Rebecca Dannenbaum searching for a phone charger, which she said she left in her room before going to the bathroom. (Caylo Seals | The Corsair)
Rebecca Dannenbaum, a Venice Beach native known by her friends as Prophet, standing in front of the RV she lives in with her dog, Google, on Venice Blvd. in Los Angeles, Calif., on Sept. 24, 2023. (Caylo Seals | The Corsair)
Rebecca Dannenbaum, a 54-year-old Venice, California native, has lived in the same RV parked in the same spot on Venice Blvd. for seven years.

Adopted in Minnesota by a Jewish, upper-middle-class family, Dannenbaum was brought to Venice, “the best place in the world,” by 30 years old. A dog groomer by trade, she lives with her two dogs, Google and One, and is fostering a third. Stopped at. She has spent all but 14 years of her life in Los Angeles, “Always West of Lincoln.” Lincoln Blvd., which runs North-South, is the main road that divides Venice.

Growing up she had a difficult relationship with her family. She was brought home by her dad without her mother knowing, and her mother felt forced to raise her. Due to this, Dannenbaum says that there is still some resentment, but that her mother did the best she could.

In her school years, she would spend time with the other “Boardwalk Bros,” the kids who were outcasts, and they would skateboard and listen to punk rock on the Venice Boardwalk. She says that she has “always been an addict,” and she was addicted to himself when she was nine.

“My dad used to have to take me to go fill up the gas in the car just because as a baby she only thing that soothed me from crying was the smell of perfume,” Dannenbaum says. “But I don’t do it in the same level that I used to do it.”

She has become frustrated with housing programs but feels forced to use them. After housing in and out of several housing assistance programs, she went into bridge housing, but left a few weeks ago because they wouldn’t let her keep her dogs there. Temporary shelters like bridge housing are designed to give people a safe place to sleep while they wait for permanent housing.

“The system was designed to fail. It’s like everybody knows that except for the people it’s failing for. And that’s unfair,” she says. “The one thing that people fail to realize is that the people out here on the streets, want to fit into society, society just won’t ask them to come in.”

Living in vehicles creates obvious difficulties, such as not having access to showers or bathrooms and finding a safe spot to park. She says that people will keep junk and trash outside of their RV and she will have to dispose of it. It can also be dangerous. On Oct. 14, a 47-year-old veteran, known as Tank to his neighbors, was killed in his vehicle home on Oct. 14 of this year. The LA County Homeless Initiative says that it takes a long time. Additionally, they have strict rules that can create stressful environments, and moving into a shelter spoils people from the community they had while living on the street. There are also challenges in running these programs.

In a statement, the LA County Homeless Initiative said that it takes time to prepare people to come off the street and to dispose of their vehicle. The resident may not be the owner, so the county must locate and inform the owner of the RV before action can be taken. Moreover, there is an additional burden in storing vehicles before they are disposed of.

“The Homeless Initiative also says, ‘Many RV residents do not identify as homeless and feel they are being asked to give up a roof over their head, even if the RV is inoperable and not fit for human habitation.’”

Lutzker says that some of the issues with programs in LA in general, is that someone can be stuck in them for a long time. Additionally, they often have strict rules that can create stressful environments, and moving into a shelter spoils people from the community they had while living on the street. There are also challenges in running these programs.

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Rebecca Dannenbaum’s friend sitting front of the RV Dannenbaum lives in on Venice Blvd. in Los Angeles, Calif., on Sept. 24, 2023. Her RV has become a sort of hub for many of her friends. (Caylo Seals | The Corsair)
They would be utilizing a space that usually goes empty 90% of the time. And this way it’s still a parking space,” she says, referring to an empty parking lot near where she lives.

Towards the end of 2022, LA City Councilmember Monica Rodriguez, who represents the north-east San Fernando Valley, announced that her pilot program that aims to reduce the number of RV encampments in LA has been successful.

“It focuses on engaging individuals, particularly those in recreational vehicles, to create comprehensive housing plans and transition them into housing while ensuring their vehicles are removed from city streets upon program completion,” according to a statement from Councilmember Rodriguez.

As of Oct. 20, the pilot program has placed 85 individuals into temporary housing, nine have been permanently housed, 65 vehicles have been removed from city streets, and twelve individuals have returned to living on the street or to an unknown location since its launch.

With 88% of participants still in the program, the high retention rate is due to “the service provider’s commitment to working with individuals throughout the entire process, from the initial contact to achieving permanent housing” the statement says.

The LA City Council passed a motion to expand the program, still in its infancy, to the rest of the city. The strategy is currently being reviewed to ensure “it aligns with city regulations and is scaled according to recognized best practices.”

However, Dannenbaum distrusts city officials and programs, and views them as corrupt and intended to fail. She is frustrated that the needs of people living on the street are assumed, not asked about.

“You're not going to take me from a safe home to put me in a temporary home,” she says. “Why can’t I just stay here until you get me permanent housing? I've been here for seven years.”

When asked about the distrust those living in vehicles may have towards the city and county, and how the pilot program is different, a spokesperson for Councilmember Rodriguez says that “establishing meaningful relationships holds substantial significance when working with individuals.”

Beyond the need for better housing programs, there appears to be an absence of readily available data on those living in RVs, and other vehicles in general. Use of public programs, the unique challenges of living in an RV or a car, the condition of their vehicle and general demographic data is just some of the additional information that, if collected, could be used to better guide housing efforts.

LAHSA’s yearly count only publishes data on the number of RVs, cars, and vans there are in the city and county of Los Angeles, and estimates the population living inside.

The RAND Corporation also does a count, but does not have specific data for those living in vehicles and only focuses on three neighborhoods. Data collected by researchers is narrow and focuses on a small subsection of the population, so it is not representative of the county as a whole.

Isela Gracian, Senior Deputy of Homelessness and Housing for LA County Supervisor Holly Mitchell, says that demographic data the county would have collected on those living in RVs is limited to the Pathway Home program.

“What is actually, something realistic that this person would seek out in terms of services? Not something that we think they should seek out, or would be better,” says Lukacher. “You need all the
Rebecca Dannenbaum sorting her laundry as she helps a friend of hers, Rob Sanders, take it to a nearby laundromat on Nov. 5, 2023. Sanders is relatively new to being unhoused, so Dannenbaum is letting him live with her while he learns to survive. (Caylo Seals | The Corsair)
Rebecca Dannenbaum, a Venice Beach native known by her friends as Prophet, and her friend sharing a cigarette in the RV that she lives in on Venice Blvd. in Los Angeles, Calif., on Sept. 24, 2023. Dannenbaum has lived in this same spot for about seven years where it has become a sort of hub for many of her friends.

Rebecca Dannenbaum dragging a pile of trash away from the RV she lives in on Venice Blvd. in Los Angeles, Calif., on Oct. 23, 2023. She says that she piles trash up to make it easier for sanitation teams to take, but they never do. So, she moves it in front of a nearby fire hydrant because they are required to take it. She also says that most of this trash comes from people leaving junk near her RV.

Lisa Redmond, a member of the Venice Neighborhood Council (VNC), founder of the Venice Catholic Worker, and a housing and homelessness field specialist at the RAND Corporation says that what she hears from her constituents is that the main impact of RVs is largely “Visual Blight.”

“People say we just don’t want homeless people living next to us, but the thing is they already are,” says Redmond. “I think that they would be a lot more agreeable if they are provided with services, and bathrooms, and showers, and regular food.”

While the VNC itself has little power to act, they have recently restarted their committee on homelessness. Redmond also believes that the VNC can “broaden up” and begin to facilitate local organizations to have more safe parking, provide more bathrooms, and start to demand more from the city.

“When I think of an apartment I think of, ‘Oh, my god, neighbors and stress, and just the bills and the headache, and the walking on eggshells.’ Then what happens if I lose it? It’s stressful.”

She says that it reminds her of the 14 years she spent away from Venice when she was married, and that she does not “need four walls and a kitchen to make me feel whole or safe.”

However, Rob Sanders wants a permanent home. He came to California when he was 19 to pursue his artistic dreams, and relatively new to being unhoused. Dannenbaum is providing him a place to stay while he learns to survive.

“T am not saying that everyone wants to be in housing. Just to be able to go in, close the door, and lock your shit up. That’s a big deal for some people,” Sanders says. “This is the United States of America, we are the wealthiest nation on earth. People should not be homeless.”
Rebecca Dannenbaum takes a break from cleaning the RV she lives in on Venice Blvd. in Los Angeles, Calif., on Nov. 5, 2023. (Caylo Seals | The Corair)