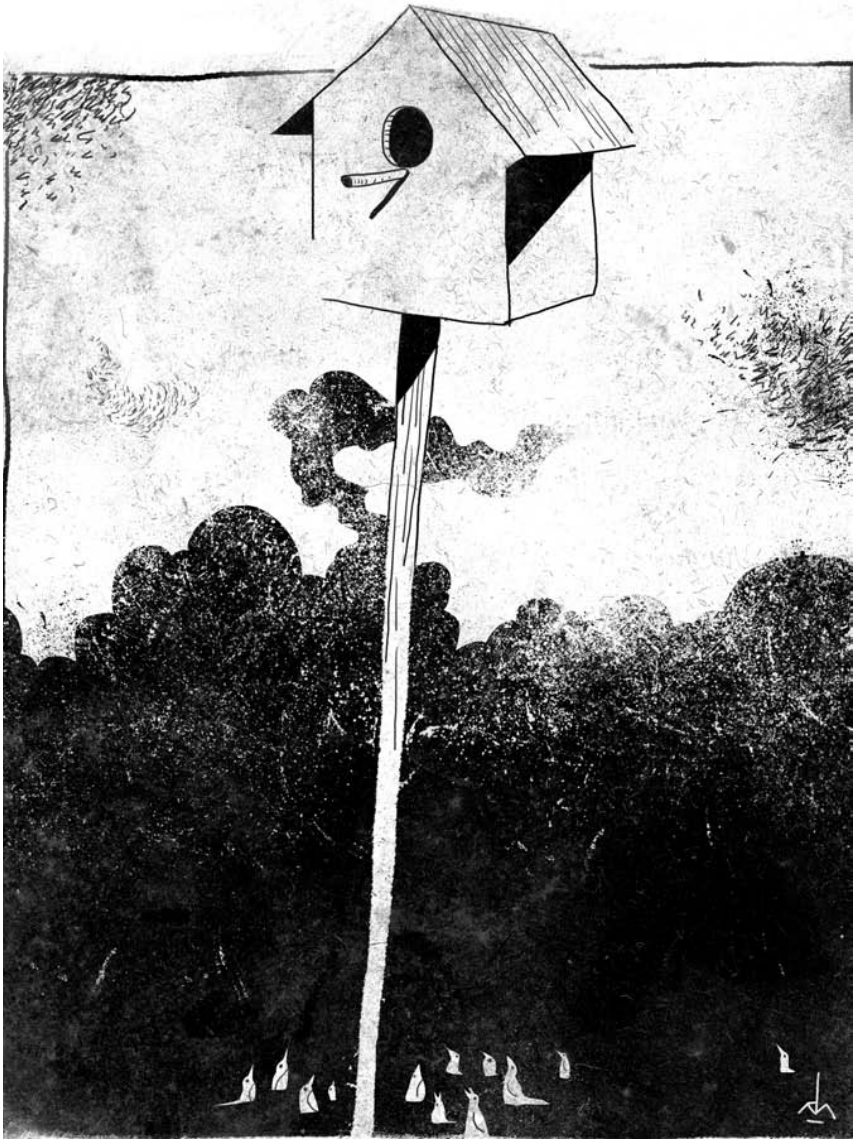
By Hank Kalet
Illustration by Dushan Milic

Tent City, USA



It is a cool spring morning in Lakewood, New Jersey. The sun is out, but it is dark and wet in the woods where a small city of tents and huts has been spreading for the last five years.

The narrow mud path from busy Cedar Bridge Avenue into the encampment is lined by firewood and thick cross-sections of tree trunks, blue and green tarps that drape plywood walls, and shopping carts. In some of the structures, there are men, both black and white, sitting in resin chairs. Some are smoking.

White hens and roosters wander the encampment and a couple of dogs can be heard barking over the receding sound of cars and trucks. At the center of the camp sit several propane grills and metal trash drums, a large tent used as a chapel, and another used as a shower. Fires burn in the trash bins, and several men stand or sit around to keep warm.

The encampment, across from a small public housing facility at the outskirts of Lakewood's small downtown area, is home to about 100 people, mostly men, who have found themselves with few other options. Many have tried shelters, have lived with relatives and friends, or slept in cars. Some work, while others have been on unemployment or have seen their benefits run out.

Angelo Villanueva is one of the camp's longer-term

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residents. A stonemason who had worked in the Camden area, he lost his job when the construction industry faltered as the recession took hold. He has been in the camp for a year—"the six-month plan didn't work," he says—and he is not sure how long he will remain.

"I lost my apartment," he says, "and I have no family in the area. I tried to live with friends, but, you know, they always say, 'My wife says,' and I'd have to move out."

Angelo's story is not unusual. According to the Reverend Steve Brigham, who helps maintain the camp as its de facto director, the camp has attracted a growing population of the new homeless—people whose jobs have been outsourced or lost work when the building industry collapsed.

Officially, there are 645,000 homeless people on any given day in the United States and about 3.5 million who are homeless at some point annually. Unofficially, there may be twice as many. A lot of the unofficial homeless live in tent city encampments.

Lakewood's Tent City, as it has come to be known, is one of many that have cropped up across the country. Some—like the one in Lakewood—predate the 2008 banking collapse. The Lakewood encampment was formed in 2006 as a way to connect smaller, less formal groupings and to create a sense of security and stability for Ocean County's homeless population. Other tent cities date back to as early as the 1990s.

Most offer amenities that the homeless often lack: showers, kitchen facilities, outhouses. Some offer access to electricity, the Internet, and television.

In Lakewood, there is a shower tent constructed by a long-term resident of the camp that features a tile floor. The sink and stall shower get water from a pipe that's been sunk below the surface to tap into the groundwater. The materials either were donated or purchased with gift cards to local big-box stores.

The kitchen was created using the same DIY ethos, with a small propane-powered stove and a prep area in a camper trailer.

The permanence of tent cities creates a "sense of ownership and allows the homeless to make both tangible physical and social improvements to their community in a way that is not possible in a mobile community," says a 2010 report by the National Coalition for the Homeless. Some receive significant support from local governments and community groups, others—like Nickelsville in Seattle—have faced major opposition. All of them, however, have been growing since the recession took hold.

"I worked twenty-five, thirty years. Then the economy crashed. No one is building houses. I always thought I'd be able to rely on my hands to make a living."

Neil J. Donovan, executive director for the coalition, says the growth of tent cities is understandable given the failures of our society to protect the most vulnerable.

"I would not call it a grassroots response," he says. "I would call it a natural, organic response to being un-housed and wanting to achieve as much of a degree of normalcy as possible."

Donovan is not happy about the response from the public to the residents of the tent cities.

"They are not there because they are deviant," he says. "They are not there because they are not smart. They are there because there is a deficiency that is not met. They are victims of our society, which does not provide for those most in need."

The issue is the lack of affordable housing. During the 1970s, Donovan says, affordable housing accounted for about 350,000 units across the country, many of which were built just before and after World War II. Over the last thirty to forty years, most of these have been razed or been allowed to be converted into market-rate units.

"That 350,000 is now down to 50,000 units," he says. "We have got to get back to at least the stock we had before."

At the same time, the rooming house—a single room with access to a common bathroom and dining area—has virtually disappeared. Those units provided workers trying to survive on or near minimum wage—a dishwasher making $200-$300 a week—a "very normal existence," he says.

Brigham agrees.

"You have to blame the economy, but I also have to blame the municipalities for not allowing affordable housing to be built," he says. "And I'm not just talking about subsidized affordable housing. I'm talking about small houses on small pieces of property, boarding homes, things that typically the underemployed, the low-wage earner has been able to access. I see it as irresponsibility of the political leaders, of the powers that be. The town fathers are not addressing the needs of the poor. They want to cater to the wealthy and the middle class and push out the poor to somewhere else. I see it all the time."

Lakewood was New Jersey's

fastest-growing town over the last decade, adding nearly 35,000 residents. Many of the newcomers are Hasidic Jews or Latinos. The town's median family income of $45,000 remains among the lowest in the state. The town, as a recent story in the *Asbury Park Press* points out, has had its share of problems—racial and ethnic tensions, bias attacks, violent crime.

There are affordable housing units—both those subsidized through HUD and state-approved units. And the Lakewood Housing Authority is located across the street from Tent City. But there are not nearly enough places to live, which is why the Lakewood encampment has been growing as the economy has faltered.

"I'm sure there are a lot of people living in cars," says Brigham. "There are a lot of people losing their jobs, losing their housing, and boarding with family, living on couches, whatever."

Mike is one of the more recent residents. He moved into Tent City several months ago when he returned to New Jersey from Pennsylvania to be closer to his children. He gave up a job in the Keystone State and has not been able to find another one. He lived in his car until he found the Lakewood encampment.

Jay, who works framing houses, came to Tent City after bouncing around the area for much of his adult life. He is fifty-two, in recovery for alcoholism, and found himself without a place to live. He works when there are jobs, but it has been sporadic.

Brigham says a small number of Tent City inhabitants have regular jobs—mostly at places like Walmart or the fast food restaurants in the area—while many are day laborers working only occasionally. Transportation is an issue—there is a bus that stops not too far from the camp, but getting bus fare can be difficult, and the routes are designed to take commuters into New York rather than to get around the local area.

Jay, for instance, had not worked in the week and a half that he'd been in the camp, and he's not sure when he'll be able to work because of transportation.

"From here to the Long Branch area, I imagine would probably run maybe as much as $6 or $7 one way," he says. His transportation bill can run up to $60 or $70 a week.

That is a big reason that many end up staying in Tent City for upwards of two years, Brigham says.

"Without transportation, especially in this area, it is difficult to get a regular job," he says.

In the beginning, the camp was home to what Brigham calls the typical homeless—the mentally ill and the addicted—but he has been seeing a change in the population: people whose "jobs have either been outsourced or downsized or the building industry has collapsed and so they don't have enough work to afford the cost of housing."

Michael and Marilyn Berenzweig also live in Tent City. They've been married for more than forty years. Michael is a musician, and Marilyn has always been the chief breadwinner, working nearly thirty-five years in the textile industry as a designer and studio supervisor. Her last salary topped $100,000.

"The industry has been dying," she says. "It has been dying for a number of years. The work is going to China, and computerization has made designers unnecessary."

After being let go from her last job with a family-owned company, she says the couple "knew we had to change our lifestyles."

They were living in an apartment in Queens, New York, paying $2,000 a month in rent, and they were helping out their daughter and husband.

"We did not have much savings," she says. "I suppose we should have, but our daughter did need our help. They were renting a house in Queens, so we consolidated." It was a small house, and there were tensions. Michael and Marilyn, both vegans, were hoping to get their daughter's family to eat a healthier diet. After they had a final falling out with their daughter, they took up residence in Tent City, which is where they've been for the last two and a half years.

They are "not at all unhappy" to be in Tent City, Marilyn says. "I wouldn't mind a bathroom with a nice shower, but we do pretty well."

"We kind of decided to have a different lifestyle than the United States promotes," Michael says. "It is rewarding not to be a part of the capitalist system."

Donovan understands the sentiment, but says society would be better served by the construction of permanent housing.

"If you had some kind of health problem and you took half doses of antibiotics, you would become treatment resistant over time," he says. "People in tent cities are people who believe housing is so out of reach that they become housing resistant. We have got this whole generation, or a sampling within it, that has just lived in this un-housed situation so that an encampment seems reasonable."

Brigham does not disagree.

"Affordable housing is a basic human right," he says. "But you have to make something small enough for someone working a minimum wage job at Burger King or McDonald's to afford. Every wage earner should have a place they could afford to live in."

For Angelo Villanueva, and for many like him, that's not possible in today's America.

"I worked twenty-five, thirty years," he says. "Then the economy crashed. No one is building houses. I always thought I'd be able to rely on my hands to make a living. I guess that's not the case." ◆