



THE MAD HOUSERS

534 Permalume Pl., Atlanta, GA 30318 (New Address!) · (404) 806-6233 · www.madhousers.org

UPCOMING EVENTS

July 20, Tuesday 7:00 pm

Client Outreach meeting

Jake's (676 Highland Ave)

July 27, Tuesday 7:00 pm

General Meeting

Jake's (676 Highland Ave)

July 28, Wednesday 7:00 pm

Stove burn

Warehouse (534 Permalume Pl.)

July 29, Thursday

Stove build

Warehouse (534 Permalume Pl.)

August 21, Saturday

ShedSpace

See page 6 for details

Check www.madhousers.org for the latest news and upcoming events!

FIRE AT BANKHEAD

By SALMA ABDULRAHMAN

On a cold winter night last January, a hut burnt to the ground and threatened to ignite a second structure nearby. The owner, Tom, was lucky to escape with the clothes on his back and his wallet. The fire was caused not by a Mad Housers stove [see sidebar, page 2], but by a kerosene heater.

The night of January 29th, 2004 began quietly enough when Tom asked a fellow campmate to buy him some kerosene for his kerosene heater.

The man was happy to oblige, but he accidentally bought gasoline instead of kerosene.

"It worked fine for about two minutes," recalled Tom. "Then it made frying noises, like frying bacon. It went out one time, then ten seconds later it ignited again. And then it exploded.

Fire and gasoline sprayed all over the bed and the walls. I ran out, but after a few seconds I ran back in to get my wallet and my pants. I covered myself with a blanket to try to hide myself from the flames. I tried to get my shoes but I couldn't get close enough; they were on the other side of the bed."

"We received the call as a woods fire, not a structure fire," says Captain Tim Garrett of Atlanta Fire Department Station 22. "When we first approached the camp we saw railroad tracks so we decided to reposition ourselves at another entrance to the camp. We never lay lines across tracks. We took up a few water and CO₂ extinguishers and used those, but we had trouble getting access because the nearest fire hydrant was over 300 feet away. When we got there, the structure was fully involved. We laid lines from the fire hydrant and extinguished the fire, and tried to save what we could."

That night was the first time Captain Garrett had ever visited the camp. "I had seen the camp from the street



Tom among the ruins. Photo by Salma A.

before and I'd seen people walk up there, but I'd never been up there. I thought they'd built the structures themselves, I thought that was pretty impressive."

The firefighters sprayed down the charred remains of Tom's hut, making sure the fire was completely out. Then they turned their attention to Tom's old hut, which was smoldering, and hosed it down as well.

Tom, wearing a borrowed pair of shoes from a fellow campmate, spent the night watching the remains of his hut in case it flamed up again.

Captain Garrett and his team are no strangers to homeless fires. "It's not common, but it does happen. Kerosene heaters are a huge cause of fires, especially in the winter. Just recently we were called for a woods fire. It was a homeless guy in a makeshift shed he'd built himself. The fire was caused by a kerosene heater. That man died."

I asked Tom how he and his fellow campmates were treated by the firefighters. "They wanted to know what kind of fire protection we have here. They were concerned about access to the hut site, concerned about our safety. They were really

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Fire Captain and Nice Guy Tim Garrett



Tom's new place

Photos by Salma Abdulrahman

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stellar."

After the fire, Tom had nowhere to go. He asked the Mad Housers to build him a new hut, and in the meantime he stayed at the Salvation Army. They offered him a space for two weeks, but he left after only six days. "I wanted to come back here. I guess I just don't like being crammed in with a lot of people." Tom immediately began cleaning the burnt hut site, despite the freezing weather. On the coldest night, in a chill 24 degrees, Tom made do with sleeping in a drafty, eleven-year old hut that had been turned into a storage unit. Of all the possessions lost in the blaze, the hardest thing for Tom to replace was the one thing he needed the most: his medication. The Veterans Affairs hospital required proof that the medication had been destroyed in a fire before they could replace it. So Tom turned once again to the Atlanta fire department for help.

"Those guys were great, I owe them my appreciation," says Tom. "Especially Captain Tim Garrett, he helped me get my medication back. He took out of his own time and called them and went through all that rigmarole, that maze of people he needed to talk to, going back and forth, and helped me work with the VA. And I really appreciate it."

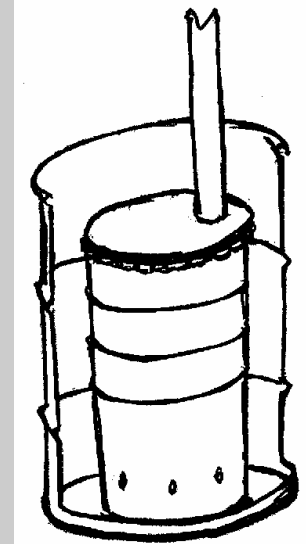
Three weeks later, the Mad Housers showed up in force to build Tom a

new hut. They worked with cheerful determination and assembled Tom's new hut in less than four hours.

"I feel great about the new hut going up. Peter [a MH volunteer] brought things for me, clothes, shirts, little things that helped a lot." Tom also plans to buy another kerosene stove when he's saved up enough money. "I've always used a kerosene stove. It's less work than a wood-burning stove but it's more money. I use it for heat, for cooking, for heating water." Tom still has a ways to go to get his life back on track after the fire. "I lost everything. I have to go through the process of getting everything again. I had just got new glasses that day, and they burnt up. I've got my medication. The most important things were my birth certificate and my military discharge papers. I fought for ten years to get that."

Tom, 63 years old, has been homeless for fifteen years, and he's lived at the camp for eleven years. Despite the fire, things may be looking up for Tom. "I'm on a waiting list to get into a high-rise downtown. They say it'll be six to eight months. I'm number 210 on the list."

Since the fire, the Mad Housers have distributed free fire extinguishers to every shelter. We are also collecting old cell phones for each camp. The cell phones do not have service plans, but by law a cell phone can always be used to call 911.



**STAYING WARM
WITHOUT GETTING
BURNED: STOVES AND
SAFETY**

The Mad Housers do not supply huts with kerosene or other liquid fuel heaters such as the one that set Tom's hut afire, for reasons of safety and availability.

Instead, huts are supplied with our emergency heating stoves, wood and charcoal burning stoves that we manufacture ourselves from steel shop buckets. These low-tech wonders put out plenty of heat from readily available wood, and are designed with safety in mind.

The diagram above illustrates a typical three-bucket stove sitting in a heat shield. The heat shield is half of a 55 gallon drum; it serves to both protect the walls behind the stove but also to reflect the heat back into the hut, thus keeping fuel requirements low. The top two buckets actually contain the fire, while the bottom bucket creates a dead space between the firebox and the bottom of the heat shield. The vent holes around the base of the stove sit under the fire, working with the chimney pipe to keep the fire burning evenly and the smoke out of the hut.

In the fifteen-plus years and scores of shelters built by the Mad Housers, no stove has ever caused a hut fire. Our careful design, sturdy construction and thorough instruction in stove use helps keep people warm *and* safe through the winter months.

LIBRARY HUT OPENS

By CATHY BYRD

If you're looking to borrow a copy of *The Chosen* or *Aesop's Fables*, *A Stranger in a Strange Land* or *Robinson Crusoe*, you can find them in the most surprising place: at the Stewart Camp library. Ann Rice, Amy Tan, Norman Vincent Peale and Shirley McClaine claim shelf space there. Maya Angelou's poems can be checked out, too, along with books on

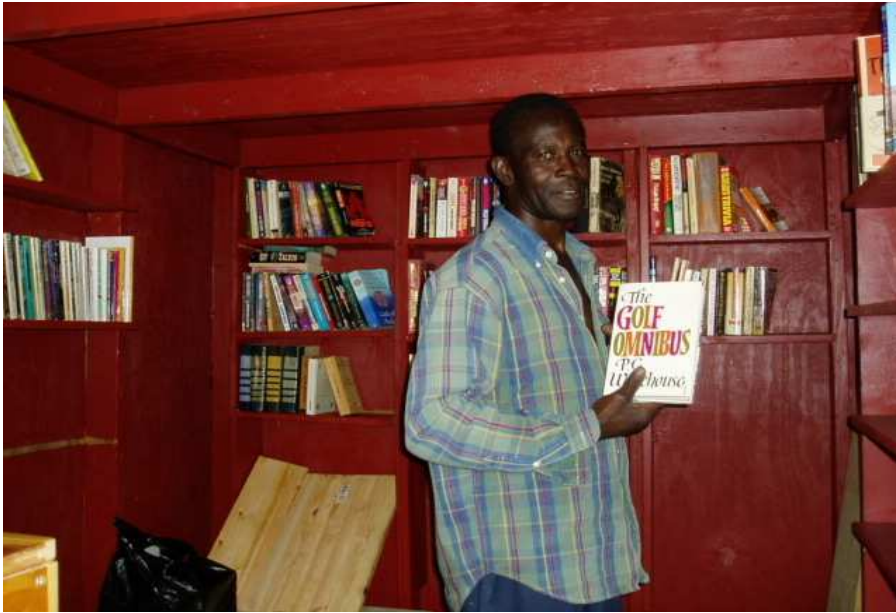
golf, physical conditioning and card tricks, a guide to wills and estates and a dozen romance novels by Nora Roberts.

Joe Agana, head librarian, conducts business informally, securing the 100 or so books with a simple padlock and watching over the building from the vantage point of his hut 10 feet away. This one-of-a-kind resource is here thanks to the vision of volunteer Larise Jackson. "Any time Larise

came down here, she found me reading," says Agana. Jackson discovered that quite a few members of the camp liked to read. So when the Mad Housers came to replace Agana's shelter last year, she remembers, "I just saw that hut empty and thought why tear it down? Why not make a library?"

Last December, Jackson worked with Agana to build shelves and paint the interior. Though they've managed to stock the library with a wonderfully odd starter collection, there are still a number of empty shelves. Agana gave us a wish list: a new dictionary, history books, a set of encyclopedias, elementary education textbooks, more books on how to use the internet and periodicals such as *NewsWeek*, *Time* and *U.S.A. Today*. For those who don't read much, he asks for picture magazines or books.

Beyond stocking the shelves, there are other ways we could improve this unique space. The interior is dark red and the miniature skylight (once the opening for a stove flue) offers little light. Jackson suggests adding some windows, and painting the inside pale yellow. With donations of books and magazines, paint, and volunteer time, the Mad Housers will work with Agana to ensure the Stewart library continues to grow.



Wodehouse in a wood hut. Photo by Lewis Ingram

STEWART NARROWLY AVOIDS CLOSURE

By NICK HESS

Stewart camp is unique. Located on a large, fairly remote site off an abandoned road, but close to a busy avenue with all the necessary services, Stewart was occupied for many years before the Mad Housers started in 1988. It is the largest camp the Mad Housers serve — over a dozen residents.

The trouble with Stewart started when a police officer stopped a camp resident on his way home. The policeman asked the camper where he was going, and when the camper replied he was going home, the officer asked where "home" was. When the officer saw the camp, he contacted City Sanitation, who immediately sent an inspector.

The inspector had plenty to see. Since camps don't get trash service, they

often have problems with garbage disposal unless they're close to a dumpster. Stewart's large size and remote location only exacerbated the problem; in addition to the large amount of trash that had accumulated over the course of fifteen years and dozens of residents, outsiders often dumped their trash at the site. In short, the camp was a mess, and the inspector declared it to be a dump site, which gave the city authorization to enter the property and remove the trash — and the huts. The city gave the campers a week to leave the premises before the bulldozers arrived. Fourteen people were about to lose what little stability they had.

The Mad Housers do had three basic options. First, we could ignore it. We never expect a camp to live forever, and Stewart had lived a long time indeed. However, the prospect of so many people being dislocated at once

was unappealing. That led to the second option: try to move as many folks out of the way as we could. The problem with this solution was twofold: first, there was no way we could move more than a small fraction of the residents in a week's time, and second, there was no place for them to go. The third solution was to try to clean up the camp. If all the trash was off the property and on the curb, then theoretically the city would have no reason to enter the campsite. This was a risky option — it might not work at all, and even if it did, we didn't want to set a precedent of cleaning for clients. After a few days of discussion and some calls to the city, we decided to try getting the camp clean. However, we wanted to make sure that, as one volunteer put it, "we would be helping them clean up the camp, not cleaning

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(Stewart, Continued from page 3)

it up for them". So we made a flyer for the camp, which stated:

...The Mad Housers will be here on Saturday morning to **help**. We'll bring wheelbarrows, garbage bags, shovels, rakes, gloves, and tools to help clean up. We'll bring volunteers to help, and enough food and beverages to keep everyone fed and happy for the day. However, **THE RESPONSIBILITY TO CLEAN UP THE CAMP IS YOURS. WE WILL HELP YOU CLEAN THE CAMP; WE WILL NOT CLEAN THE CAMP FOR YOU.**

If cleanup is going well but isn't finished by Saturday, we will come back on Sunday morning. If cleanup isn't going well – if people expect the volunteers to do the all the work – we won't come back...

Saturday morning, a group of volunteers showed up at Stewart. Some clients were already working, and as the morning progressed most of the camp pitched in, until about nearly twenty people – half volunteer, half campers – were hauling trash to the curbside with wheelbarrows, shopping carts, and dollies. By the

end of the afternoon, the camp looked a lot better, but not quite done. The camp's participation had been very good, so we decided to return the next day to help finish the job.

The next morning we arrived to work on the last few stubborn spots. A couple of the huts were occupied by people with hoarding disorders, and their areas were piled with years of accumulated stuff. There was no way to clean these huts – but the areas around them could be cleared and neatened enough to make them more cluttered than trashy. We worked until mid-afternoon, and called it quits. All we could do was wait for Monday morning.

All told, an estimated two tons of trash and an old car were removed from the site by a total of fifteen volunteers and ten campers over two days. Among the items hauled out: an engine block; derelict bicycles; a truck camper top; a quantity of heavy scaffolding; and the aforementioned car.

CLIENT OBITUARY: EARNEST WALLACE

Earnest Wallace, a longtime Stewart resident, was found dead of natural causes in his hut on April 16. He was 58 years old.

Earnest was born on October 27, 1945 and spent his early years in Tarpon Springs, Florida. He entered the Marines upon turning 21 and was honorably discharged after serving in Vietnam.

He is survived by two daughters, two grandsons, his mother and three sisters.

Monday morning was tense. Volunteers had waited for the city to show up, but finally had to leave for work at 10:00. One of the campers agreed to call when something happened. Finally, around 10:30, he called. As promised, the city had shown up with a bulldozer and trucks to clear the site. But when they found all the trash sitting on the curb, the motorcade stopped. Phone calls were made... and the bulldozers loaded the trash onto the trucks and departed, leaving the campsite alone. The client reported that one of the workers told him they had originally been instructed to clear the entire site. Finding the site cleaned up and all the trash conveniently on the curb stopped the process in its tracks. Stewart, for now, was saved. Months later, Stewart is still going. The city has barricaded the abandoned road leading to the camp, keeping dumpers away. Meanwhile, the Mad Housers, looking towards the inevitable future, are exploring ways to shrink the size of the camp. It's not an ideal situation, but as always, we do what we can.



Trash day arrives at Stewart after fifteen years. Photo by Nick Hess.

VOLUNTEER INTERVIEW: SHAUNA METTEE

BY SALMA ABDULRAHMAN

Shauna received a degree in Molecular Biology from the University of Colorado, Boulder. She's lived in Atlanta for eight years and is working on a joint degree in Nursing and International Public Health. She's worked everywhere from South America to Guinea-Bissau (West Africa) and Madagascar and enjoys backpacking, camping and doing yoga

with her husband Michael.

Before we start I have to know, just what do you do at the Atlanta Zoo in the middle of the night?

I've been an educator and an animal handler at the Atlanta Zoo for six years. I teach an overnight program called Nightcrawlers where I handle education animals like young alligators, snakes, hedgehogs, and chinchillas.

Wow! OK, back to business... how did you hear about the Mad

Housers?

I met Jim Devlin at an art opening of our good friend Julie Puttgen. I heard him discussing a recent build and got the website info from him immediately. I signed up on the email list a couple days later. I met Nick when he put a call out for trucks for a Home Depot pickup. My husband and I joined everyone for the panel build at the warehouse the next night.

What was that first panel build

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(Shauna, Continued from page 4)

like?

Everyone was very helpful. A lot of people showed up that night, thirteen or fourteen, and their energy made it really exciting. There was one point where seven of us were all kneeling around a panel and hammering at the same time. It was loud, there was great energy, and it was really exciting.

I was also impressed with the plan in place, and the way the panels came together so quickly. There was something very satisfying about leaning a completed panel up against the wall and just seeing them stack up.

Why did you decide to join the Mad Housers?

I'd been volunteering with other groups over the years, but I wanted to find an innovative, driven organization where I could make a difference with underserved people. I have years of public health experience with communities in developing countries, and I thought maybe my skills could make a difference with communities here in Atlanta.

How long have you been a volunteer with the Mad Housers?

About six or seven months.

What kind of work have you done with the Mad Housers since you joined?

I've worked on panel builds and helped with a hut deploy last weekend. Michael Ann and I are



Shauna. Photo by Salma Abdulrahman

taking care of many of the administrative duties, and I'm helping with Client Outreach.

What are some of the things involved with Client Outreach?

I've been researching and contacting lawyers. We need legal advice so we can focus our energy on our work and not be worried about liability. I've also been cleaning and reorganizing the office at our warehouse. There's a surprising amount of administrative work that goes on in the background to help the Mad Housers function smoothly, and we can always use help with that. And I've come up with a list of all Atlanta-based homeless shelters. Jim and I will contact the shelters and try to establish a relationship with them. We want to be a source of information to our clients if they need it.

What are your impressions of the clients you've met?

They're as diverse as any people you'd meet every day. Overall they're clever, independent and polite. I use the word clever because their life is

about problem-solving. They have to do that all day long, and that comes across when you meet them.

What did you think of the campsites you've visited?

I've been to all the sites for Client Outreach. One thing happened that really impressed me, and I've seen this at other camps too. I went up to one of the camps with Nick. There were two guys sitting on a porch talking when we got there. After a second or two, one of the guys got up, went into his hut and locked the door. I was amazed at how good that made me feel. Here was a guy who had his own space that he could choose to go to. It was his space and his choice whether he wanted to talk to us or not. He had that small bit of control over his life; that's something we take for granted, that we don't have to answer the door if we don't want to. That feeling when you come home at the end of the day and you can lock your door... I think it's wonderful that we can provide that for someone.

What's one thing you'd like to tell people about the Mad Housers?

I like the Mad Housers because they directly address a basic issue: shelter. They don't care about race or religion- they're not trying to get an agenda across, they just want to help. The Mad Housers are focused, hard-working and fun people. Because of our great volunteers, we can have an immediate, tangible effect on the lives of Atlanta's homeless.

FEEDBACK FORM

- I'd like to volunteer
- I'd like to make a donation: \$ _____
- I have materials to donate
- I know someone who needs shelter
- I know a campsite
- Please remove me from your mailing list

You can use the back of this form for additional details.

Mad Housers, Inc. is incorporated as a 501 (c)(3) charitable organization. All donations are tax-deductible.

Name

Address

City, State & ZIP

Phone Number Call me

Email Address Add me to your email list

Send all correspondence to:
The Mad Housers, 534 Permalume Pl., Atlanta, GA 30318

**CLIENT OBITUARY:
PAUL SIMMONS**

Those who read our last newsletter may recall our client interviewee Paul, recipient of a new hut in the story "Thanksgiving". We found out shortly after publication that Paul died soon after moving into his hut, right around Thanksgiving weekend, "most likely of a massive heart attack" according to his benefactor, David Powell. Paul was born on December 27, 1947.

Powell writes:

I think Paul would want to be remembered as a philosopher. He believed in peace, respect for all living things, and the sanctity of a man's word of honor. Paul was truly a giver in a world of takers.

A few months after Paul's death, his shelter was passed on to another person who needed temporary housing.

David's full letter can be found on the Mad Housers website: www.madhousers.org



ODDS AND ENDS

Thank you **Sevananda** for choosing the Mad Housers as your January 2004 Community Change partner! Each month Sevananda sponsors a charitable organization and matches their customer's donations by 25%. The Mad Housers are proud to say we received the **largest Community Change donation ever**: \$521 from Sevenanda members donating at the register and 25% matched by Sevananda for a whopping grand total of \$651.25!

Located in Little Five Points, Sevananda is a consumer-owned cooperative providing fresh organic produce and other products to metro Atlanta. (www.sevananda.com)

The Mad Housers have a **new office!** After years of having various files scattered between volunteers, we have cleared out a room in the warehouse. Better yet, we have **changed our mailing address** to go to the office, so now all Mad Houser business has one location. Our new address:

The Mad Housers
534 Permalume Place
Atlanta, GA 30318.

Even with a new office, we're still a **100% volunteer-run organization**. Without their (our!) time, effort and care, none of this would exist. Thanks to every one of our wonderful volunteers—and **thanks to our donors**, who keep the lights on and the nails coming!

Remember **Shedspace**? The annual innovative project showcasing local artists in backyards across Atlanta will have an installation this August, in volunteer Cathy Byrd's backyard, in an authentic Mad Housers hut.



Time: August 21, 5 to 9 pm
Place: 2449 Harrington Dr.
Decatur, Georgia.

Featuring: True Heart Collaborative.

The Mad Housers welcome our new summer intern **Michael Prude**, who comes to us from Paideia.

Keep an eye out for our next issue!

