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SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY'S NEWS AND ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY



To the curb

Facing eviction, Sunny Acres residents fear they may lose refuge even so simple as a tent [8] **BY COLIN RIGLEY**



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Eviction notice

Despite court-mandated evictions looming over residents at Sunny Acres, it's life as usual

BY COLIN RIGLEY • PHOTOS BY STEVE E. MILLER

Becky Jorgeson looked across the table. "So you know what tonight is?" she asked coyly. "Square dancing," Steve answered out of turn.

"Shhh," she chided him. Steve wasn't supposed to drop the news with Dan De Vault sitting at the table. De Vault sat quietly, scooping forkfuls of sour cream over his dinner of potatoes, squash, and stuffed red peppers. He maintained the characteristic smile that suggests he knows more about you than you know about yourself.

"Dan's been doing this for a very long time, so he can almost predict the future," one resident told me later that night. At about 6:30 p.m., the sun blared

through the windows of the dairy barn at Sunny Acres where about 10 people were eating the last meal of the day. "Oh my god this is good," Jorgeson told the cook, a shy young girl wearing glasses with her hair pulled into a ponytail. "And I don't even like stuffed peppers."

They chatted, exchanging stories about past jobs, or panhandlers they had seen in downtown San Luis Obispo recently—a young man trying to get money to buy strings for his guitar, for example.

"That's kind of the thing about Sunny Acres. Someone will bring up a topic and everyone has a story for it," said Barbara, a short woman with fiery red hair who moved to Sunny Acres a few months ago. She's become a sort of den mother. An

addiction specialist by trade, she counsels the other residents, administers drug tests, and cracks down whenever someone gets out of hand.

Matt walked into the room, a smile stretched across his face. He and De Vault talked about the people who have come over the years, trying to save Sunny Acres, none of them successful or really, as both men agreed, able to understand what makes Sunny Acres work. As he does with everyone, De Vault busted Matt's balls for thinking he knew better than the Sunny Acres founder, a man several people told me was like a father to them. "I showed up on the spot, Johnny Rescue. Then I realized it doesn't need fixing," Matt said. Craig, a fifth year Cal Poly student

who helps with the ranch, walked in with Dave. Or, as he introduced himself, Dr. Dave; a "third generation redneck builder" from Texas.

Dr. Dave swept salt off the table and spread out a stack of legal papers. He was obviously confused, had trouble forming his thoughts, likely in need of psychiatric help. But Dr. Dave insisted he had a plan to save Sunny Acres in federal court.

"Well how long is that gonna take?" De Vault asked.

"I can get it done in 10 days," Dr. Dave told him.

"So people wouldn't have to leave," De Vault responded skeptically.

Due to a court order—capping roughly a decade of fights over the fate of Sunny



Acres—Judge Charles Crandall, at the request of the county, effectively ordered the beleaguered sober-living facility to be vacated by Aug. 20. As many as 20 of the 31 residents who currently live at the ranch face eviction under court order from tents and cabins that were deemed unsafe. In effect, by court order, some residents will be forced into homelessness again.

Later, after dinner, Barbara stood among the cabins that must be vacated. “It’s a family,” she said. “It really is.” Then she spoke just above a whisper, as though she was trying to make sure residents in the cabins wouldn’t overhear. “We sat down, the four of us [managers] and said, ‘OK, who’s gonna stay and who’s gonna go?’”

It’s the question looming over everyone at Sunny Acres no one wants to, or knows how to answer. Do they kick people out who are stable enough to live outside the protective bubble of the ranch? Do they choose based on who the best workers are? Do they try to force the people living in individual tents into dormitory housing where they’d likely be uncomfortable?

And really, no one knows what’s going to happen to Sunny Acres. The people who live and work there don’t know, the management doesn’t know, and De Vault is blunt that he doesn’t know. “Did you get the order from that chicken-shit judge?” he asked. “That’s all I’ve gotten.”

Get to work

Eric has lived at Sunny Acres for about two and a half years. He lives in a crudely slapped-together tent made of nothing more than a tarp that’s clasped to iron fence posts. If the court order is carried out, Eric will be forced to leave Sunny Acres. He could move out of the tent and avoid eviction, but probably won’t. He’s mentally disabled, on medication, and said he doesn’t want to live in a group setting. In short, Eric likes his tent. “When they come, I’ll tell them I don’t want to live in there with the other people,” he said.

De Vault put it this way: “The sheds are necessary because we do a lot of help with the mentally impaired. And the mentally impaired don’t sleep at night. That’s rule number one. And they don’t lend

themselves to dormitory housing.”

At about 8:30 on a foggy morning, Eric was more concerned about keeping the geese from eating the fruit he’d picked. He pawed through a box of cucumbers assessing the damage after Aflac, one of the pain-in-the-ass Sunny Acres’ geese, had stolen a few bites.

“Oh man, he got that one, too. See there from the side?” he said. “Son of a bitch!”

Life at Sunny Acres carries on as usual. Even with the clock ticking closer to the eviction deadline, few want to talk about what might happen, or if they do, it certainly isn’t affecting the day-to-day routine.

At night, a few men sat on couches and recliners in the community room, smoking hand-rolled cigarettes, and watching some crappy Jean-Claude Van Damme movie on TV.

Residents attend the mandatory bi-weekly Alcoholics Anonymous and/or Narcotics Anonymous meetings held in the dairy barn. There’s still a work schedule and most residents spend five days each week working the 12 acres of

crops, fixing cars, or handling one of the dozens of chores in need of a pair of hands.

They eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner together. They comfort and counsel each other during moments when they feel like using again. During the day the ranch feels alive and detached from its surroundings. Cars buzz by on Los Osos Valley Road. To the west there’s the Congregation Beth David. To the east are the homes surrounding Laguna Lake. To the south are McMansions on the hills overlooking Sunny Acres, which must look like an isolated ant farm from them.

On that morning, Eric went about his day harvesting. He was almost impenetrably focused and quiet as he parted leaves and searched for fruit that would either be sold through Cal Poly, sold at Sunny Acres’ fruit stand, donated to the food bank, or wasn’t yet ready for picking.

After a bit of prodding, Eric gave some sparse details of his life. He was born and raised in Texas and left when he was 33. “I just didn’t like it,” he said.

He moved to San Diego and shuffled between living indoors for about two years, but then spent the next eight living “in the woods” around Oceanside. He worked in odd jobs during the housing boom, mostly maintenance and landscaping.

But Eric never made much money, and when demand for new construction projects plummeted, he headed for the Central Coast at the urging of a friend. “Everything got bad,” Eric said while pulling cucumbers off the vine and placing them in a wheelbarrow. “And I needed to get up north, go to a better place.” He moved to the area and shifted from living “in the woods,” as he put it, to working “for some lady.”

“And then a guy brought me over here and I’ve been here ever since,” he said. Though he’s looking for other jobs, he clearly doesn’t want to leave Sunny Acres. He said he’d like to stay in his tent, maybe dig a ditch around it to keep water out when it rains. He’s also thought of building himself a yurt (a hut), but between the farm work and searching for work, he doesn’t really have the time or motivation to leave his tent.

“I was living in a tent, but they chased me out of the woods,” he said. “But at least here it’s legal. I’ve got food and a shower. But there’s still a million people out in the creek.”

Success story

“Let’s go get some grub before it’s all gone,” De Vault suggested. Back in the dairy barn, I sat across from De Vault and next to Jesse, one of the managers and the person who runs most of the daily farm operations. Wearing a medical collar with a plastic tube over a stoma, Jesse plugged the end of the tube with his finger so he could speak.

“If it wasn’t for this guy [De Vault] and Sunny Acres, I’d be dead,” he told me. “I’d be dead.”

For a while he managed to balance a casual drug habit with work, mostly in processing plants in Santa Maria. But in 1991, after divorcing his wife of 11 years, Jesse began using meth everyday. Then, in 2000, he lost his job.

“From there on, it went in a spiral down. I was using \$800 a month in meth. Everything I owned, I ended up selling. At the same time, I was selling drugs,” he said.

He continued like that for years. He and his girlfriend were kicked out of their apartment and shuffled between living out of his car, at Lopez Lake, and crashing with friends when they could. “It was miserable,” he said. “All the friends I had when I was using drugs—and I had a lot of friends—but when you’re down and out, you don’t have any friends at all.”

On Friday 13 in September of 2002, he was arrested when SLO police found drugs in his bag. “That was the first

time I ever got locked up for drugs,” he said. Jesse was facing eight felonies and possibly three to five years in prison. On the night before a scheduled court date and after spending about two months in a county jail, he made a deal.

“If you get me out of this,” he bargained that night, “I’ll go straight.” He admitted he had made the same promise before, but this time he actually believed he would do it. “I was broken,” he said.

The next day in court, Jesse’s attorney walked out of the judge’s chambers and told him most of the felony charges would be dropped if he pleaded to lesser charges and agreed to probation. “Where do I sign?” he remembered thinking. He also thought, “Why was I spared?”

since moving to Sunny Acres: one time after one of the last county raids.

In 2004, SLO County officials and police forced about 60 of the 72 residents on the ranch to leave, he said. Jesse was living in one of the permitted structures and therefore was not forced out. He watched his friends walk off the ranch and down the road that day and thought again, “Why was I spared?”

“It was depressing for me, so I used the best coping method I had, which was the comfort of getting high,” he said. “I felt so fucked in the head. It could’ve been me.”

Now, about six years later, Jess may have to decide who goes and who stays.

“What do you tell a person that’s been

came forward to save my ass and save these people’s ass.”

But if you ask anyone living there now, they don’t want to leave.

“For the first time in my life I have stability,” Jesse said. “I have a solid foundation. I have people that look up to me. I mentor people now.”

There are people like Jimmy Lack. Lack has been living off and on at Sunny Acres since 2002. He eagerly took me into his trailer where he had old newspaper clippings following the political and legal battles over Sunny Acres. “And then here’s my memorabilia wall of all the people that came and left Sunny Acres,” Lack said, pointing to photos pasted to the wall near his bed.

“I’ve never been so happy in my life,” he said of the ranch. “I’ve had my best birthday here, the best Christmas of my entire life.”

There have been some positive small steps for Sunny Acres. County building officials recently accepted plans from De Vault for a new 8,000-square-foot, 14-room facility for residents. De Vault’s attorney, John Belsher, is appealing Crandall’s ruling and a court date is scheduled for Aug. 9. Jorgeson said the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development re-opened a case on Sunny Acres that she believed would add more weight in the battle with the county and courts.

When you talk to people there, the first thing on their minds isn’t the looming eviction, or the national media attention De Vault and the ranch have attracted. People at Sunny Acres want to talk about the harvest for the day, or show pictures of the stump removal they were working on the day before, or gloat about how many chickens they sold to a passing family.

Jesse wants to tell the story of when De Vault forced him to build stairs even though he had no idea how. They took 10 weeks to build and Jesse beams proudly when he talks about the perfect set of stairs he constructed.

“I was like a fucking rooster,” he laughed. When he grabbed De Vault to show off his work, “He goes, ‘I don’t know why you’re so happy. You better get your ass upstairs and

do the next set.”

And it seems that, at least for the moment, Sunny Acres is building stairs and hobbling up each step—perpetually moving people from condemned buildings to tents and cabins to wherever they’ll go next.

Eric wants just to pick the crops and keep the geese from eating his fruit. I asked him what it was like living and working on the ranch. As he rolled a wheelbarrow out to gather more fruit, he answered simply, “Eh, up and down.” Δ

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‘If a place like this helped a person like me with my problems in life, it can help anybody. This place is needed. This place is my home. And there’s a lot more people that we need to help here. There’s a lot more people like me.’ Jesse

And while waiting to be released, not having had much contact with anyone since he was arrested, Jesse thought to himself, “Where the hell am I gonna go now? I’ve got no job, no car, no money.”

His girlfriend picked him up, took him to get a burger and a Coke (“That’s the only thing I wanted.”) and then dropped him off at Sunny Acres, a place he’d never heard of. He met with De Vault and was quickly put to work. “It wasn’t luck, it was some higher intervention ... I was just along for the ride,” Jesse said.

That was more than seven years ago and Jesse said he’s been clean ever since. Then he corrected himself. He has used

homeless for the past 18 years?” he said. “Now they’ve had a roof over their heads for the past two months, they’re going to be homeless again.”

What now?

Much has been said about Sunny Acres: The living conditions there are unsafe and unsanitary; the residents are being taken advantage of because they have nowhere else to go; De Vault gets off on the media blitz he’s created by fighting with the county.

“Everybody says that it’s gone to my head and all I’m about is publicity,” he told me. “Actually, the way I see it is I feel so great that the media and public support