

Hotel California

It is the land of broken dreams, of lost jobs and auctioned homes - it is America. Who wants to see the poor and homeless, has to go to San Diego. And meet David Ross.

By Reymer Klüver

San Diego - The air still carries the warmth of the sun and the gentle light of dusk takes away all the hardness of the day. With a battered, black Hyundai David Ross turns into the 17th Street on the outskirts of the inner city of San Diego, in southern California. Red tape holds together the left taillight of the car. Rust breaks through on the passenger door. Ross slowly rolls by, the window lowered, honking at a few people on the sidewalk. They call him Dave, he is the water man, the man with the water. A woman in a grubby, sky-blue T-shirt jumps up from the blanket she had spread out on the concrete for the night. "Hey Waterman," she exclaims in a voice so hoarse, as only years of life on the street can make it, "what do you have for Paula?"

Ross, a man of 75 years, opens the tailgate of his car, he sits on the bumper and pulls water bottles out of the trunk. Everybody gets one, women get two. They all crowd around him now, a bunch of sad figures in sports sneakers, sweat pants and T-shirts. San Diego is a metropolis of the homeless in America, of the people without a place and a home to go to. "God bless you," says a bearded man and quietly puts the bottle of water in a small brown backpack, "thank you." On two crutches, he drags himself into the twilight of the early night.

Ross travels the streets of San Diego every day. "America's Finest City" San Diego is called in tourism brochures. This is the glossy advertising, and that's one side of San Diego. Ross knows the other side, a city of violence and neglect. Nothing more he has to give but a sip of water and a few good words. And yet, that is exactly what people on the street get the least and perhaps need the most: To comfort them into the next day or perhaps only into the night.

Bottoms, the homeless call this area on the outskirts of San Diego. That could be translated simply to lower city. But a different, much harsher translation would be more suitable. In this place it cannot be overlooked, how permeable America's society actually has become. Permeable in one direction: downwards. In the Bottoms those land who hit rock bottom.

Julie Porter, for example, a small gray-haired woman with a history millions now share with her across America: One year ago, her house in La Mesa, a suburb of San Diego, was foreclosed on her, because she had lost her job and could no longer pay the mortgage. Since then, the 53-year-old lives in a car.

Or Matthew Bow, aged 28 years. He constantly runs around in a shirt and a tie, as if he had an office job. But he has not. He has nothing left. Six months ago, the Marines got rid of the war veteran, because Bow could not cope with the fact that his best buddy in Iraq had put a bullet through his own head. Urgently he should undergo psychiatric treatment.

Or Brisena Ramon, 39 years old. Months ago, the small, round man suffered a hernia. In the hospital they have patched together his abdomen, with skin from the thigh and then released him back on the street. Across the abdomen stretches a swollen scar, not at all healed. His bed is a camping chair on the sidewalk on Commercial Street below Interstate 5. The scar will ignite again soon.

In San Diego the number of homeless people has risen by 20 percent since 2008, the first year of the great misery in America. And they are getting even more because so many people lose their homes across America, in this era of broken dreams, of lost jobs and foreclosed homes.

Estimates vary widely for all of America: In the United States between 1.5 and 3.5 million people per year are likely to live, at least for a time, without a solid roof over their head. Homelessness is something of a new social disease, just like back in the days of the Great Depression. In San Diego they have counted them last winter: 9000 people now live on the street. Under the bridges of the highway, Interstate 5, on the sidewalk opposite the city library, in doorways, in the gutter. That is nearly one out of a hundred of San Diego's population of more than a million.

David Ross, the water man, knows the people on the street. And they know him. Wherever he stops his black car and hands out water they are right with him. For years, he has been doing it now. Ross is a remarkably wiry fellow with close-cropped white hair. He has forgotten to shave perhaps for days now. And his face is wrinkled as California's San Andreas fault. "I know I look like Keith Richards," says Ross, "like Keith Richards on crack." Indeed, life has left its marks on him, and one might think, Ross does not look that much different from the men who live in the streets. He wears a faded baseball cap (the Lions, the football team in his hometown of Detroit) and green-tinted sunglasses, white sneakers and wide, white sweatpants. On the side pocket it reads "God Bless." He takes that seriously. In the newspapers of the city they call him "Gandhi of the ghetto", an association triggered

perhaps by Ross' frail stature that makes the man look so scrawny ascetic. For breakfast he usually eats nothing more than a banana. Every morning, despite his age he adamantly plays tennis for one hour.

It is a long and winding road that has made David Ross become the Gandhi of the ghetto, an epithet that flatters him recognizably. "I am a child of the ghetto myself," he says, "born and raised in Motown," Detroit, America's Motor City. His father he barely knew. The man was a gangster, hired by the Mafia. He was shot when David was eight years old. His mother had to give the boy away during the week. At 15 he fled from the home for the first time. Later he somehow managed to pull himself out of the mess. He became a car dealer. A boy from Detroit knows something about cars. And he knows how to talk - until today. First he sold Pontiacs, then cars from Mercedes-Benz. First in Dallas and later in San Francisco, Houston and finally in Los Angeles where he led the dealership. He was successful, making millions in sales - until he collapsed in the office. A heart attack. He was only 53 years old, but already broken. He narrowly escaped death. "That day was the best in my life," he says today: Ross got out. He moved to San Diego, worked more than a decade as a social worker and now lives on a small pension. And he began to help people without a place to stay. "I know what they are going through. I know what it's like not to be loved by anyone", he says.

And then there was this woman he happened to more or less stumble upon one night. She was 60, or perhaps only 40. After two or three years on the street, he says, all people look like they are 60. She sat huddled on the sidewalk under a bridge on Imperial Avenue. "A diabetic. You know, many in the streets have diabetes. And they get far too little liquid. Simply speaking, they dry up very slowly." He took a small, open bottle, which he had in the car. "She said she did not want to take my water away from me. I said, Honey, please drink. And she drank. But she could hardly swallow, her throat was so dry. It took minutes before the bottle was half empty. That was the moment when I understood what these people need." He knew that many of the homeless are ill and need medical care. That they are suffering from pneumonia and tuberculosis, high blood pressure and diabetes, and cancers that are not properly treated. He knew that a third of the people on the street are dependent on alcohol or drugs. He knew that many are simply not quite right in the head and should be in a home and should be supervised so that they do not do any harm to others or themselves. In short: Ross knew how incredibly ugly America's supposedly most beautiful city could be, how great the need was in San Diego.

But the fact that these people even lack the bare essentials of life, just a little bit of clean water for drinking – he would not have believed it in his dreams.

And so that night he went into the next Seven-Eleven and bought all the water bottles that they had. 30, 40 bottles. Then he distributed them. He does that almost every day since then, hundreds of bottles he distributes now on a daily basis, until the trunk of his black Hyundai is empty: water, vitamin drinks, fruit juice, anything that helps against thirst, The bottles are donated to him, by his tennis friends, by church organizations, by anyone. He takes everything.

If you will, the story of water man in San Diego is also a story of civil disobedience, a parable for the power of the individual, an object lesson of how courage and endurance apparently can shake up conditions that seem to be molded in concrete for all times. At least shake them up a little bit. "I don't have any illusions", says Ross, "I do not believe that I could change things radically here."

But he knows that he makes the authorities nervous. His presence alone prevented "that they do business as usual" as he calls it - that things could go on as they used to. In San Diego's police they have learned it the hard way. First, they did not know what to do with him, "this crazy old guy with a one-eyed, dancing dog", Ross says about himself - and Topspin, his white Bichon Frise. He has taken in the pet dog three years ago from an animal sanctuary: On command, she turns on her hind legs in a circle. Sometimes he has her with him in his car. The police probably thought that he was a strange fellow. But really annoying he became to them, when he protested against their practice of confiscating the shopping carts from the homeless along with all their belongings and fining them with \$ 500 (knowing that they would never be able to pay), on the grounds that the carts must be the property of supermarkets, and thus obviously were stolen.

Ross organized used shopping carts and distributed them to the homeless. They had a marker on them that read: "Born-Again-Baskets". Which is of course not without subtle irony, "born-again shopping cart, borrowed from the Isaiah Project," his small organization. "Now no policeman can take them away anymore," says Ross, "it is as if we had given them their own car." Nearly so. And he objected to the daily harassments. Like when one ill-tempered cop distributed tickets, 205 dollars for "illegal housing" - which it costs if one gets caught in San Diego spending the night on the street. That's more than for a room in the Holiday Inn. Or was he there when the police again chased the homeless under the bridges, and preferably at night in the pouring rain, knowing that there is nowhere else for them to go in San Diego. This old man really got on their nerves, so much that eventually one of the police could not hold back, when Ross was handing out water bottles to the people. He hit Ross so hard he had to go to the hospital. He complained. Lawyers helped him free of charge, local television took up his story. And Ross won. In the end the

court believed the testimony of two homeless, after all. The city had to compensate Ross for the hospital costs.

The City Council of San Diego feels awkward when the water man attends their meetings. Every Tuesday morning he shows up at City Hall. Every petitioner has two minutes, and the faces of the five council men and three council women behind their desks in the paneled chamber take on a decidedly bored expression, when Ross reaches for the microphone. They know his story. Once a week, he reminds them of the bottom ten thousand of the city. "I'm just an old man," he begins, "and it's hard to do any tort to me. But the way we treat people in this city who have no chance and no voice is a disgrace. San Diego is a city without responsibility and without shame." Tirades like that won't change anything. David Ross knows that. But he has proven that he is not to be underestimated.

Four chemical toilets he has wrested off the city, they are at the Island Avenue and 17th Street, right in the bottoms - so to speak, and they offer the right to do an all too human business at least with some kind of dignity. Now it does not stink anymore in the streets of the area. "Every day the toilets are used 800 to 1000 times. But it was a struggle." And just last year he has got \$ 100,000 off the city after she had wanted to expel homeless people with methods, such as one might think they may be possible in the slums of Mumbai, but not in the streets of San Diego. Municipal officials had gathered belongings of the homeless they had gathered on sidewalks and in parks and had them shipped off to the dump – medical drugs, personal photos, ID cards, everything.

Ross and a few friends complained. Agreement was reached out of court, and so the city turned a storage room on the outskirts of the inner city over to the water man and \$ 100,000 for a garbage depot: the "Waterman Check-In Center". 315 brown, clean and numbered plastic barrels are now in the facility. Homeless people can leave here what is left in their possession and store all for free, without fear that it might be stolen - or simply thrown away.

"I'm happy when I'm with these people," says Ross, "and if I should die today, under a interstate bridge from San Diego, I would leave as a happy man." He really means it. "I would not have been able to say that when I had my black Mercedes convertible in Los Angeles, my Armani suit and Gucci loafers."

Well, on this summer evening at the 17th Street Paula, the woman in the dirty sky-blue T-shirt, does not leave the water man alone. He has given away his water bottles and thrown in a few offhand remarks, and he even has given a pair of sneakers to one of the women (the shoes had been donated to him). "They would cost you \$ 400 in Detroit," he jokes. But now he wants to leave. He still has to go to the interstate bridge on Commercial Street and in front of the public library. And to the tent for the homeless veterans. They wait in Midway, halfway to the white sandy beaches of La Jolla. But Paula continues pleading. "Paula", the water man jokes, "I'm waiting now for 25 years for you. If it does not work with your new guy, I will be waiting." They like that, when he talks like that. Paula laughs, but she does not let up. "Hey water man," she continues begging, "play it again, and play it loud."

Ross turns around and says: "She always wants that." And then he inserts the CD, and from the speakers of the Hyundai a country hit is rattling into the warm evening air of San Diego.

"Why me, Lord". There is the dark voice of Kris Kristofferson, the old song, and Paula sings in a hoarse voice, kneeling in the open driver's door. Her forehead is deeply wrinkled, and her bright blue eyes are glowing in a leathery tanned face.

"Why me, Lord?"