

San Francisco's Tenderloin: A Photo Essay

by David Field

Making a difference

Moving to the Tenderloin, in June of 2006, was a learning experience even though I had lived in San Francisco for the past 6 years I had little idea of exactly what I was getting into. For the past years I had spent my time helping the homeless at places like Glide Memorial Church and St. Anthony's Foundation. Both of these organizations specialize in assisting low-income individuals and homeless people get food, shelter and in some cases rehabilitation for drug or alcohol abuse. It was eye opening as I met individuals my same age, race, ethnicity, and with very similar cultural backgrounds. Little was I aware that within the next 2 years I would be living in the same area where I had helped an innumerable group of neglected people.

June came and went and I began to notice things interesting about the area. Parks, murals, playgrounds, children, families, computer centers, schools, churches, many non-profit agencies, and housing projects dedicated to individuals with low socio-economic status were all around me. The long lines of homeless were there but as obvious as they were, distracted from many of the beautiful things in the area. I was struck with the thought that in order to change people's perceptions of the Tenderloin a story had to be told and a difference had to be made.

Killings and cameras

But just when I started to believe in the beauty of the area something happened: A woman in her 50's was murdered on my street. The police tape, the emergency services and the change in mood for the next week of the residents



Created between 1985 to 1986, this bronze sculpture symbolizes the diversity of people that come to Boedekker Park in the Tenderloin. The faces in the sculpture are of people that actually frequented the park in the late 70's. Smith took molds of their faces and sculpted them in to bronze. His sculpture represents hope for the community in the Tenderloin.

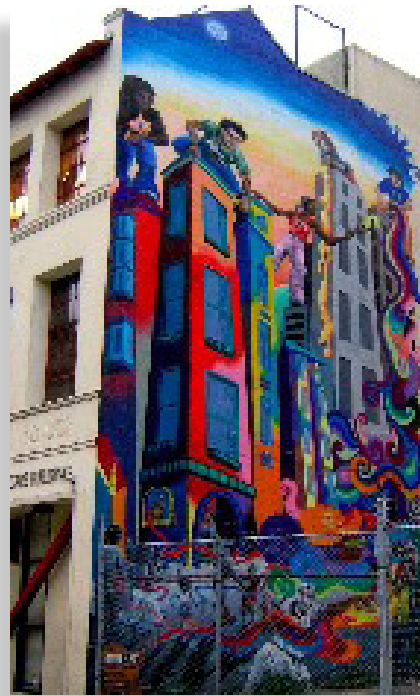
that live here provided me with a different opportunity. I noticed then that the streets between Ellis, Taylor and Leavenworth had signs put up stating that the city was installing safety cameras. These cameras were only “passive” cameras and would do very little to help in the immediate need for protection in the Tenderloin.

Interviews

Those signs went up four months ago and they are still there and since then have had four more murders occur. I decided to interview a few people and get their perspective on crime in the Tenderloin. I posed the following three questions:

- 1) Do you think that cameras in the Tenderloin will prevent or lessen crime in this area?
- 2) Do you object to the cameras being put in this area and if so, then why?
- 3) If you had the opportunity to change the area to rid it of crime what would you do?

The responses were intriguing and intelligent and represented a good cross section of people in the neighborhood. I interviewed a business owner, a neighbor, and a building manager; all people who had been in the area for more than a year and who could attest to the recent current events in the Tenderloin. Their answers, their emotions, and the subtle things found, are what constitute this essay.



A side view of the Janice Marikatani Children’s Center. Just one of the many buildings in the Tenderloin instituted to make a difference. The center offers assistance to families including a day-care for children up to 13 years old. Associated with Glide Memorial

Church, the center has been open for four years and is a courageous effort put together by the Reverend Cecil Williams and his wife Janice Marikatani. The side mural offers a glimpse of children in the Tenderloin.



One of the signs put up by the city of San Francisco explaining the “notice of intent to install community safety cameras on Jones and Taylor Streets.”

A total of eight of these signs in English, Spanish, and Cantonese are placed actually on Jones, Taylor, and Leavenworth Streets. The homeless in the area had no reaction to the signs because a large percentage of them can not read or write.



Mimi Yee, Owner/Proprietor of Manor House Restaurant on Leavenworth Street in the Tenderloin.

I have always believed that this area was relatively safe. As the owner of a business in this area I believe that the cameras will make a difference and that they are good for the crime at night. I do, however, think that they invade the privacy of the public. I think that if the police foot patrolled in the area more often then crime would decrease better than using the cameras. My restaurant caters to the homeless population, I strive to make everyone comfortable and accommodate every individual. The fact that there has been so much crime that the city has to add cameras make it a little unnerving to me. However, I remain optimistic because I have seen this part of the city flourish before.

Just one of the many signs posted in the Tenderloin prohibiting alcohol. Signs like these do little to reduce the amount of drinking since 24 hour liquor stores sell 1 can of beer for as little as 75 cents making it easy for people to obtain alcohol.



Henry (Resident on Ellis Street)

Cameras in the Tenderloin would not prevent crimes or lessen it because by the time when these crimes occur people are so angry with each other that they do not care if there are cameras at all. I say the more cameras the better because I have nothing to hide when I am out in the neighborhood. Anyone who does have something to hide would be bothered by the idea then. I think money is the main reason why the city has not put up the cameras. It cost a lot to install, maintain, and operate those cameras and even then they will still not be very effective. If it were up to me, I would have the police patrol 24 hours a day to keep the crime down.



A beautiful mural on Leavenworth Street. This mural was created in an effort to bring the community together. It is comprised of three paintings which have three separate quotes. “People should know more about this place.” “There is good people, there is bad people.” “So I think I just want people to know that just don’t judge a book by its cover. There’s a lot more inside.”



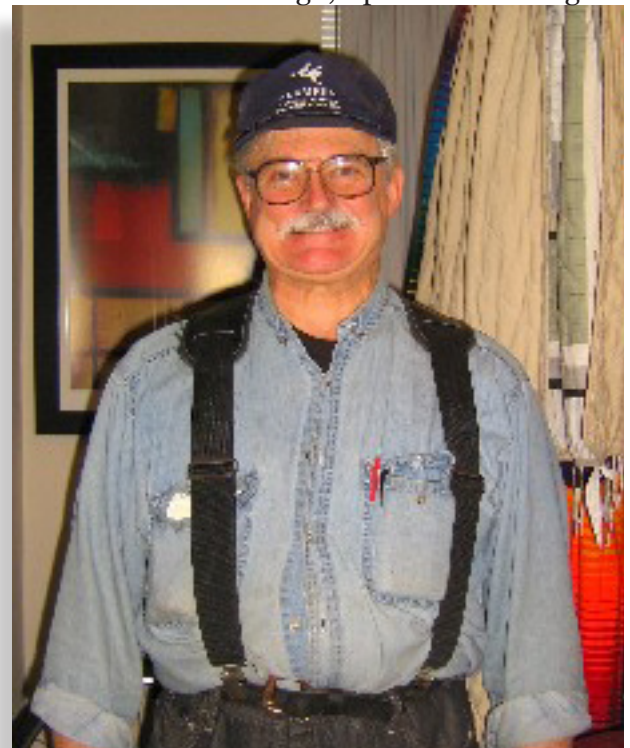
The irony of the crime in the Tenderloin is that much of it occurs in the area that is around the police department. I tried to contact the officers who staffed this station on three separate occasions but they declined to comment for my essay.



Christmas day in the Tenderloin. You can see the back of the signs on the Ellis St. sign. Thousands of homeless or people in need filled the streets waiting for food and gifts to be given to them from Glide Memorial Church. Each day Glide services over 2500 people with food, shelter, clothing, and counseling and drug and alcohol rehabilitation. The impact of this photo is obvious. There are many more individuals that need help in the Tenderloin. Cameras are not needed in the Tenderloin- funds are. The money that it costs to install the cameras here could easily have been diverted for necessities for these people.

Bob McCullough, Apartment Manager

Originally the city had instituted the cameras as “live action” cameras but those would have cost the city almost double so they went with “passive” ones instead. “Passive” simply means that these cameras can only record the action on the streets. They can not be moved and sound can not be heard. With the active cameras, if a gunshot was fired the camera could trace where the shot was fired within 50 feet. I was on the board helping to make decisions on whether the cameras should be active or passive. I voted “active” because since late 2005 there have been 4 shootings in the Ellis and Taylor Street locations which, to me, justified the use of these types of cameras.



Conclusions

The experience of photographing the Tenderloin enabled me to have an understanding that went far beyond the conventional stereotypes that exist here. The Tenderloin is a living, breathing, beautiful, yet misunderstood place, much like the people who inhabit it. The plethora of parks, murals, playgrounds, schools, churches, and non-profits that exist in the Tenderloin serve the residents and their families out of their own good will.

Apathy and turning a blind eye towards the violence and crime in this area is just one more obstacle to overcome. The city of San Francisco can offer more funding towards projects that actually help ameliorate the array of problems people in the Tenderloin typically face. Rehabilitation and restoration are the key to resolving issues in the area. If the city wants clean streets and people, than it should stop photographing them and start interacting with them.

Communication is key. It is the element that is underused and abused here. If elected officials would take out the time to talk to the people, assess their true needs, and together come up with a resolution, than the Tenderloin would be on its way to a positive, true, faithful recovery. Making a difference in this area means that communities, non-profits and churches such as Glide Memorial Church and St. Anthony's Foundation need not only financial support but emotional support as well.

This photo essay and the people who participated in it, all offer resounding ideas on how to positively make a change in not only their own community, but also in the world at large. If one positive idea can resolutely make a difference in one small area then it can make a difference for a large one as well. §