

Urban Alchemy helps the formerly incarcerated find stability while as â??practitioners,â?? they help stabilize the Tenderloin

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Itâ??s the day after Thanksgiving and Chris Purcellâ??s corner of the Tenderloin is uncharacteristically quiet. Thereâ??s a couple of young men sitting in the gutter smoking weed, a few homeless people pushing loaded shopping carts, and the occasional loud argument on the street. â??The weed smokers donâ??t bother us; weâ??re not here to bust chops,â?• he says.

Purcell, one of a dozen or so employees of Urban Alchemy who patrol a section of the neighborhood every day, is there to push flagrant drug users and sellers away from the area and do his best to calm the sporadic violence that plagues a neighborhood whose colorful past and troubled present have made it a national symbol of failed urban policies.

Holidays tend to be quiet, he said. Nearby Hastings College of Law and City Hall are shuttered. But the quiet doesnâ??t last. By 10 the next morning, a fatal shooting erupts on a stretch of Leavenworth Street Purcell often patrols but was not staffed that morning.



Chris Purcell in the Oasis, a little park maintained by Urban Alchemy at Hyde and Turk streets. (Photos by Bill Snyder)

Urban Alchemy is a nonprofit that hires formerly incarcerated people to patrol streets in neighborhoods experiencing high drug use, homelessness, and violence. The company calls those workers practitioners and is clear they have no police powers and are not allowed to use force unless physically attacked.

â??Persuasion. Respect. And getting to know people on the street are the tools I use,â?• says Purcell, a 67-year-old who served more than 20 years in state prison after being convicted of being an accomplice to a kidnapping. He landed the job soon after he left prison about two years ago.

Your â??kindlyâ?? but tough uncle

When Purcell sees a fight starting or someone openly using drugs, he politely but firmly, asks them to move on. Generally, that tactic is successful, he said. But when Purcell or one of the practitioners he

supervises are gone for the day, the dealers often come back. â??Itâ??s like a business; they have three shifts.â?•

The dealers know the boundaries of Urban Alchemyâ??s territory. As Purcell walked the neighborhood with a reporter, he stopped at the corner of Hyde and Ellis streets, the edge of his turf, and pointed to a group of men in front of a snack store just across the street. â??I know them. Theyâ??re dealing,â?• he said.

He wears a pouch around his neck containing Narcan, a drug used to reverse the effects of a drug overdose. In his first 11 months on the job, he used it 49 times to aid people on the street. They all lived, although deaths from overdosing, particularly with fentanyl, are a sadly common occurrence in the Tenderloin.

Purcell looks like your kindly uncle with his bald head, trimmed white mustache, and comfortable paunch. He has a calm, pleasant demeanor and though he was never in the military, punctuates his speech with phrases like â??we took the blockâ?• and ends some of his text strings with â??copy that.â?•

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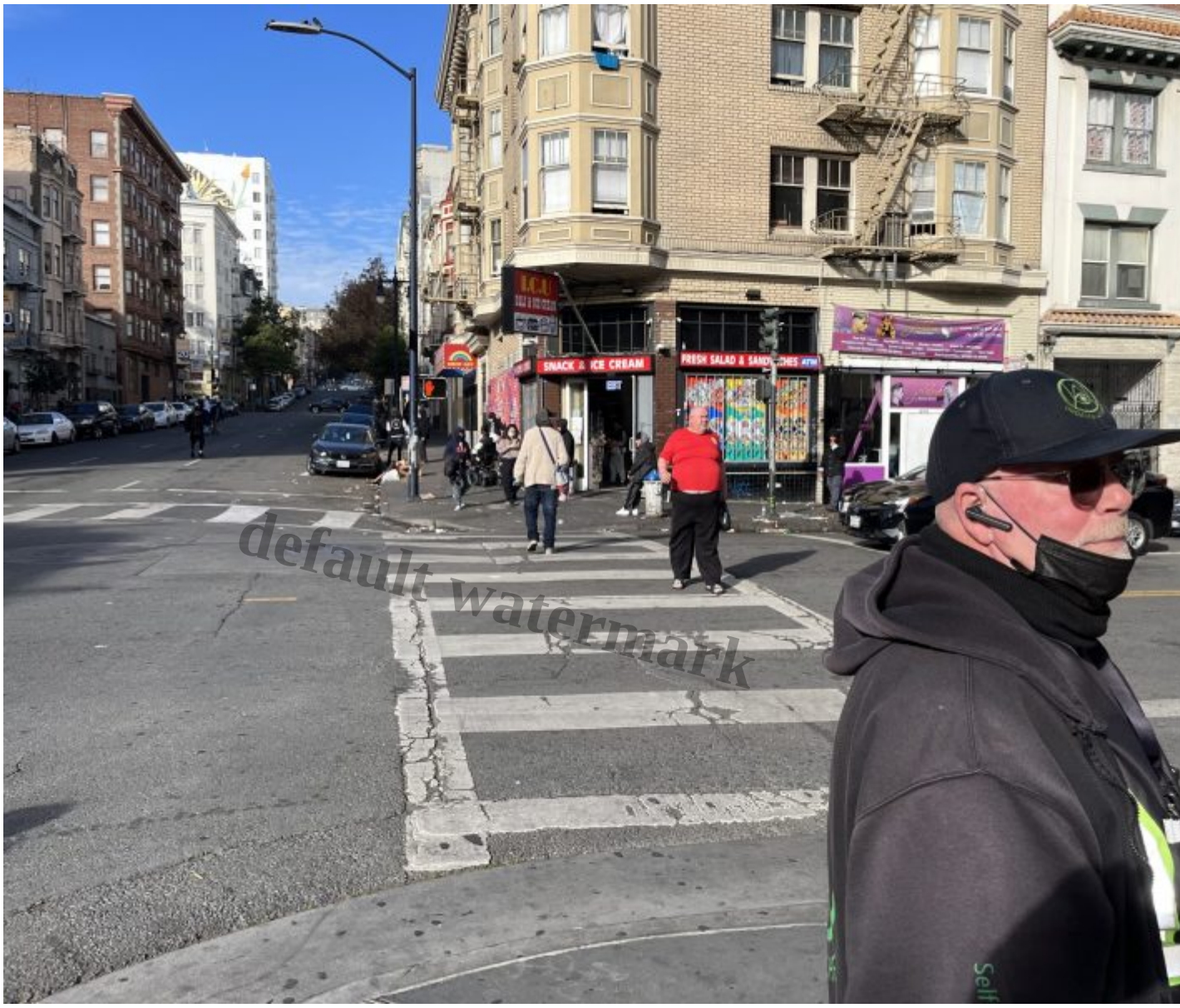
When a disabled young man rolled up to him in his wheelchair, Purcell bent over and slipped him a few dollars. â??Heâ??s one of my kids,â?• he said, using a phrase he uses when referring to some of the troubled young people on his beat.



Purcell monitors the Tenderloin neighborhood.

San Francisco is paying Urban Alchemy about $11 million over two years to work in the Tenderloin, mid-Market, South of Market, and the Bayview. Some private businesses pay more for additional services. The organization also has contracts for similar work in cities including Oakland, Los Angeles, and Austin, Texas, and is being paid $53 million to staff San Franciscoâ??s homeless shelters and Tenderloin Center, which closed Dec. 4. Urban Alchemy has about 600 employees in the city.

Looking for good listeners

Itâ??s hard to know how big an impact Urban Alchemy is having in the neighborhood. Although its charter includes keeping sidewalks clear, tents and people sprawled on the ground make an obstacle course of some blocks. But San Francisco Mayor London Breed, who pushed for the contracts, praised the company in a statement on its website: â??Urban Alchemy has been an invaluable partner in keeping our city safe, clean and welcoming for all.â?• Supervisor Dean Preston, whose district includes the Tenderloin, did not respond to a request for comment.

Employees of Philz coffee shop near Hastings posted a blackboard with â??a shoutoutâ?• to Urban Alchemy, â??for looking out for the neighborhood.â?•

Whether or not the program is truly effective in reducing neighborhood problems, it does appear to have helped ex-prisoners re-enter society. Most, but not all, of its practitioners are former convicts, and many are men of color, said Artie Gilbert, the companyâ??s Bay Area director of operations.

When hiring, â??we look for social skills, people who are good listeners with appropriate life experiences,â?• he said. Training of about 40 hours focuses on how to de-escalate potentially violent situations and skills such as CPR. While not all new hires manage to stay out of trouble, the rate of recidivism among the practitioners is low, Gilbert said.

Practitioners at Urban Alchemy make $21 an hour plus standard benefits. At times the job is dangerous. Two practitioners were shot last year and one was slashed with a razor. All recovered.

Mathew â??Guyâ?• Musladin has patrolled parts of San Francisco for Urban Alchemy since he was paroled last April after serving nearly 28 years in prison for murder. (He asked that his exact duties be kept private and that we donâ??t publish his photo.) Unless youâ??re in the habit of reading legal newsletters, you probably donâ??t know that a landmark United States Supreme Court case â?? Carey v. Musladin â?? bears his name.

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This mural in Urban Alchemyâ??s garden comprises, according to artist Adrian Arias, â??a fusion between the history of the Black Hawk Jazz Cafe, Black Lives Matter and the ancestral roots of the Ohlone peoples and my ancestral Mochica culture.â?• Billie Holiday performed at the jazz cafe, which operated at the corner of Hyde and Turk streets from 1949 to 1963, in 1961.

The case didnâ??t bear on his guilt or innocence as such. His attorneys argued that he didnâ??t get a fair trial because family members of his alleged victim wore buttons with a picture of the dead man while they sat in court. But the Supreme Court ruled that the buttons did not prejudice the jury and his appeal was unanimously denied.

Adjusting to normal

Musladin, who grew up in Sacramento, went to a private school, played varsity baseball and football, and earned a degree in business at Sacramento State College. He was married, with a 3-year-old son, when his life went disastrously off track. A complex confrontation that involved his estranged wife, alleged methamphetamine dealers, and a quarrel over custody turned violent and a man died after being shot by Musladin.

Sentenced to 32 years to life in prison, Musladin, now 62, used his time in prison learning optometry. â??The other choices were working in metal fabrication, bookbinding, or laundry. I wanted something more mentally challenging,â?• he said.

He excelled in his studies, earning a certification as a master optician from the American Board of Opticianry., â??2020,â?• a professional magazine for the optical industry, published an article he wrote in September. It described ways to better prescribe lenses and eyeglasses frames.

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Despite his credentials and professional reputation, Musladin has had no success landing a job in optometry. â??Iâ??ve put in dozens of applications.â?• Some businesses, he said, have simply told him they wonâ??t hire someone with a record, an apparent violation of Californiaâ??s Ban the Box law.

Despite their long stretches in prison, both Purcell and Musladin said theyâ??ve adjusted well to life outside the walls. â??I love this job. I really canâ??t imagine being anywhere else,â?• said Purcell, who has finished his parole and is living with close friends in the East Bay.

Unlike some former long-term inmates who are flummoxed by modern technology, both men have smartphones and are comfortable with computers.

An official of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation said Musladin is doing well, meeting all of the conditions of his release. Heâ??s back in touch with his adult son and hopes to soon get permission to leave his supervised transitional housing in San Francisco for a room or an apartment on his own. There is one aspect of modern San Francisco life that left him with a feeling of â??culture shock. Watching the (open) drug dealing. I do not understand why it is allowed to run rampant.â?•

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