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'Castaways' in motor homes feel stranded on society's fringe

By LUIS SINCO

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A man stands outside his battered trailer along Broadway in an unincorporated section of southern L.A. County. Shortly afterward, he was arrested for outstanding warrants and his home was towed away. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)



In 1979, the recreational vehicle manufacturer Winnebago proudly touted its latest models in glossy magazines with splashy full-page ads proclaiming their coaches to be “A Condominium That Goes Places at About Half the Going Price.”

Today, many old and battered Winnebagos number among the thousands of motor homes that line the streets of Los Angeles, from the San Fernando Valley to the Westside to the Harbor area. In a region where rents and home prices skyrocket year after year, recreational vehicles now qualify as residences for people who would otherwise be homeless.



A man smoking marijuana is framed in the window of his motorhome, which was parked beside an oil and natural gas processing plant along Broadway in an unincorporated section of South Los Angeles County.



A person collecting cans and bottles rides a bike down West 94th Street near LAX in an area that had become a community of homeless people living in recreational vehicles, tents and on the sidewalk. Police cleared and closed off the area, known to locals as "The Hunger Games," in January.



Kraig Goins fills his motor home with enough gasoline to drive it across the street and avoid being fined for not moving the vehicle on a day scheduled for weekly street sweeping.



A jetliner flies over a motor home parked on a stretch of West 94th Street beneath the flight path to LAX.

The 2017 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count tallied 4,545 campers and RVs in L.A. County that possibly serve as makeshift dwellings. In short, one of America's least affordable housing market forces people to find creative alternatives for shelter.

I happened upon the situation about a year ago, trying to find a shortcut on my commute home. I exited the jammed 110 Freeway in South L.A., turning onto Broadway to a landscape dominated by warehouses and light industry. At 133rd Street, I noticed numerous motor homes, most in a state of disrepair, lining both sides of the road.



The setting sun casts a golden glow over a line of recreational vehicles parked along Broadway in an unincorporated section of South L.A. County. With its wide streets and lack of residential neighborhoods, the area has become a magnet for people living in living in RVs. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

I found similar encampments in Manchester Square, a once-thriving neighborhood just east of LAX being converted into a transportation hub for the airport. In a surreal scene, scores of homeless people scratched out an existence beneath the endless string of jetliners landing at the airport.

The following photo essay offers a glimpse into these people and their

unconventional homes.

Sharon Manley and Kraig Goins



Sharon Manley and Kraig Goins share a tender moment outside of their recreational vehicle, which is parked along the road in an unincorporated area of South Los Angeles County. Manley is 77, Goins is 58, and they have lived in a series of motor homes for the last 15 years. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

Sharon Manley and Kraig Goins call themselves an odd pair. She is 77 and he is 58. She grew up in Iowa and he in Torrance. She looks like a kindly grandmother and he looks a lot like the late rock star Frank Zappa. They live together in a dilapidated camper parked beside the Hawaiian Host chocolate factory in Gardena.

Manley came to L.A. in the late 1970s, newly divorced and with two teenage sons in tow. She worked as a sales clerk and maid. Her last paying job was as a home care provider for elderly people in the South Bay. She said both her boys died young under tragic circumstances, one in a fatal confrontation with the police and the other fighting a covert war in Central America.

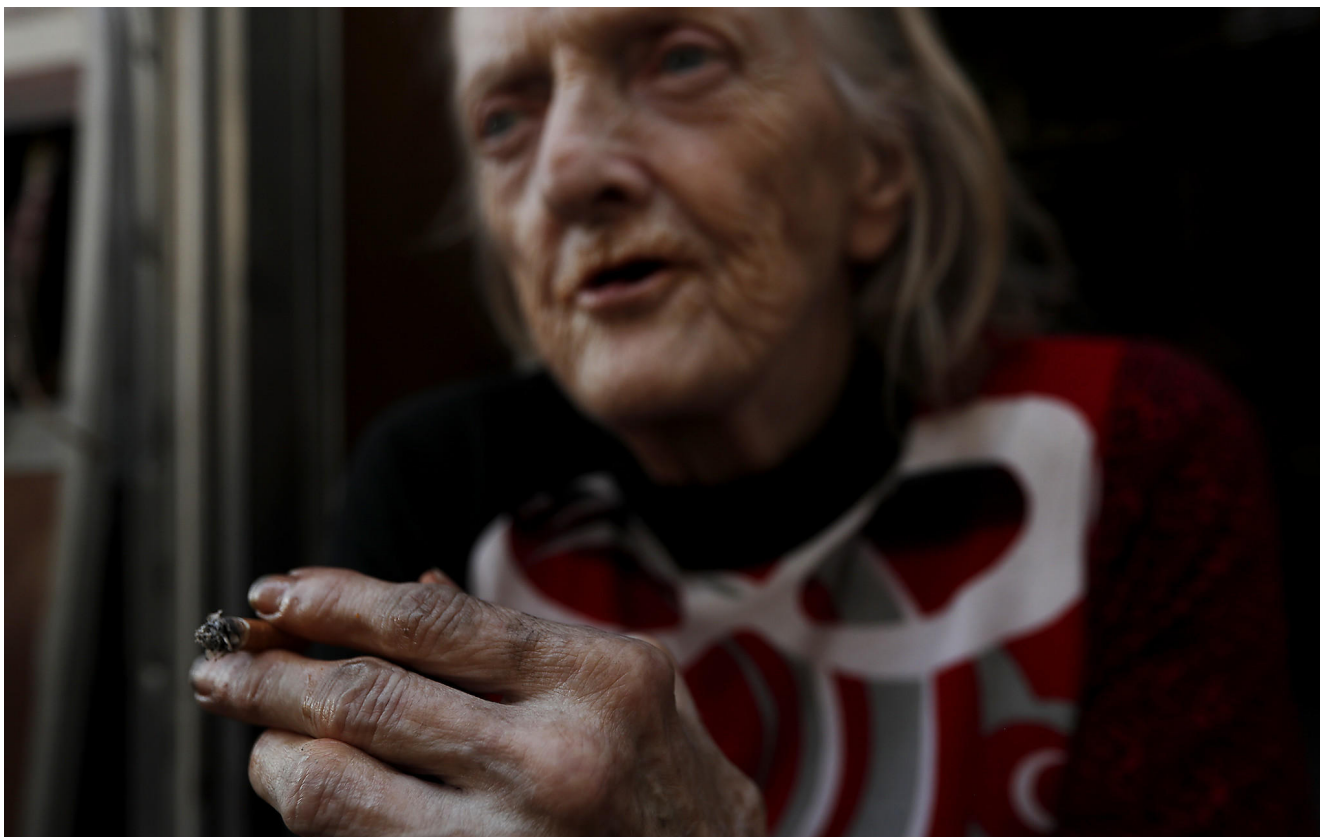
Goins was a skateboarder who graduated from Torrance High School in 1978

GOINS WAS A SKATEBOARDER WHO GRADUATED FROM TOLLAND HIGH SCHOOL IN 1976.

He worked as a parts and inventory specialist in the aerospace industry but lost his job to massive layoffs in the mid-1990s. He became an auto mechanic and was badly injured when a motor fan dislodged from its mount, struck his head and almost sheared his face in two. He said his heart stopped beating in the ambulance but doctors revived him at the hospital.



"This is not a recreational vehicle, this is our home," Kraig Goins said. (



"I would like to be in a small house or apartment. We keep thinking that we can do it, but the rent keeps going up and we just can't ever afford it. said Sharon Manley, 77.

"I died and came back," Goins said. "I've never really recovered from that."

Manley and Goins met and became romantically involved in the late 1990s. They have lived together in a series of motor homes for the last 15 years but never married. Their current camper's generator recently died, forcing them to live by flashlight and candles after dark. They get handouts of water and canned goods from a nearby church. They huddle under worn blankets on cold nights.

Manley currently has no income, does not draw Social Security and has no health insurance. She needs documentation to apply for social services and said police barred her from retrieving her driver's license and other identification after impounding their last motor home for expired tags. The police even prevented Goins from getting his dentures, she said.

"They were not very nice about it," she said.

Last year, Manley had pneumonia and sought help at the King-Drew Medical Center emergency room in South L.A. She has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and suffers from early stage dementia.



Manley lights a cigarette inside the recreational vehicle that she shares with her longtime companion. Manley suffers from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and early stage dementia. She has no health insurance. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

“If I’m really sick and need help, we’ll call 911,” she said. “We’re not calling all the time. I don’t abuse it.”

Goins receives general relief assistance, which provides \$200 in food stamps and \$200 in cash every month. He said he supplements that by repairing and selling bicycles bartered or bought from others living on the street. He also recycles cans and bottles pulled from the trash.

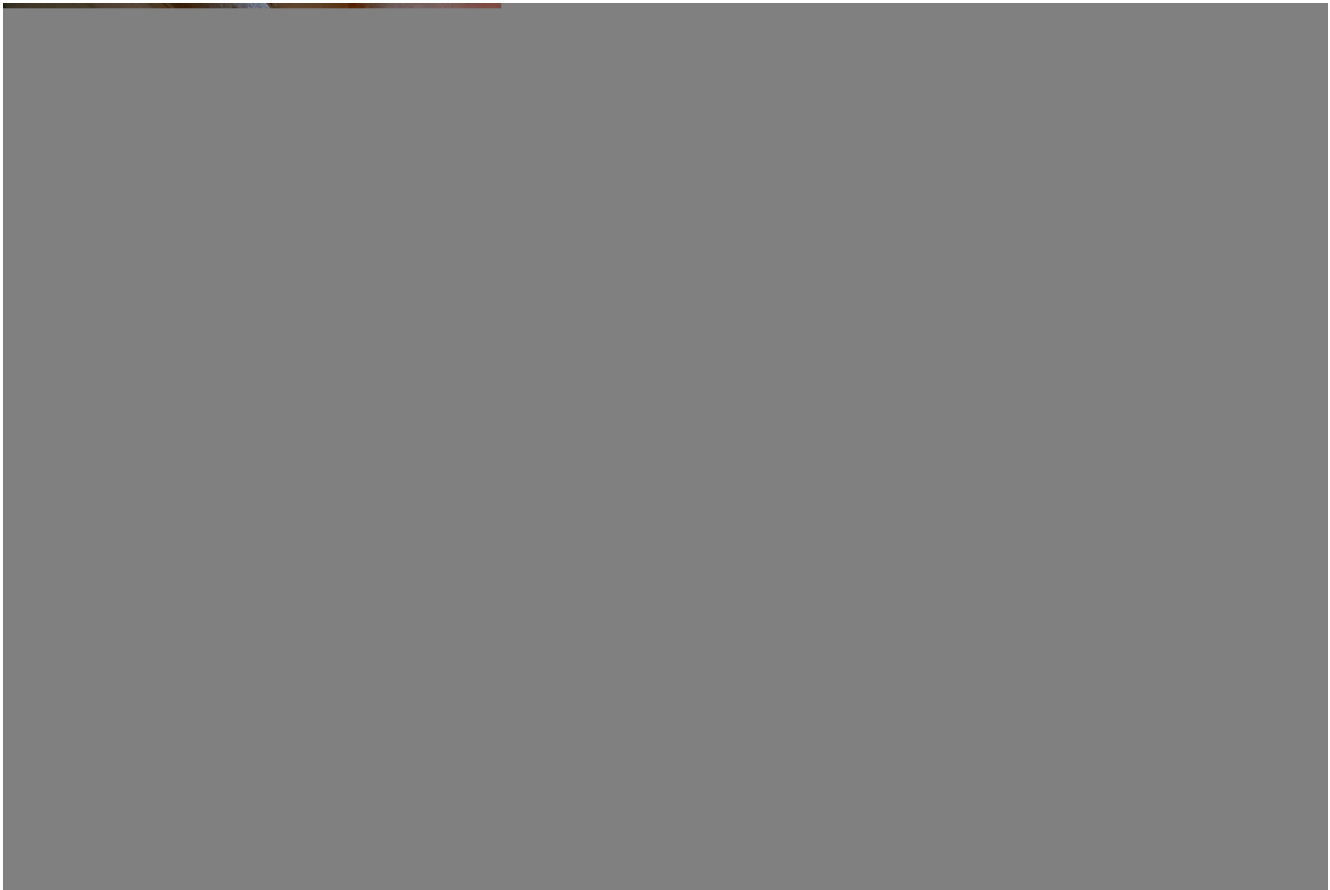
“Sometimes I feel like we’re worse than homeless,” Goins said. “I think Sharon and I are destined for a change. There are just too many people living out here now. All the ordinances, all the laws, all the pressure from the police — it didn’t use to be like this. It’s impossible to live anymore.

“This is not a recreational vehicle,” he said. “This is our home. For this, we’re not accepted by society. We are castaways.”

“Yes, I would like to be in a small house or apartment,” Manley said. “We keep thinking that we can do it, but the rent keeps going up and we just can’t ever afford it.”

“I’ve never felt homeless as long as we had a roof over our heads. We don’t sleep out in the rain like other people do. A lot of times I want to be able to take a shower or a bath every day. I miss that. It’s something you can’t do here,” she said.

Cliff Allen



Cliff Allen checks a shotgun that he kept inside his recreational vehicle. Allen, 67, lived for eight years in Manchester Square, a former residential neighborhood near LAX that is being converted into a ground transportation hub for the airport. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

“I believe that my lord and savior Jesus Christ is always looking after me,” said Cliff Allen, 67, standing in the doorway of his battered white camper on West 94th Street, near Los Angeles International Airport. “I got to think like this because it’s all I got.”

Overhead, an Airbus a380 jumbo jet roared past.

A native of Nashville, Allen came west in 1985, “burning up” his credit cards along the way to get here. He is blind in one eye from a childhood accident. He spent his days drinking Coors Light, smoking Marlboros and reading paperbacks or watching a small television powered by car batteries. He collects about \$1,000 a month in Social Security benefits.

In the mid-1990s Allen met a real estate agent who hired him to repair properties. He lived in vacant apartments and homes as he fixed them up, or parked his camper at the job site.



Cliff Allen, 67, collects about \$1,000 a month in Social Security benefits. He worked for years as a handyman but never put aside savings for retirement.



Allen relaxes inside the tight confines of the recreational vehicle that was his home for about 8 years.

About eight years ago, the agent died and Allen's livelihood evaporated. He rented an apartment, but casual work barely kept up with living expenses of about \$3,000 a month. More than half of that was for shelter, he said.

He started parking in Manchester Square when the city began buying up properties for its new airport ground transportation hub. As homes came down, homeless people moved into the vacant tracts.

Allen married and divorced twice. He hasn't seen his only child in more than 30 years.

"I wrote and told him I'd give him a thousand dollars to call me," Allen said. "But he never has. I don't care if he calls and tells me to get lost. I'm just looking for closure."

An Airbus a380 jumbo jet flies over Allen's camper in Manchester Square near LAX, before it was cleared and barricaded.
(Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

He once shared the camper with a woman named Pam and fondly remembers her sending his family and friends birthday and holiday greeting cards.

Pam died of a heart attack in 2015.

In November, Allen secured Section 8 housing in the San Fernando Valley after waiting three years.

Allen combs his hair in the bathroom of his one-bedroom apartment in a Section 8 housing complex in the San Fernando Valley.

Right, Allen moves in his belongings.

Allen checks out his apartment located on the sunny side of the building, across the street from a public park. (Luis Sinco /Los Angeles Times)

“Jesus is always looking out for old Cliff,” he said.

He now has a one-bedroom apartment in a refurbished complex restricted to people 62 and older. He lives on the sunny side of the building, with a public park across the street. He pays about \$300 a month.

He sold his 22-foot camper to a friend for \$1,000 — enough to pay his son should he ever call.

Diamond Haynes

Diamond Haynes cries as she talks about her seven children, who are currently in the foster care system. Haynes, in her late 30s, lived in a trailer along West 135th Street in an unincorporated section of Los Angeles County. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

“I see a woman in black standing next to you. Does that mean anything?” said Diamond Haynes, who claimed an ability to divine the future. “I can tell you some

things you might not know.”

Haynes, in her late 30s, sat in a darkened trailer parked along a dusty, industrial stretch of West 135th Street in unincorporated Gardena. The operations of an oil tank farm hummed behind a chain link fence. A syringe lay on the filthy floor. Outside, several people milled around a cooking fire that enveloped them in acrid smoke from burning laminated wood.

Neighbors gathered outside Diamond Haynes' trailer on West 135th street.

Haynes brushes her hair inside the trailer where she lived for most of 2017.

She grew up in the Inland Empire and found her way to South L.A., where she worked for a time as a retail clerk. She admitted becoming addicted to crystal methamphetamine, then her apartment burned and she lost her seven kids to the foster care system. She desperately wants them back, crying about it as we spoke.

Haynes grew up in the Inland Empire and found her way to South L.A., where she worked for a time as a retail clerk. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

“I thank God for every day that I’m alive,” Haynes said. “You don’t lose your religion out here. You remember the times you were blessed with many things. You hold on to that.”

Haynes is reflected in a mirror inside her trailer home in South L.A. County. “I thank God for every day that I’m alive,” she said. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

A short time later, police impounded her trailer for expired registration tags. She disappeared from the streets, and some said she’d checked into drug rehab.

David Sweeney

David Sweeney, 51, prepares a meal inside his motor home, which was parked along West 93rd Street, a cul de sac under the flight path to nearby LAX. A Marine Corps veteran of the Gulf War, Sweeney began living in the vehicle in 2015. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

“So you basically want to know how to live rent-free in Southern California,” said David Sweeney, 51, when we first met. It was a warm, sunny afternoon in the late summer, and he sat on a lawn chair beside motor homes parked along West 93rd Street, a cul-de-sac under the approach to LAX. A broadcast of his beloved Chicago Cubs blared on the radio. “This is it right here,” he said.

A Marine Corps veteran of the Gulf War, Sweeney came to L.A. 17 years ago, finding irregular jobs as an electrician as he waited to cash out a pension for union work in the Midwest. He suffered a severe leg injury in the war, causing him to limp and to occasionally pass up jobs because of chronic discomfort. “Sometimes it feels like I’m walking on a sponge,” he said.

He once rented a home, where he lived with his girlfriend and another couple. But the couple married and moved out, and soon the girlfriend was gone too. “The rent was outrageous,” he said. “I became a slave to paying it. I get it. That’s the way life is. But sometimes it’s really hard to make it work.”

Sweeney lives in a condemned neighborhood near LAX.

"You never really feel clean living like this," Sweeney said. You can't wash your clothes easily. I don't shower every day."

He bought a used, 28-foot motor home in 2015 and parked it at various job sites. Eighteen months ago he settled on the edge of Manchester Square.

“I have a roof over my head, but I do feel homeless,” said Sweeney, who lives with his dog, Jerry. “You never feel like you belong. You’re not part of the surrounding community. People don’t want you to park near their homes, and I don’t blame them.

“You never really feel clean living like this. You can’t wash your clothes easily. I don’t shower every day.”

"So you basically want to know how to live rent free in Southern California," said Sweeney "This is it right here." He once lived in a home but moved into the RV when rents became "outrageous." (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

Added Sweeney: "I don't talk much about things I'm ashamed of, but I have basically every mental disorder known to man. I'm bipolar, I have attention deficit disorder, PTSD, la-la-la. I don't get embarrassed, because I'm a Cubs fan, but the fact is I have become everything I hate.

"I'm just trying to make my peace with God."

Dee Timmons

Dee Timmons, left, talks with a couple who were living inside a car parked near her motorhome along Avalon Boulevard in South Los Angeles. Currently unemployed, Timmons refuses to apply for government assistance. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

"You know how you think sometimes something's going to be really cool and later you find out it's not cool at all?" said Dee Timmons, 37. "That's what this is."

Raised in Inglewood and South L.A., Timmons described a "comfortable, middle class" life before things changed. Her divorced parents both lost their homes in the recession of 2008. She lived with her father, who eventually moved to an apartment with her brother, leaving Timmons to fend for herself.

Dee Timmons, 37, starts a cooking fire in a makeshift barbecue outside her motorhome.

Timmons peers out of her motorhome as dusk descends on Avalon Boulevard in an unincorporated section of South L.A.

She bought a 25-year-old, 36-foot motor home for \$3,500 about two years ago and has been living on the side of the road in unincorporated Gardena ever since. Her two older kids live with her mother in Alabama. Her youngest, a girl, lives with a sister in Hawthorne.

In the past Timmons worked low-paying jobs as a security guard, sales clerk and maid. She has lived in a motor home for two years. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

She worked as a sales clerk, security guard and maid — and just never made enough money, she said. She currently doesn't have a job, but refuses to apply for government assistance. Relatives occasionally give her money. She gets food from a nearby church pantry, collects bottles and cans for cash, and often panhandles. She owns a pair of pit bulls, which recently had a litter of puppies that she sold.

Timmons joins her neighbors in a sidewalk gathering of people living in cars and recreational vehicles parked along Avalon Boulevard in unincorporated Gardena. The area is dominated by light industry and warehouses. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

In subsequent visits, Timmons altered her analysis of life on the curb.

"Why do you think people who live like this are sad? This ain't sad. I do all right. I ain't hungry and I got a place to stay," she said, squatting beside her motor home and roasting Oscar Mayer salami on a makeshift outdoor barbecue.

Timmons said she had a "comfortable, middle class" life with her father until he lost his home in the 2008 mortgage crisis. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

"If you think about it, everything's hard. Having a house is hard. Having an apartment is hard. It's not yours. It's only yours until you can't pay for it, and then they kick you out. Nothing comes easy. This is freedom from that. I'm used to it, and I like it."

WITHOUT A HOME

They're part of the Los Angeles streetscape, as familiar as the swaying palm trees and idling traffic, living under freeways, alongside riverbeds and on canyon hillsides. The mentally ill, the drug addicts, the economically disadvantaged, many with their life belongings in a backpack or shopping cart. Here, The Times launches Without a Home, a special endeavor to

examine a crisis of homelessness in our region. It is a challenge for each and every one of us. Citizens voted twice to open their wallets to fund a solution. Now, city leaders and others must act to improve the plight of some 58,000 of the county's most vulnerable residents.. [Full coverage](#) ↗

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