [Redacted].

R:

Yeah no problem. You can always come out and chat.

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