

15 MINUTES

A happy soul in a sometimes-rough neighborhood

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

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A man living in a boarding house on Park Avenue and 3rd Street was getting evicted, and he wasn't happy about it. The man narrowly missed kicking Dell Beard, the super, in the head earlier that day when Mr. Beard broke up a dispute between the man and his girlfriend. That was the last straw. Mr. Beard had let the man stay too many nights already, even at the risk of getting in trouble with his boss, the property owner.

"He was drunk all the time and he fought everybody all the time so I had to toss him out," said Mr. Beard, who also lives in the cluster of buildings that house about 25 tenants, and manages a small convenience store, Walters' Grocery.

Early on the morning he confronted the drunken tenant, getting ready to go over to the store, Mr. Beard almost broke up with his girlfriend. Over a breakfast she made him of grits and eggs, they'd decided to stay. "We love each other," Mr. Beard said.

But one of her concerns — and one his friends share — is that his job is dangerous. Potentially violent incidents are bound to happen too often there, they feel. The boarding houses are located in a working class area wedged between downtown Fort Myers, Dean Park and Dunbar, where signs of struggle and poverty are apparent. Beggars stop by the store asking Mr. Beard for work, and

sometimes he pays them a few dollars out of his pocket to clean up the parking lot.

A few weeks ago, Mr. Beard was awakened in the middle of the night when a fight between two neighborhood men arguing over a drug deal somehow spilled onto his lawn. He called the police and went outside to get the men off the property. One of them was badly beaten and left in an ambulance.

Even with the dangers, Mr. Beard remains full of energy and enthusiastic for his job. He's had it for about five years, since leaving San Jose, Calif., for Fort Myers. And at 38, Mr. Beard points out that he looks younger than his age — "you'll notice I don't have a single gray hair," he said — because he doesn't let life worry him.

"I love my job," he said. "It's different. The other night after I saw the cops put that guy in an ambulance, I sat down on the porch and lit my cigarette up and my girlfriend tells me, 'you need another job.' And my friends tell me I need another job. But I get paid and I get to see all kinds of crazy shit no one else sees. One day, when I have grandkids, I'll be telling them about it. I thank God every day for my job. I'm proud of what I do."

He added that most of the tenants get along well. "Basically, everybody's just trying to live," he said. "Everybody's trying to eat. I've dealt with people that have just gotten out of prison and have lightning bolts (tattooed) on their arms and people that smoke crack on Palm

Beach (Boulevard). And I've dealt with people that have money, education and nice cars. After dealing with all these personalities, I find if you are diplomatic, they make the right choice (on their own). These days, dealing with people, it's all about respect."

Mr. Beard had a chance to test that theory when the man he'd kicked out that morning came back to the grocery store later to beg for his room back. Mr. Beard was spending the quiet rainy afternoon working the register and holding court in his usual gregarious way — he is a generous and tireless talker — with a few other tenants. The man had slipped in with an unknown friend, both of them looking too thin and grim and red-eyed. The atmosphere in the cramped room, among the beer and cigarettes, snack cakes and Hamburger Helper, grew suddenly tense. Mr. Beard managed to stand his ground until the man's unknown friend, who had a gravelly voice like Louis Armstrong, con-



Dell Beard

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vinced him to leave.

"C'mon, Willy," he kept saying, standing in the doorway. "Can't you see the man has company? Let's go. Leave him alone."

Mr. Beard returned to his old self as soon as Willy left, saying he was looking forward to having a few beers downtown or maybe going fishing. A few minutes later, a young police officer stopped by to make sure everything was OK.

"If you want to stay healthy, feeling good, you can't let things worry you," Mr. Beard said. ■

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