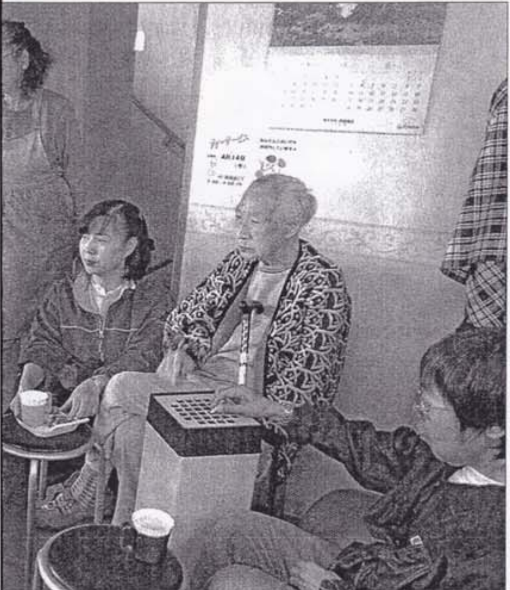
STORIES TO TELL

Hospice helps homeless travelers leaving life

'I've always lived free. Now my life is just about over. If life is a train journey, I'm approaching the last stop.'

MASAAKI SHIBATA
Ex-whaler

Masaki and Mie Yamamoto run Kibo no Ie—Hope House hospice.



PHOTOS BY TAKUYA MATSUNAGA

Residents take refreshment in the tea room at Kibo no Ie, a hospice in Tokyo's Sanya district.

By SATOSHI NAKAMURA
Shukan Asahi

It's July 31, 2004, and exploding fireworks are painting awe-inducing patterns against the night sky above the Sumidagawa river.

"Fireworks," says an elderly man after taking a swig of beer, "make you feel good."

We stand on the roof of the hospice Kibo no Ie (Hope House) looking down over the flophouses of the day laborers in the Sanya district of Tokyo's Taito Ward. One floor below us, a man is dying.

The fireworks are over. I open the door to his room and smell a sweet-sour odor. The lights and air conditioner are on low. I hear gentle music coming from a CD player.

TV. He ended up in a hospital, suffering from a cognitive disorder.

Kibo no Ie opened in October 2002 as a shelter for street people and people receiving welfare payments who found themselves unable to cope with living alone. There are at present 21 residents, but the turnover rate is high—as it naturally would be at a hospice. As of June, 24 residents had died this year.

"Here, people are free to be themselves," says co-director Masaki Yamamoto. "If they're nice, they're nice. If they're snappish, they're snappish. Our idea was to provide a space where people could live out their last days in the manner that suits them best."

arm. It says, roughly speaking, "Don't mess with me." He's had a more varied life than most. Born in 1934, he was evacuated from Tokyo during the war to his mother's hometown of Iwakuni, Yamaguchi Prefecture. On Aug. 14, 1945, the day before the war ended, his refuge was bombed.

After the war, he made his way alone back to Tokyo. The journey took him three days.

He sheltered in an underground concourse beneath Ueno Station and shined shoes for a living. A barber he met took him in, and eventually he obtained a barber's license.

But unable to settle down, Shibata drifted from job to job, selling snacks at movie theaters, cooking at a

gone. He never saw them again. He worked for a while as a painter in Tokyo's Shinbashi area. He later spent some time on Palau in the Caroline Islands.

Home again, he found work in Sanya as a steeplejack. In 1958, he worked as a welder at the summit of Tokyo Tower, which was then nearing completion.

Sato never married. Fast losing his eyesight, he spends most of his time listening to the radio and taking walks with staff member Haruko Sato. An "Edokko" (a native of Tokyo born to a family that has lived in the city for at least three generations) to the core, he enlivened last April's cherry-blossom viewing by the Sumidagawa river with his

Masaaki Shibata is the life of the party.

young.

She had a pension, so she was not penniless. For 4,000 yen, she bought a tent and set it up by the statue of Saigo Takamori. In the mornings, she used playing cards to read fortunes. She read novels and did crossword puzzles on the streets in the afternoons. If her neighbors had little to eat, she was happy to help out.

"I had a sleeping bag and portable hand warmers so the cold didn't bother me," she says. "I enjoyed living at Ueno. Afraid? No, never. People called me *'ne-san'* (big sister). And the stars were so beautiful. No, I was happy there."

In June last year, she fell ill and had to be hospitalized. Kibo no Ie happened to be close by. Impressed by its promise of freedom, she installed herself there as soon as she was discharged.

Every Tuesday, an American, Carol Sack, brings her harp to Kibo no Ie and plays for the residents.

One day in mid-April, Sack was sitting at the bedside of Fumiko Shimizu, who suffers from cancer and was nearly comatose.

Sack began to play, improvising, alternating high notes and low notes. Shimizu's hand moved jerkily in rhythm to the music. Soon her movements grew gentler, her breathing quieted. Sack shifted into a Gregorian chant, then an Irish lullaby. After 45 minutes of playing, all traces of agitation were gone from Shimizu's features.

"Music thanatology is an American invention," Sack says. "It uses music to ease a dying person's passage into the next world. It imparts the strength a dying person needs. You might think of it as a kind of prayer."

Shimizu died the next morning. She was 90. Several days later, the funeral was held at the small rooftop Christian chapel, where part-

sky above the Sumidagawa river.

"Fireworks," says an elderly man after taking a swig of beer, "make you feel good."

We stand on the roof of the hospice Kibo no Ie (Hope House) looking down over the flophouses of the day laborers in the Sanya district of Tokyo's Taito Ward. One floor below us, a man is dying.

The fireworks are over. I open the door to his room and smell a sweet-sour odor. The lights and air conditioner are on low. I hear gentle music coming from a CD player.

"I'm sorry, did I hurt you?"

At the man's bedside is Mie Yamamoto, 47. She is inserting a tube up the man's nose. Mie and her husband, Masaki, 41, run Kibo no Ie together.

"I'm going to drain your phlegm now, Tsuchiya-san."

Tsuchiya does not respond. But, "He understands everything I say," Mie says. "Now and then he moans and clears his throat to release the phlegm."

Teruo Tsuchiya was born in 1938. He came to Kibo no Ie almost a year ago. He was dying of liver cancer. A native of Yamagata Prefecture, he moved to Tokyo after graduating from junior high school and worked as a carpenter.

Once, he was married and had a son. Fond of sake, Tsuchiya drank heavily. The marriage failed. As the recession of the 1990s deepened, he found himself with less and less work.

In 1993, he began living on unemployment insurance. His health deteriorated. Assailed by one ailment after another—cirrhosis of the liver, gallstones, angina, insomnia, a stroke, ulcers, auditory hallucinations—it's a wonder he stayed alive as long as he did.

Mie places her hand under Tsuchiya's left shoulder and begins a massage.

"The fireworks were wonderful," she says.

Tsuchiya does not reply.

"It's a good thing you came here, don't you think? Where you're among friends?"

"Mm," he murmurs.

"We're glad you came, too. Well, take it easy. And when your time comes to die, you will die in peace."

Tsuchiya's breathing is harsh and ragged. His stomach rises and falls with the effort. I hold his hand. It is warm, but there is no answering pressure. He will die the next morning.

For the past 12 years, I have been talking and listening to the homeless who live at the west exit of JR Shinjuku Station.

Not surprisingly, they tend to develop close relationships with each other. They may be in a leaky boat, but at least they are all in the same leaky boat. Many who save their welfare payments and move into apartments soon sink into solitary misery.

I know one man who, after living on the streets, moved into his own apartment in 1999, only to find himself with nothing to do except drink and watch street people and people receiving welfare payments who found themselves unable to cope with living alone. There are at present 21 residents, but the turnover rate is high—as it naturally would be at a hospice. As of June, 24 residents had died this year.

"Here, people are free to be themselves," says co-director Masaki Yamamoto. "If they're nice, they're nice. If they're snappish, they're snappish. Our idea was to provide a space where people could live out their last days in the manner that suits them best."

Yamamoto grew up as the son of a police officer in the Ryogoku area of Tokyo. In 1989, he joined a nonprofit organization working with gravely ill children.

Ten years later, owing to personal problems, he sank into depression. He returned home to think about what he wanted to do with his life. Moved by the homeless and their difficult lives, Yamamoto decided to try and help them. The idea of a hospice took shape.

"I thought I'd set up some kind of facility so that people living on the street wouldn't have to die alone," he says.

Using his father's savings as collateral, he took out a loan and went looking for a place to rent. But landlords balked at allowing their property to be turned into the final stop for the indigent.

One day he talked to a real estate agent in Sanya. The agent had a former public bathhouse on his hands. After borrowing more money, Yamamoto bought the 150-square-meter property for 45 million yen.

Around that time, he attended a lecture at Tokyo's Sophia University, his alma mater, given by German professor Alfons Deeken. Deeken is known for his philosophy on death and is a pioneer in death education. That's where he met Mie.

Kibo no Ie's full-time staff of five, including the Yamamotos, is supplemented by about 20 part-timers and volunteers. There are also doctors, nurses and Christian clergymen (Yamamoto is Christian) who make themselves available when needed.

For residents who are recipients of welfare payments, the monthly charges are 69,000 yen for rent and 45,000 yen for food. There are contributions from Christian churches and other organizations, but contributions from the public, generous in the early days, have fallen off. Making ends meet is a perpetual problem.

The residents are a miscellaneous lot. One was formerly a prisoner of war in Siberia. Among the many occupations represented are miner, whaler, Ginza cabaret bartender, carpenter, steeplejack, steam locomotive driver, Kabuki theater lighting technician, forester and *soba* chef. Together they form a living history of wartime and postwar Japan.

Masaaki Shibata, the whaler, has a tattoo on his

to his mother's hometown of Iwakuni, Yamaguchi Prefecture. On Aug. 14, 1945, the day before the war ended, his refuge was bombed.

After the war, he made his way alone back to Tokyo. The journey took him three days.

He sheltered in an underground concourse beneath Ueno Station and shined shoes for a living. A barber he met took him in, and eventually he obtained a barber's license.

But unable to settle down, Shibata drifted from job to job, selling snacks at movie theaters, cooking at a restaurant and serving at an *izakaya* pub before ending up as a cook on a whaling ship.

Whaling fleets got under way in autumn, returning the following spring. They hunted blue whales in the Antarctic Ocean. To become an expert harpooner, he says, takes no less than 10 years.

His memories emerge in disjointed, if fascinating, fragments. "The cooks worked three shifts. The sake was packed in barrels. The most frightening thing? Killer whales. Fall overboard, and they'll make short work of you, let me tell you. Like Jaws."

Shibata today is nearly blind, his eyes dulled by glaucoma and cataracts. Even so, every Thursday he gropes his way along the fourth-floor corridor from his room to the recreation room for the weekly tea party. With his vast store of wide, if unsystematic, knowledge, he's the life of the party, a compulsive and entertaining raconteur.

"Being unable to see makes your other senses sharper," he says. "Hearing? Nothing gets by me. I can tell whether an elevator is going up or down from the sound."

When the man in the next room collapsed in the middle of the night, Sibata was the one who alerted the staff. And every evening, blind or not, he turns off the lights, changes the toilet paper, and does various other chores.

"I've always lived free," he says. "Now my life is just about over. If life's a train journey, I'm approaching the last stop. All the staffers here are so kind. If I'm itchy, they scratch me, you know? So in return, I like to do whatever little services I can for them."

In a corner room on the second floor is Yasumasa Sato, 84. He grew up in Tokyo's Koishikawa area, the son of an artillery factory worker. Young Sato joined the army and fought in many battlefields. He vividly recalls bullets whistling over his head in China.

"When they hit close they'd send clods of earth smashing into you. We'd take cover in trenches, eating *senbei* (rice crackers) and candy out of our packs."

At war's end, he found himself in a tank battle against the Soviet Union's Red Army. Sato's platoon was routed, taken prisoner and transported to Siberia. They lived in log huts and cut down trees to make railway ties.

Sato returned to Japan in 1955 to find his family

Home again, he found work in Sanya as a steeplejack. In 1958, he worked as a welder at the summit of Tokyo Tower, which was then nearing completion.

Sato never married. Fast losing his eyesight, he spends most of his time listening to the radio and taking walks with staff member Haruko Sato. An "Edokko" (a native of Tokyo born to a family that has lived in the city for at least three generations) to the core, he enlivened last April's cherry-blossom viewing by the Sumidagawa river with his traditional Tokyo toasts, clapping his hands and exclaiming, "Here's to everyone's good health!"

Then there's Yoshie. In her younger years, she ran a Japanese-style restaurant at a tourist spot in central Japan's Chubu region. Several years ago, though, she lost her restaurant after the area was rezoned.

She lived for a time with her son and daughter-in-law, but that didn't work out.

"One holiday, I heard the car drive off. Everyone was going out for dinner. What about me? They completely ignored me. If there's anything I can't stand, it's being ignored," she says.

Three years ago, in summer, Yoshie traveled to Tokyo and went straight to Ueno Park. She seemed to take naturally to living outdoors. Her past was past—over and done with. She even took another name—the name of her younger sister who died

playing, all traces of agitation were gone from Shimizu's features.

"Music thanatology is an American invention," Sack says. "It uses music to ease a dying person's passage into the next world. It imparts the strength a dying person needs. You might think of it as a kind of prayer."

Shimizu died the next morning. She was 90. Several days later, the funeral was held at the small rooftop Christian chapel, where part-time staffer Giko Yamada, a 29-year-old Buddhist priest, read sutras.

Some residents are hard to get along with at first. But they usually come around after they become familiar with the staff members.

Others prefer to keep to themselves. "Maybe they feel like talking, but they can't because they've thrown their past away," Shibata says.

Whatever their characters or their inclinations, they all have this in common: This is the last chapter of their lives. What final memories will they store for themselves at Kibo no Ie?

On June 29, a resident who had lived in Sanya for 50 years died. An altar was set up in the entrance. Sato, who was especially close to the man, closed his sightless eyes and prayed.

Carol Sack comforts 90-year-old Fumiko Shimizu. Shimizu died not long after this picture was taken.