

## HOMELESSNESS IN THE VALLEY



Yascha Feld, 41, has been staying at the Town & Country Center in downtown Palm Springs. Feld says he has few other options for housing and has been kicked off the property before, but knows he will be moving on. OMAR ORNELAS/THE DESERT SUN

# Social clash in Palm Springs

Preservationists press police to clear Town and Country Center of squatters desperate for place to stay

**By Xochitl Peña**  
The Desert Sun

By homeless standards, Chris was living in a plush condominium.

Behind the tall walls of an outdoor porch, the 58-year-old had created a

home with bed, night stand, carpet, sitting chairs, a work bench, and an old refrigerator he used as a closet.

He even had a luxe address — the Town and Country Center, owned by the Wessman Development Co.

A few doors down from Well in the

Desert, where free bagged lunches are handed out daily, Chris had a spot envied by others down and out.

"I fight to keep it. Considering my health. I'm grateful to be here," he said Monday, hours before he was asked to move by Palm Springs police.

Members of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation are relieved to

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# Village

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see police have pushed the homeless camps out of the 64-year-old storied plaza.

But police and preservationists alike say homelessness is a chronic problem, especially around the building that offers plenty of places to hide.

"I can't say how many times we've taken camps out of there," said Palm Springs police Officer Barron Lane, who spends the majority of his days

addressing homeless issues.

"It's an ongoing problem. We just keep having to remove them," he said.

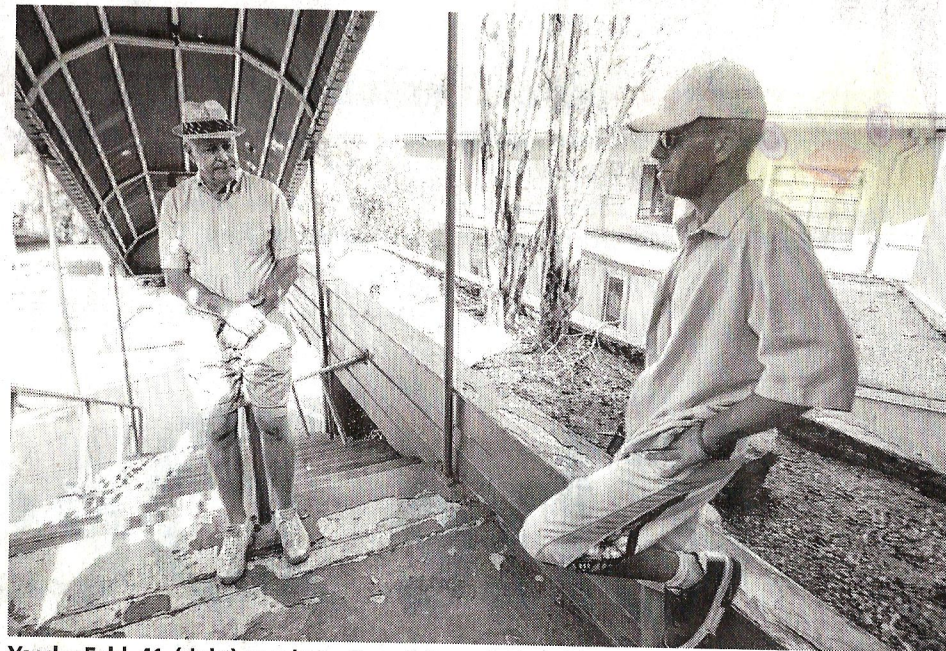
Eviction from the Town and Country Center came after pressure from the preservation foundation, which has long fought to protect the building designed by two internationally famous architects, Paul R. Williams and A. Quincy Jones.

Gary Johns, vice president of the preservation foundation, fears that what is rumored to have caused a July 11 fire at the Carnell Building a few

doors down on Palm Canyon Drive could happen to the Town and Country Center with a sloppy candle or discarded cigarette.

Homeless people were known to be staying on the second floor where the Carnell fire started. Palm Springs Deputy Fire Chief John Allen is aware of the suspicions, that a vagrant started the fire, but said it could not be proven and the cause of the fire is undetermined.

"It's so difficult to say. It could have been a transient that accidentally set it on fire ...It could have been kids. Unfortunately nobody can confirm those suspicions," he said.



Yascha Feld, 41, (right) speaks to Gary Johns, vice president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, about public policy and homelessness in the Coachella Valley. OMAR ORNELAS/THE DESERT SUN



The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation sent a letter Monday to City Manager David Ready and Michael Braun, senior vice president of Wessman Holdings/Development Company, asking for action.

"In light of the recent fire at the Carnell Building, a building known to be frequently occupied by transients, we hope that the city will take more aggressive enforcement actions to remedy this problem," Ron Marshall, president of the preservation foundation, wrote.

One problem, Lane said, is that he only works four days a week and can't be on watch constantly.

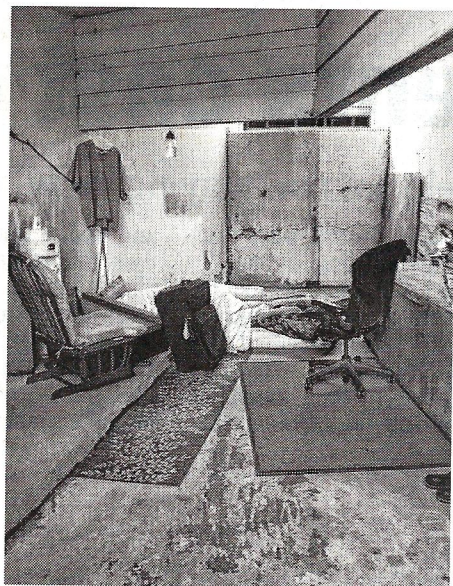
And because he is the only officer who focuses on homeless issues, his work is often reactive.

"Once we spot homeless people on our property, we immediately contact the police and or Barron Lane at the city and they take care of the issue immediately," Braun said in an email. "If they return, we will contact the police immediately again to remove any transients from our property."

Lane said the homeless who set up camps are often cited for "illegal camping" and then given 24 hours to move their belongings out.

Palm Springs isn't alone in its struggle to juggle the issues that come with homelessness.

On the other end of the valley, Indio is dealing with the fallout from dismantling an illegal homeless camp that at one point had up to 60 people living in tents and on sleeping bags behind a convenient



**A new homeless camp was discovered during a tour of the Town and Country Center. The photo shows the unsecured nature of the complex and an actual occupant of the camp while asleep.**

PHOTO  
PROVIDED BY  
GARY JOHNS

store/gas station.

The illegal camp began to grow early last year after Martha's Village & Kitchen — one of two homeless shelters in Indio — closed its 100-person emergency shelter for lack of money.

Palm Springs has Roy's Desert Resource Center, the only homeless shelter in the city, had to cut 40 beds in July after it lost funding from Riverside County.

Even with three shelters in the valley, there is limited space and not all homeless people like the rules enforced to stay at such shelters.

Yascha Feld, 41, said that's why he doesn't stay at Roy's.

He was living at the Town and Country Center at the top of the staircase leading to the entrance of the former Zeldaz nightclub until he was pushed

out earlier this week.

He had a mattress with sheets, swivel chair, travel bag, skateboard and clothes all neatly positioned at the landing.

He had a broom to keep things tidy and a copy of The Celestine Prophecy tucked between his mattress and the door.

"There's only a few of us here," said Feld Monday. "We try to keep it clean."

Now, not a single item of Feld's remains.

This isn't the first time Chris and Feld have been kicked out of the Town and Country Center.

They leave when asked, but return later after things have calmed down.

"The Town and Country Center seems very vulnerable to the homeless, and as long as the property owner lets the property be neglected its going to

be a welcome mat for the homeless," Johns said.

The deteriorating plaza has a courtyard environment with patches of grass and flowering trees surrounded by empty storefronts. It offers lots of places for the homeless to hide.

The preservation foundation has had an interest in the Town and Country Center for about a decade, but has really elevated advocacy in the last five years.

In 2009, the preservation foundation was unsuccessful in getting the Palm Springs City Council to approve a historic designation for the building.

Last year the building was proposed to be razed as part of the Desert Plaza remodeling, but was taken out of the plan following much protest, including from the preservation foundation.

The foundation has continued to keep an eye on the plaza, and in April 2011, informed the city of squatters that had made their way into the building. A concerted effort by police and the owner at the time eliminated that problem.

"We're always happy that they respond, but would be much happier if they have continuous enforcement," Marshall said.

"It does get taken care of periodically, but what happens is ...everyone forgets about it and two months later they are back there."