

# A Visit to Camp Paradise

Realtors talk about “pride of ownership” when they describe upscale neighborhoods. These little plots with their tents, outdoor furniture, kids’ toys and bikes neatly in their places certainly reflect the campers’ pride in their homesteads.

by Lydia Gans

I parked my car on a dead-end street behind one of those Denny’s Restaurants you find at freeway ramps, this one on Ocean Avenue near downtown Santa Cruz. There are a few modest houses, an open area and a trail going under a bridge and down to the San Lorenzo River. A pleasant walk through the woods along the river and I came to a hand-lettered, cardboard sign announcing:

## Camp Paradise

### RULES

1. NO DRUGS or you will be asked to leave.
2. NO ALCOHOL or you will be asked to leave.

3. NO fighting.
4. Respect each other.
5. Must do your part of chores.

Camp Paradise will enforce all these rules. Be one that can make a difference for all. Enjoy Camp Paradise. WE DO.

A bit further on is the center of the camp’s activity: A few tents, a box of toys, tarps stretched over areas for work and storage of tools, food and cooking supplies. When I arrived, a small group of men were working on an intriguing construction project.

I got a warm welcome from their senior member and leader, Larry Templeton, along with an enthusiastic explanation. They were building a bicycle dragster.

That’s a sleek, pedal-powered, racing vehicle. These guys call themselves the “River Rats Bicycle Club” and they plan to challenge the Santa Cruz Spokesmen and their \$25,000 dragster to a race.

Larry showed me around the camp. Near the center are vegetable gardens tended by the campers. There was the pumpkin vine planted and cared for by one of the children, and a delicately balanced pile of rocks which would detect even the smallest earthquake. Larry talked about Stuart, who likes to construct rock sculptures like this one, and how he met and fell in love with a fellow camper. Stuart and Suzanne are now housed.

As we walked on into the woods, Larry pointed out some of the poisonous and dangerous plants growing wild and said that the children get a weekly reminder lesson in recognizing and avoiding them.

Individual camp sites are set up in little clearings in the surrounding woods, each site bearing the unique mark of the person or family who lives there. I thought of how realtors talk about “pride of ownership” when they describe upscale neighborhoods. These little plots with their

tents, outdoor furniture, kids’ toys and bikes neatly in their places certainly reflect the campers’ pride in their homesteads.

We walked down to the river. It is filthy and, thanks to the leather tannery on the other side, it is so polluted that a person with a cut on their finger runs the risk of serious infection if they merely put their hand in the water. There is a homeless shelter on the other side, Larry said, and a rundown neighborhood where drug dealers and other undesirable people hang out.

From our vantage point on the clean, wooded Camp Paradise shore, I looked across at the dead and dying vegetation on the other side as Larry explained that the city regularly sprays it with Roundup.

The people of Camp Paradise, 25 to 30 of them, have created a community to take care of their needs and to take care of the environment; yet the City of Santa Cruz continues to try to evict them. At the same time the shelters, which have not nearly enough beds to cover the need, are sending people who come to them for help across the river to Camp Paradise. It’s ironic. It makes no sense.