

Nomad in a Settled City:

Tales of a Traveller

Despite choosing her life on the road, Ramona Mayon's journey has been an endless battle over rules, expectations and bureaucracy

by Joe Dworetzky and Glenn Gehlke, Bay City News Foundation
May 2, 2023



Ramona Mayon sits inside her 27-foot Gulfstream RV at the Bayview Vehicle Triage Center in San Francisco. Now 62 and battling Stage 4 breast cancer, the self-described nomad is making peace with herself while still fighting for the rights of the unhoused. (Courtesy Ramona Mayon)

<https://localnewsmatters.org/2023/05/02/nomad-in-a-settled-city-tales-of-a-traveller/>

Nomad in a Settled City

Tales of a Traveller

Story by **Joe Dworetzky**  Design by **Glenn Gehlke**
Bay City News Foundation

One night in March while an extreme weather event exploded over San Francisco — a “bomb cyclone” as the climatologists called it — Ramona Mayon was texting with a journalist. The journalist was in a warm and comfortable home office. Mayon was not.

She texted from a broken-down RV under surveillance cameras and behind security fencing in back of the former Candlestick Park. There was no electrical connection, and she was carefully watching the battery on the phone she had charged earlier in the day from a small solar panel.

Her RV — a 27-foot Gulfstream that was also 27 years old — sat in a “safe parking” site that bore a name only a career bureaucrat could have produced: the [Bayview Vehicle Triage Center](#).

The VTC was located next to a federal Superfund site on land with a rich history of accommodating the unregulated disposal of industrial chemicals. The potential health impacts of the location would be concerning for anyone, but were especially so for Mayon.

She came to the site with breast cancer, and it had now reached Stage 4. She was receiving weekly hospice care, though she said the hospice wanted to drop her because she had outlived their expectations.

On this night, Mayon was one of the roughly one thousand people living in their vehicles in San Francisco who were “experiencing homelessness,” as city officials called it.

She despised the VTC — she called it an internment camp — and she had been trying desperately to get her RV repaired so that she could leave — so she could *escape* — San Francisco and get someplace where she could die in peace. Yet for all the grimness of her circumstances, Mayon's texts displayed an aggressive good humor and positivity that might have been taken as cheer but which were better read as purpose.

She was telling a powerful story, one that explained how she came to be living — actually dying — in that vehicle triage center — and why San Francisco, self-described as the most accepting and generous big city in the country, was something very different if you were a person who lived in your vehicle.

Ramona the Traveller

Mayon is 62, with abundant hair — a trifecta of blonde, white and gray — spilling long and straight over her jacket. With the cancer, she is frequently cold, and like any real San Franciscan she dresses in layers. She has steely eyes, a long serious face and the steady noncommittal expression of a judge.

But looks often mislead. Mayon is litigious, not judicious. And definitely not shy and retiring. She describes herself as “flamboyant.” In May 2018, she managed to get herself registered with the Federal Election Commission as [a candidate for President of the United States](#). It was political theater, of course, but if tomorrow she were miraculously awarded the post, she would already know the first three things she wanted to do. Mayon is not beholden to other people's opinions. She has not lived a conventional life and doesn't care if some people look at her situation and assume she must be crazy.

It goes all the way back.

She was born in Louisiana in 1960. Her father was in the oil business, not a tycoon but a skilled pipeline engineer — she claims he is in the [Pipeliners' Hall of Fame](#) — who worked on oil projects all over the world. Growing up she traveled with her mother and father as he moved from job to job. Most of the time in Europe, but there were stints in Latin America and the Middle East.

By the time she was 17, she had lived in 17 countries.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The story contains references to the ethnic group Roma or Romani using the word "Gypsy," which is a derogatory and racist term that we would not otherwise use. After discussion, we have decided that in this context and for accuracy and the reader's information it was appropriate to include the term where it appears in the title of Ramona Mayon's writing and in quoting an explanation from an organization that seeks to provide information about the culture and lore of the people.

Her father's family came from Scotland. They were "[Travellers](#)" (mostly spelled with two "l's"), a nomadic group not well known in the United States, but well known in many parts of Europe.

Travellers come from many backgrounds. According to the [Gypsy Lore Society](#), self-described as "an international association of persons interested in Gypsy and Traveller Studies," Travellers include "Cale, Hungarian-Slovak, Ludar, Rom, Romnichel or Sinti Gypsy or American (Roader), English, German, Irish or Scotch Traveler."

Mayon's ancestry, she says, is from the Scottish Traveller group.

The society writes that to come from this background "is something special, something to be treasured along with the language, customs, and cultural values embodied in a unique way of life."

A unique way of life, but not an easy one. Mayon is excruciatingly aware of that fact.

In her 1,918-page work "[My Big Fat Book of GypsyTraveller Lies, Hate & Bigotry](#)," published on the Academia research platform and directed to scholars, ethnographers, activists, lawyers, and judges, Mayon collected more than half a million words spoken, written, and texted about Travellers and the other nomadic groups that are frequently placed beneath that umbrella. Collected from November 2011 through April 2012, Mayon calls her work "an exhaustive Archive of Hate." She describes it as "a quasi-scholarly attempt, to use the words of the 'public' to show how the Settled (those in 'real' houses) are committing ... a planned campaign of persecution ... against an ethnic group, the Nomadic group."

Mayon doesn't claim to be a scholar of the traditional sort, but she has written and self-published half a dozen [works that she sells on Amazon](#). All of the books deal with her life and learning as a nomad; many deal with the problems she has encountered living in the world of the people she calls "Settled."

She is highly literate but her schooling was not conventional. Her father made a good income, and she sometimes had tutors in Europe as they traveled. Other times she went to schools on American military bases. She learned enough while bouncing around Europe to get a GED in the States. Then she had a few years of community college in Houston studying first psychology then ceramics before leaving to study mid-wifery. It was a hodge-podge.

But her research and study never ended. In part out of necessity, she came to love the study of law — she claims to read Supreme Court briefs for relaxation — and has spent thousands of hours schooling herself on the American legal system, where she has fought, and sometimes — she would say frequently — come out on top in a lifetime's worth of battles with the Settled.

A thin line between love and Haight

The problem, she says, was the hippies.

In the long-ago days before the Internet, the nation's youth were slow to get the message that the [Summer of Love](#) ended in 1967.

In the years that immediately followed, longhairs and self-declared freaks kept coming to San Francisco from all over the country. They traveled any way they could — by plane, by car, by thumb and especially by bus. Greyhound was cool but what was especially cool was to arrive in a converted school bus, painted with Day-Glo, fresh from an epic adventure across the United States. Those hippie buses, stuffed with tie-dye, headbands, furry boas, hash pipes, and speakers booming music inside and out, all headed to the same place: the roughly eight-block stretch of psychedelia called [The Haight](#).

There was one immediate problem: where to park?

San Francisco was no bigger in those days, still a 7- by 7-mile fist at the end of the Peninsula's forearm. The streets were no bigger, and while the city was not as dense and riddled with cars as today, it was still dense and riddled with cars.



Section 97 of the San Francisco Police Code doesn't specifically forbid people from living in their vehicles — only from sleeping in them between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. A sign regarding the law appears in the Sunset District in April 2023. (Joe Dworetzky/Bay City News Foundation)

You could squeeze in a few buses, dozens maybe, but no way could the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood absorb the incoming hundreds, maybe thousands, of painted Blue Bird school buses, much less the converted milk trucks, post office step vans, Ford Econolines, and VW buses that arrived every day. Fortunately, there was a solution. The Haight dead-ended at Golden Gate Park; Hippie Hill was the finish line of the hippie westward migration. There was plenty of parking on the streets in the park.

But not everyone in San Francisco was enthralled with the idea that the city's jewel box should become a place to store the nation's dilapidated school buses, particularly when so many of them were full of weird kids living without bathrooms, without running water, and with the most jerry-rigged arrangements for cooking.

Something had to be done and San Francisco Ordinance 77-71, passed by the Board of Supervisors on April 2, 1971, and codified in Section 97 of the city's Police Code, was the solution.

On its face, the ordinance was straight forward: Between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m., no person shall use or occupy any “house car, camper or trailer coach for human habitation” on any “street, park, beach, square, avenue, alley or public way” within the city of San Francisco. The ordinance added a few details that made clear that the quaint term “house car” included RV’s, buses and vans, and that “human habitation” included “sleeping, eating or resting,” regardless of whether those acts were performed “singly or in groups.” The ordinance also spelled out consequences: a fine of up to \$1,000 dollars, imprisonment in a county jail for up to six months, or both.

But despite being straightforward, it was hard to put your finger on exactly what problem the ordinance was getting at. It wasn’t parking; the law didn’t forbid parking an empty hippie bus at night. It wasn’t sleeping in a bus; that apparently was also fine — except at night, when most people slept.

The real crime was the troublesome — heretical — act of living in a vehicle, rather than having what the law calls a “fixed place of abode.”

Mayon says it more directly: Ordinance 77-71 was then and remains today a law that allows the city to treat those who live in vehicles as criminals.

Because. ... Just because.



Ramona Mayon came to San Francisco to get married. She had been living out of a purple convertible Cadillac with a pack of kids and two animals that she says were not dogs but actually wolves, staying in campgrounds throughout the South when she met Greg Mayon. He was a sometimes tugboat captain, sometimes oil patch roughneck who drank a lot.

She was 37 years old. He was 46. They connected, even though Greg came from the world where people sleep in beds located in rooms with walls and a roof.

Greg was Settled. Ramona was not.



An old photograph of Ramona Mayon and her husband Greg from early in their marriage is pinned to a wall of her RV. (Courtesy Ramona Mayon)

They left Louisiana in August 1996, twenty years after hippies first made the pilgrimage to San Francisco to hear Quicksilver and the Dead and the Airplane. But some of those old ideals died hard.

Greg had been to Woodstock and thought getting married in Golden Gate Park would be the perfect way to celebrate their profound bond.

Ramona was no hippie — she had a conservative, self-reliant, badass streak and saw herself more as an outlaw than a peace-and-love type — but she went along with the idea because Greg had made the ultimate gesture of love: he had agreed to leave the world of the Settled and join her nomadic lifestyle. It was the only way their relationship could have worked; she would never have gone back to what Travellers refer to as “box living.”

She was also very interested in the rumored possibility that San Francisco would legalize marijuana for those with medical need — she had a powerful need in the form of major migraine headaches — a rumor that came true on Nov. 5, 1996, when the state’s voters approved [Proposition 215](#).

They each brought plenty of baggage to the marriage.

He'd been a hard-living drinker and wasn't keen to quit.

She had four children, one from a marriage at 17 to a Mexican man whom she describes by shaking her head and three more from another relationship that she wouldn't spend that much effort describing.

All that baggage was present in the 32-foot Blue Bird school bus they salvaged from a swamp in Belle River, Louisiana, and retrofitted on the front yard of Greg's father's place in the bayou.



The first house on wheels: a 32-foot Blue Bird school bus that Greg and Ramona Mayon salvaged from a Louisiana swamp and later painted black because they were not allowed to keep it yellow. (Courtesy Ramona Mayon)

As Mayon describes in her 2016 book, “[Nomadic Proud](#),” Greg lovingly built a marriage bed to fit in the bus and positioned it with room for the cradle of their 18-month-old son, Merlin, who had been born in Louisiana.

Mayon loved that bus. It had been her dream since she was 14, and in it the couple launched their new joint life as nomads, traveling with five kids and enough animals — rabbits, hermit crabs, lizards — to populate a petting zoo. Her plan — and now Greg’s — was to “carve a life out of the woods, the road, the parks, the seashore, a quiet wandering life where our children were the center of our days, and the road took us down paths few dared to follow.”

They took 10 months to make their way to San Francisco, spending four of them in San Simeon on Highway 1 near Hearst Castle. They camped by the ocean where the kids — at that point ranging in age from 2 to 17 years — played on the beach in the technicolor sunset. It was her vision of what a well-lived life could be.

The bus had been school-bus-yellow when they left Louisiana, but according to the law of the roadside as interpreted by the down-home constabulary, non-school people couldn’t keep a bus yellow. And so, by the time they landed in San Francisco they had painted much of it flat black.

Another change happened to the bus on that trip. When they started, it was a vehicle; by the time they arrived in San Francisco, it was their home.

No town for Travellers

Perhaps San Francisco’s most prized characteristic is its worldwide reputation as a place of tolerance, compassion, and acceptance. The city is a sanctuary for the undocumented, the place to first recognize the right of every person to marry whomever they want, a safe space where one can choose their own pronouns.

But for nomads like Ramona and Greg, tolerance and compassion were not all they encountered. They learned quickly that there is another, harder side of San Francisco filled with police and bureaucrats and residents with properties that have million-dollar views and no love for Travellers with two l’s.

After they arrived in San Francisco, Greg was diagnosed with Hepatitis C and severe liver damage. The good news was he stopped drinking; the bad was that Ramona now had a wounded husband to go with five children living in a school bus parked in the Sunset out near the beach. The story of those early years in San Francisco is set out in Mayon’s book

“Collected Letters from the Abyss,” a roughly 400-page tome that she published on Amazon in 2010. The page count is rough because, for a reason she no longer recalls, the book doesn’t have page numbers.

Mayon likes to describe herself as a “documentarian,” and the narrative that flows through “Letters” is heavily punctuated with xeroxed documents — letters, court filings, emails, photos — that serve as evidence of what happened to her family after arriving in the city.

The short version is that a conflict between the Mayons and the San Francisco Firefighters Union spun up an investigation by Child Protective Services into how the couple were raising their children in the black school bus out by the beach.

The resulting fight lasted years and created much damage, both collateral and otherwise. CPS won legal custody of the children but not physical custody. In other words, the city did not take the kids away from the Mayons.

Along the way, Mayon got an education in law — not the sort practiced by toney law firms before the Supreme Court, but the day-to-day grind between low-level bureaucrats and those unfortunate souls caught up in the drowning paperwork of administrative litigation. In that sort of trench warfare, most unrepresented litigants — those doomed souls who appear in court *pro se* (on their own behalf) — find out that what you don’t know can kill you.

Mayon learned, often the hard way, about service of process and the administrative record, about noticing a motion and getting continuances, and most of all she learned about the bored indifference of judges who have the power to ruin a life forever in the few minutes between the slap of a new file arriving and the slither of it leaving.

With the legal battle and Greg’s health, the family didn’t spend as much life in “the woods, the road, the parks and the seashore” as Mayon had expected when they set out in 1996. San Francisco became the place they lived, where Merlin grew up, where his older sibs went to school, worked, came into adulthood, and said goodbye as they went out on their own. And all that time their home was the flat black school bus parked out by the beach.

They had found a great hack: they were living cheap in one of the most beautiful and expensive cities in the world. And all that time their home was a home on wheels. All they had to do was avoid leaving footprints.

Mayon describes the life they were living. “The kids ran our plans. At night they would discuss where in Golden Gate Park they wanted to wake up in, depart for school from, return to.

Afternoons were playgrounds, or museum free day or Haight Ashbury. We moved nights to Great Highway. Moved every day.”

Your home is not their castle

Mayon does not subscribe to the sometimes popular culture view that one can see on blogs about “Vandwellers.” It is the life she and her husband chose, but she does not think of it an easy way to live or to try to raise a family. The Mayons suffered a lot of damage over the years. Some of it — maybe a lot — was because of their own decisions, but some — maybe a lot — was about the the way vehicle dwellers are treated.

In the Settled world, the law accords a person’s home special dignity; it’s a castle, a place where one can stand his or her ground against an intruder — even by lethal force, in some states. If the city or a lender wants to take your home away because you have not paid your taxes or your mortgage, the law offers you the dignity of notice and an opportunity to cure. You get to have a neutral judge determine if your version of the story or The Man’s version is true and correct. You have time to mount a defense. Sometimes you can even get a free lawyer to speak on your behalf.

But if your home is on wheels, and if you are committing the crime of sleeping in that wheeled home in San Francisco between 10 at night and 6 in the morning, it is a different ball game. You are a criminal, and your fondest hope is that they let you be.

A misdemeanor citation issued to Greg Mayon on Jan. 5, 2000, charges the family with illegally living in their bus between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. in violation of Section 97 of the San Francisco Police Code. (Courtesy Ramona Mayon)

Most times they do, but you are always vulnerable. That's the part people never understand. If the neighbors complain or you run afoul of some government bureaucrat, you learn that the protections given to the homes of the Settled are not the same protections that apply to your home. You learn about midnight banging on the door of your RV and about police lighting you up with their beacons even though the kids are sleeping and maybe you are in the middle of sex, telling you to move — Now! Now! — and go somewhere, anywhere, just Go!

You learn to be terrified of those slips of official paper captioned “Notice to Appear” on account of the non-traffic misdemeanor of “habitation between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.” in violation of Ordinance 77-71.

And worst of all, you learn that when a bunch of those citations have gone uncontested, or if you don't move because your home has a broken axle or busted carburetor, your home — it's your *home* — can be towed away and impounded.

You have to grab quick what you can grab, because it doesn't matter that your kids' schoolbooks are under the bed or your sick husband's medicine is in the bathroom or all the money you have saved from your modest SSI payments is under your mattress. They can hook your home up to a truck and leave you standing on the curb watching. That is really bad, but nothing hurts like seeing your children watching as their home is dragged off and knowing this is something they will remember forever.

The Mayons lost their bus in 2006, taken by the police for violating the rules created long ago in Ordinance 77-71. To this day, Ramona believes it wasn't about any of that, it was about the people they had pissed off and the fact that the law gives the Settled the power to destroy nomadic lives.

Because. ... Just because.



The loss of the bus was a tragedy. Ramona did not know how they could recover. But a community organization in the Sunset helped them get their first RV and they continued to live as urban nomads, now in an RV rather than a bus.

They stayed in the city as their kids grew up. Two of their boys became U.S. Marines. The girls married. Merlin moved in with a friend.

Greg's medical condition remained difficult, but he persevered.

Despite the fights, they had come to love the beauty of San Francisco. They had ties to the city. The kids' schools; Greg's doctors. They knew people, people knew them. They had to move every day, but as long as they did, people mostly let them be.



A sign posted in the vicinity of Great Highway in the Sunset section of San Francisco in April 2023 states that oversized vehicles are not allowed to park between midnight and 6 a.m. (Joe Dworetzky/Bay City News Foundation)

Then in 2012, the city passed [a new law creating “Large Vehicle Parking Restrictions.”](#) This one prohibited parking a vehicle (regardless of whether you were living in it) between midnight and 6 a.m. if the vehicle was longer than 22 feet or taller than 7, provided that the city posted signs giving notice of the restrictions.

The city posted those notices on scores of city streets including the small road just below Great Highway, the one where the Mayons most often parked. The place they loved. The new law became effective March 31, 2013, and it was the last straw for the couple. They’d had enough of being ticketed and hassled. Hassled and ticketed.

They went by themselves — the kids were mostly grown and doing their own things. They headed north in the RV, looking for a place where it was legal and cheap to live in a wheeled home. They had to remain within striking distance of San Francisco where Greg’s doctors practiced. But by then they had acquired an old SUV and their idea was to live in a campground in their RV and use the SUV to drive into town when they had to. They landed in a campground

in Antioch — near the gorgeous intersection of the San Joaquin and Sacramento Rivers — where they stayed nearly five years.

And then they discovered a beautiful [campground on Sherman Island](#) in the Delta. The campground only cost them \$15 a night, and they could sit outside the RV and see wind turbines turning in the Montezuma Hills across the water and the daily procession of boats and barges going up the Sacramento River. They were living on SSI benefits that combined to be about \$1,600 a month, and they figured out how to make that work.

And then came COVID.

In many ways they couldn't have been in a better situation. Sherman Island was about as far you could get from the world where the pandemic was spreading. They were self-isolated. If they had to interact with anyone, it would be outside and easy to keep a social distance.

But it ended — like so many things in their life together — by government fiat.

On March 18, 2020, California closed the state campgrounds. They were given 12 hours to vacate. Even though they had prepaid for a week, they had to pack up their stuff and go, no exceptions. The RV — their home — was elderly but had been operating. On that day, however, the fuel pump died, and it couldn't be driven. They asked to stay so they could get it repaired, but that was a hard no. They drove off, the RV sitting empty in the beautiful campsite, all by itself.



The Mayons acquired a 27-foot Gulfstream RV after losing their bus in 2006. But they were forced to abandon it at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic when it broke down in a Delta campground where they had been staying until ordered by the state to move. (Courtesy Ramona Mayon)

Who will vouch for us?

The Mayons' worldly possessions were now what they could fit in the SUV. The SUV was serviceable for driving, but as a place for two to live — especially when one had now been diagnosed with liver cancer — it was not feasible. With the closure of the campgrounds and the de facto impoundment of their RV, the Mayons were now truly experiencing homelessness.

Social workers in Sacramento wanted to split them up when they learned about Greg's condition. Ramona fought that off — at this point she was no longer his primary caregiver; she was his sole caregiver. She was also his sole lawyer; she sued the county for elder abuse.

The county checked them into a motel — an arrangement that pre-dated what would become Project RoomKey where inns made vacant by the pandemic accommodated the homeless for a fee paid by the state. They stayed in motels for several months, Greg's condition declining, and every few weeks Ramona had to launch a new fight to get vouchers to allow them to continue to stay. On June 14, 2020, the money for the motel program in Sacramento County ran out. They had little choice but to go to the FEMA trailers that were at Cal Expo in Sacramento. The irony of being kicked out of their safe and secluded RV on Sherman Island with all their possessions, to be sent to a trailer with hundreds of other people — some of whom had COVID — was not lost on them.

And that is where the trip they started in Louisiana in 1996 ended. Greg died in a FEMA trailer in Ramona's arms on July 7, 2020. They had been Travelling together for 27 years.

The Mayons faced the irony of pandemic-era health rules forcing them from their safe and secluded RV on Sherman Island to be sent to live at a FEMA trailer site with hundreds of others — some of whom had COVID.

Ramona was crushed. With the kids on their own, they had become a community of two, and now that community was gone.

Mayon took the SUV and drove to her oldest daughter's place in the Sierra Nevada. She grieved and tried to regroup. The RV was still marooned on Sherman Island waiting for a day when there was enough money to get it repaired.

But San Francisco — despite its bitter memories — had been her home for a long time. There were supportive people out in the Sunset, near the beach. In November she drove the SUV into the city and parked near where the family used to stay on the school bus. She slept in the SUV. It was not a good arrangement. She needed to get out and walk around or she would go crazy. She still had PTSD from when the bus had been taken.

Fortunately, about a week after she arrived, she ran into a woman she knew from the old days who was living in an encampment on Ocean Beach. Ramona moved there and began to split her time between the SUV and a tent on the beach.



Her study of the law continued, and increasingly her focus was on how “homelessness” — an umbrella term that roped in many different situations — made it sound as if everyone who was having that experience came from the Settled world and the only way to help them was to put them into a box.



Ramona Mayon's 2022 book, "The Vehicle Dwellers' Legal Primer."

(Joe Dworetzky/Bay City News Foundation)

Her 2022 book, "[The Vehicle Dwellers' Legal Primer](#)," states its purpose on the cover: "How to explain to the police that their harassment is unconstitutional and can be successfully prosecuted."

The Primer is divided into 10 lessons, each setting out a legal proposition and citing court cases that support its validity.

For example, Lesson 1 is that "Government cannot create second-class citizens."

In the Primer she hardened into a legal argument a realization that had been building for most of her life. The treatment that she had received as a nomad, as a Traveller, was not cool, legally speaking. She had a right, like any American, to go where she wanted and be who she was, even if other people didn't like the way she lived.

But that wasn't the whole thing. Her status was not just a person who wasn't Settled. She was a member of an ethnic minority — a non-Settled group of nomadic people — who traveled from place to place because it was in their DNA, in their racial memory.

And within that framework, the relevant law had a different feel. Lesson 8: "Government cannot exclude any ethnic group from a public roadway."

Put less technically, the point was that a government cannot discriminate on the basis of one's ethnic identity or because of the way that members of an ethnic group express their identity.

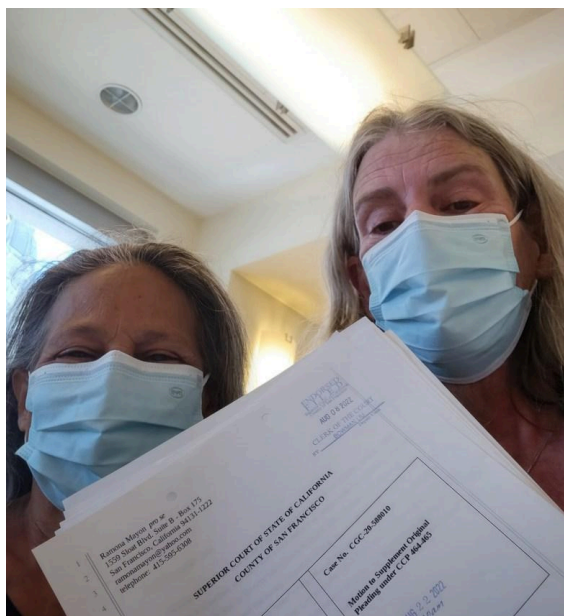
Like any general legal proposition, there were plenty of clarifications, exceptions, applications and limitations, but framed that way it was easier to explain why it seemed so sinister that San Francisco made it a crime to live in a wheeled home between 10 at night and 6 in the morning and why it seemed so wasteful and wrong-headed that the city could only imagine responding to homelessness by trying to build more boxes.

On Ocean Beach

Recently Mayon inscribed one of her books with a quote from Voltaire: “To hold a pen is to be at war.”

Almost from the time she arrived at the Ocean Beach compound, she lived the Voltaire quotation.

On Nov. 18, 2020, there was a city sweep of the beach encampment. Mayon knew that under the relatively new [Proposition Q](#), the city was entitled to clear tent encampments in parks and on the city streets. However, the law required advance written notice and an offer of shelter.



Ramona Mayon file a lawsuit against the City and County of San Francisco in August 2022 seeking an injunction against city sweeps of a homeless encampment on Ocean Beach. (Courtesy Ramona Mayon, with her friend Mitzi Fata)

The city did not provide the required notice. Moreover, with COVID still raging, they were not supposed to be doing sweeps at all. Mayon protested but the city went ahead. She filed a lawsuit in state court challenging the city's right to sweep. She had homebrew legal skills, but she was not really a lawyer and there were defects in her process.

Nonetheless she drew a sympathetic judge who held a Zoom hearing. Mayon recalls the scene: She was in her SUV at the beach on her phone dialed into Zoom, a crowd of tent dwellers clustered around the car looking in through the windows. As Mayon tells it, the judge got a city attorney on the line and told him that the city better not conduct any more sweeps at the beach without giving notice.

She was desperate to get her RV back. She'd gotten it moved from Sherman Island to rough outdoor storage in a field and it still needed the fuel pump repaired, together with whatever else had gone awry in the last year. With her daughter paying for AAA towing, she got a great Christmas present: her RV was dragged back to the city and left on the little street below Great Highway along the "green curb" — the water side of the street, not directly in front of anyone's house. The RV wasn't running, and it was filled with what she said was "raccoon poop," but it was wonderful to have her things back. It should have been a true home-coming-home.

But the nearby neighbors were not happy. "Ten or 13 came out just screaming on their telephones and stuff. 'You can't pull in here, you can't park here.'... all these people were so incredibly hostile."



In an act of political theater, Ramona Mayon went on a nearly four-month hunger strike amid the COVID-19 pandemic to stall the city's attempts to move her and in hopes of getting her RV repaired. (Courtesy Ramona Mayon)

She was petrified that the RV would be towed, so the next day, she resorted to preemptive political theater. She covered the RV with signs that said the RV could not be towed because of COVID. She also announced that she had begun a hunger strike in the hope of help getting her RV repaired. The hunger strike ultimately lasted 113 days. It wasn't a total hunger strike — she drank liquid protein and forced herself to eat an egg every morning — but she says that she lost 70 pounds and it had some seemingly positive results.

City homeless workers began to engage with her and ask what she needed. She said that she wanted help getting the RV repaired and registered so it was legal to drive.

She also got help from friends. An entry on her website says, “my all-volunteer street mechanic team took off the RV’s brake pedal (source of the godawful noise when applied) and took it away to be repaired. That’s the last job. Front tires both replaced. Fuel pump working. Battery good. Starts right up and purrs. Brake lights repaired. All new bulbs and fuses. New gas cap. Oh, probably some things I forgot I did. It’s been 9 solid months of repair on the two vehicles.”

But not all was well. The hunger strike ended on April 14, 2021, when she received word that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. She needed a mastectomy, followed by radiation and chemotherapy.

She scheduled the surgery for June 23, 2021 at a hospital in Contra Costa County near a campground where she could live in the RV during her treatment and recovery. She had friends there who would help care for her.

But there was a lot that needed to be done. There were still repairs needed on the RV. It also had to be registered and legal so she could get admitted to a campground. She needed relief from the many tickets that she had gotten. She also asked for help getting a camping pass that would allow her to stay in a campground for up to 21 days at a time. She did not want to have to relocate every week when she was recovering.

A caseworker from [Episcopal Community Services](#) was working on her case. There was [CARES Act](#) money to provide “stabilization services” for people experiencing homelessness. She threw herself into the process, conquering a mind-numbing set of bureaucratic obstacles, and worked out a detailed plan that would get her RV driven to the campground in time for the scheduled surgery. The total cost was less than \$5,000, a fraction of what it cost the city to provide shelter or permanent housing for a person experiencing homelessness.

The first case worker left. A new one came on board and erected a new series of hurdles. June 23 came and went.



She couldn't seem to get anybody from the city to help. They'd talk, they'd require her to get this paper or that paper, nothing happened. Meanwhile the cancer progressed.

On Sept. 29, 2021, she wrote her caseworker in despair, "Why am I being ignored? What am I doing wrong? And what do I do about it? Delay is denial and in my case deadly. I *must* begin getting treatment for my cancer." She chronicled the daily back and forth in what would ultimately become her book "[No Services? No Peace.](#)"

The 222-page book — this one with page numbers — describes how she tried to get assistance with the vehicle from the CARES Act money and how the city promised to do so and then reneged. The book recounts the increasing precariousness of her location on the beach. Two sweeps had resulted in the towing of other vehicles at the location. Her cancer, her political theater, her litigiousness had combined to spare her RV, but she worried it was just a matter of time.

Then came what she calls "The Purge." The city came to sweep the area where she was parked. Once again, she stood her ground and refused to let them tow her RV.

She says a city worker swore to her (and she recorded the conversations on video) that if she agreed to have her RV towed to Bayview, far from the ocean and the seaside neighbors, the city would pay to repair her RV so she could finally leave San Francisco. There was a place there, a vehicle triage center, where she could regroup and get herself organized. It was going to be a much better situation: showers, electricity, sanitation, security and a cadre of supportive services. She didn't want to go. She didn't understand why she had to go across the city to get her RV repaired. There were plenty of mobile mechanics; it could be fixed where she was. She also did not trust the city people, they had promised repairs before and did not deliver. But in the end, frustrated, sick, and scared, she said OK. And on that day — Aug. 9, 2022 — her home was towed across the city and left inside the Bayview Vehicle Triage Center.



Ramona Mayon stands beside her RV on Aug. 9, 2022, the day it was towed from Ocean Beach across town to the Bayview Vehicle Triage Center, a “safe parking” facility run by the city of San Francisco. (Courtesy Ramona Mayon)

The Homelessness Industrial Complex

The VTC was a disaster. Despite the fancy name, the center was nothing but a parking lot in a state park with a few trailers for the agencies with city contracts to use for their paper pushing. The city couldn't get PG&E to connect the site to the grid. That meant her RV was the way she felt: powerless.



A weary Ramona Mayon sits on the bumper of her Gulfstream RV on Aug. 9, 2022, a copy of her lawsuit against the city taped to its hull, as she prepares to watch the vehicle towed from Ocean Beach to the Bayview Vehicle Triage Center. (Courtesy Ramona Mayon)

Electric service for the vehicles in that location was crucial. “Providing clients with an individual power outlet to power personal devices, medical equipment, and heaters is a critical component of HSH’s program and engagement strategy,” a representative of the [Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing](#) explained to the Mayor’s Office in a July 18, 2022, memo.

She elaborated: “Guests need access to power to keep warm, prepare food, run medical equipment, and charge personal devices.”

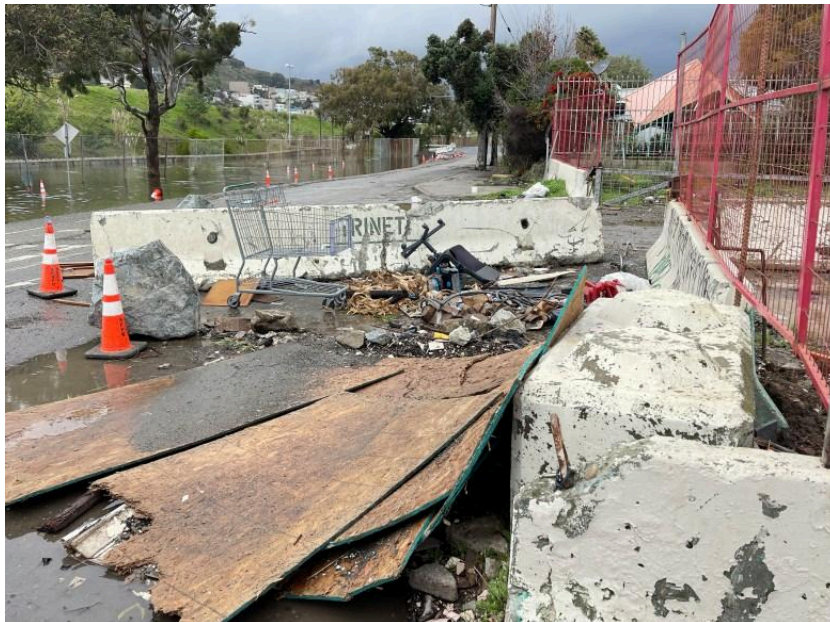
For a minute, the city used 16 small, loud, and foul-smelling diesel generators to power overhead pole lights. Then the city was sued for violating the federal Clean Air Act — the generators were unpermitted.

The city got rid of the generators in favor of solar panels which only gave dim lighting, and made the place seem creepy and dangerous at night. Residents were forbidden to cook, and the food delivered to them was ghastly. There were rats.

The biggest issue for Mayon was the location. The city convinced the planning officials that the site was exempt from CEQA — the state law that requires cities to consider the environmental impact of projects before they get underway — so there was no soil testing to see if the old parking lot was a safe place for human beings to live.

Mayon found out the site was directly across a narrow sliver of the Bay from Hunters Point, a former shipyard that had been declared a Super Fund site and not yet been cleaned up. The body of water that separated the VTC from the shipyard was part of the superfund site, and its waters lapped up to the shore within 100 feet of the parking lot.

The winter of 2023 brought punishing rains, flooding the entrance to the VTC so badly the city had to bulldoze a new way in. Concrete Jersey barriers covered with graffiti and a pile of refuse marked the new approach.



Trash and debris sit in floodwaters at the entrance to the Bayview Vehicle Triage Center in San Francisco. The situation forced the city to bulldoze a new entrance to the facility. (Joe Dworetzky/Bay City News Foundation)

And while Mayon found the conditions at the VTC unconscionable, what really made her crazy was the money.

Citywide, it cost San Francisco an average of \$50,000-\$60,000 a year to provide shelter to a homeless person, including the cost of buying or leasing the shelter. At the VTC, the cost was triple that — \$170,000 per person — even though vehicle-dwellers like Ramona brought their own housing to the site and all the city did was provide a parking lot and contractors who gave them so called “wraparound” services.

San Francisco spent a lot of money wrapping social and support services around the VTC, but the one service it did not include was a car mechanic. One might think that a site called a “vehicle triage center” would do some triaging of vehicles. And that when they had done their triaging, they’d help the needy ones get on their way.

But as of May 1, 2023, nearly nine months after The Purge, Mayon’s RV remains in the same condition as when it sat by the Great Highway except, she says, the city’s tow to the VTC resulted in a broken strut. (She filed an administrative claim against the city for the damage, which was denied.)

It only looks like a prison

Meanwhile the city is spending \$170,000 per person to live in a parking lot without electricity. A chunk of that money was spent on a contract with a nonprofit operation that employed formerly incarcerated individuals to provide security services.

At first, Mayon thought the purpose was to keep the residents safe, but after living there she began to feel that it was to keep them locked up. She couldn’t technically call the VTC a prison because she was allowed to come and go. But there were surveillance cameras overhead and fencing all around. She could not have visitors. She had to endure as many as three “wellness checks” a day from workers who at times (mostly on weekends) banged aggressively on the walls of her RV until she answered their questions, a tactic that brought back memories of police visits to her bus when it was parked in the Sunset.



Acres of RVs

are parked behind shrouded fences and barricades at the Bayview Vehicle Triage Center near San Francisco's Candlestick Point. (Joe Dworetzky/Bay City News Foundation)



Residents of the Bayview Vehicle Triage Center

are allowed to come and go, but outside visitors are forbidden from entering the site. (Joe Dworetzky/Bay City News Foundation)

She was told that the VTC will close at the end of the year and she had better apply for housing. She can't believe that they won't fix her RV, but that if she agrees to live in a box, the city will pay for it. Just another example of the city's inability to understand that she isn't homeless; she is a nomadic person with a broken vehicle.

And so she sits, day after day, moldering in Bayview on land she fears is toxic.

She isn't idle. She has been researching and studying what she calls the "homelessness industrial complex." The term is an echo from the 1960s, but it isn't the defense industry raking in the dough from huge no-bid contracts, it is a new generation of companies at the public trough, many of these "nonprofits" or the new "[public benefit corporations](#)."

She sees how the spigot of [Prop C money](#) — some \$300 million a year for homeless services in San Francisco — flows into the hands of the city but doesn't trickle down to the people it is supposed to help.

The city agencies with their acronyms — HSH, DPW, DEM — take the first long gulps at the trough. Then come the nonprofits who manage the operation. Then the assorted vendors — contractors, the subcontractors, the sub-subcontractors — until finally it is time for the homeless to drink. And that is when they learn that if they want to drink, it can only be from the right kind of cup — if they have a blue cup it should be green; if they have one with a wide lip it should be thin — and by the time they run frantically to get the right one, whoops, the last bit of water has dribbled into the dry dirt.

Local News Matters made repeated attempts, all unsuccessful, to discuss Ramona Mayon's situation with HSH, despite Mayon's consent. According to HSH, "We cannot comment on specific clients." Similarly, repeated attempts to visit Mayon's RV at the Bayview Vehicle Triage Center were unsuccessful, even though Mayon owns the RV and extended the invitation. HSH's representative stated, "The VTC, like all our shelter sites, are not open to visitors."

Endgame

The prognosis for one with [Stage 4 cancer](#) is not good. Mayon doesn't know how much time she has left, but she plans to go out fighting. She has kept track of what has happened to her. She has a [YouTube channel](#) where she has already posted roughly 125 videos documenting her experiences with the city and its contractors since the fall of 2020. She maintains a [website](#) where she blogs about her situation. She has collected much of the source material in her book, "[No Services? No Peace](#)." She keeps everything — photos, receipts, papers, notices. (When one of the residents at the site was asked whether the city had given notice of something or other, he said "ask Ramona.")

There may be a lawsuit. There may be several.

For all of her anger and distaste for government, she has a surprisingly deep-seated faith in the courts.

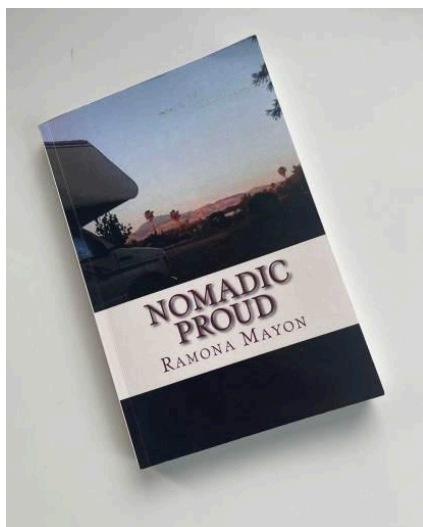
California's Unruh Civil Rights Act makes it unlawful to discriminate against a person based on their ancestry or national origin.

Her research has also uncovered provisions in the U.S. Code that make it a federal crime to subject “a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group” to “conditions of life that are intended to cause the physical destruction of the group in whole or in part.”

The name of the crime: Genocide.

At times she thinks that what she has discovered is so big and important that it will blow everything open and pave the road for the government to recognize that nomadic people who properly qualify for assistance can't be jammed into box living just to get it.

And even bigger than that, they might decide to stop trying to build housing in the world's most expensive city. Take two cents from each of those dollars and use it to give people old RV's. Let them stay in RV parks with park management who will keep them in line. Screw the Homelessness Industrial Complex. The wraparound service they really need is a good mechanic.



Ramona Mayon's 2016 book, "Nomadic Proud."

(Joe Dworetzky/Bay City News Foundation)

Whether there is a lawsuit or not, and whether or not her legal theories hold water, Mayon believes that she has created a body of work that tells her story — nomad in the land of the Settled — and has pointed out a road for others to follow.

She doesn't know what will happen, but she has planned some final political theater.

On Dec. 18th — Greg's birthday — she plans to walk up the steps of San Francisco's City Hall carrying the blue urn that holds his ashes.

She will be wearing an amazing dress, something she is going to sew herself. It will be gold and the train will be more than 30 feet long trailing behind her.

When she gets to the top of the steps she will sit and face away from City Hall looking over the city. She will put up a sign with her name and ask for donations. She will tell people that she is running for office and ask them to join her campaign.

When they ask what office she is seeking, she will tell them and give them a link where they can donate.

She has a good use for the money.

She has priced what it will cost to get a spot in [San Francisco's Columbarium](#), one of those compartments with a glass window in front, big enough to put her ashes and Greg's ashes side by side, along with a miniature model of the school bus.

She also plans to include two of her books. One will be tipped up at an angle so that if her grandchildren or their grandchildren ever come to visit, they will be able to read the book's title, which as it turns out, would also be a good name for the story of her life:

Nomadic Proud.



OTHER ARTICLES BY JOE DWORETZKY RE. THE VTC IN LOCAL NEWS MATTERS:



Bayview Vehicle Triage Center woes expose challenge of alternative shelter approaches

February 15, 2023



Environmental group fights to block permit for diesel generators at vehicle triage center

March 1, 2023



Bayview triage center sees new delay getting generators after permit stalls on technicality

April 3, 2023

TAGGED:Antioch, Bayview Vehicle Triage Center, cancer, Clean Air Act, coronavirus pandemic, courts, Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing, Golden Gate Park, History, homelessness, lawsuits, Project Roomkey, RV parking, San Francisco, seniors, Sherman Island, vehicle camping



Bay City News Foundation
(510) 251-8100
newsroom@baycitynews.com

© 2023 Connecting audiences with quality, local news.