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PUBLIC LIVES; A Park Cleans Up Its Act (Gum Removal Aside)



By ALAN FEUER

NOT long ago, Dan Biederman, who runs the Bryant Park Corporation, was chatting with his staff about the problems that plagued the park in the dirty days of 1979. Those could be summarized as thus: drugs, rats, graffiti and the stench of urine.

The park has come a long way since then, when Mrs. Astor was, as the saying goes, "accosted by a youth" (species: *Adolescentis drug-dealeum*) and the Rockefeller brothers pitched a fit. They plucked Mr. Biederman from relative obscurity to fix the park, which he has done so well that it is now -- at 900 people per acre per sunny day, he said -- the most densely used public space on the planet.

With success, however, have come the problems of success, which in the case of Bryant Park have included a loud preacher with personal-space issues, a sukkah-dwelling rabbi who refused to go away, and Howard Dean, who held an 2004 campaign rally there, importing a graffitied backdrop to where there was no graffiti.

Then last month there was the latest: a landlord-tenant dispute, which may be the only one of its kind where you actually rooted for the landlord. IMG, the company that owns Fashion Week, got into a tussle with the park and is likely to be booted after next year's February shows. It was determined, Mr. Biederman said, that the editors and models were simply too disruptive and needed too much space.

"We try not to whine at things that are not a big deal," Mr. Biederman said the other day (after saying he wasn't at all bitter about the spat, then quickly asked that his comments be stricken from the record). "And the fashion shows go under that."

It would be hard to locate a human being less physically indicative of the high-gloss, high-attitude world of high fashion than Dan Biederman. Which is not to say Mr. Biederman lacks style. He is tall, well dressed, well spoken, wears his hair short, is bespectacled, does not look 53, attended Princeton and Harvard, lives in Chappaqua, N.Y., gets excited at the size and shape of garbage cans and hikes each summer in the Alps. His mentor was the sociologist William H. Whyte whose best known work is "The Organization Man."

"I'm a half business, half government guy," said Mr. Biederman, who also runs the 34th Street Partnership and has worked as the master of Bryant Park's nine acres since 1980.

He knows everything about the place. The lawn comes from the eastern shore of Maryland, he said. The tables each cost \$75. The average "dwell time" is, based on empirical observation, more than an hour during lunch and in good weather. The guy who counts the people has a pair of tallying devices: one in his left hand to tally women, one in his right to tally men.

On good days, Mr. Biederman said, 4,600 people eat lunch in the park (split nearly 50-50 men to women). Many sit on the Bryant Park Lunch Chair, a college lecture hall model with a custom cupholder. Mr. Biederman holds the patent.

It is striking, he says, the amount of arcane knowledge one can learn in the seemingly homogenous discipline of park management. One learns, for instance, that bubble gum dropped on a sidewalk takes three weeks to change from pink to black. One also learns that the three worst occasions for vandalism in New York City are New Year's Eve, St. Patrick's Day and whenever Rangers games let out.

Then there are the odd glimpses into the city's psyche, which mainly derive from Mr. Biederman's own time in the park.

On gender: "Men will sit down at a table with crumbs near a pile of litter within range of the smell of someone who has just urinated. Women, on the other hand, are much more sensitive to danger, discomfort and disorder."

On race: "Mediterranean types, blacks, Jews, Hispanics, even some Asians have a better sun tolerance than the Irish, English and Scandinavians. If there is a group of office buddies having lunch in the park, it is usually the Irish guy facing away from the sun."

On national character: "Did you know that 67 million Americans describe themselves as amateur gardeners?"

Mr. Biederman describes his mission as "building a crowd" in Bryant Park to which end he has brought in attractions like free movies, a carousel, a piano man, an outdoor reading room and a strange commercial event this summer in which acrobats selling underwear performed a trapeze act in Jockey shorts over Avenue of the Americas.

There is also a Wollman-style ice skating rink that will open at the end of the month and would have stayed through March but for the fashionistas about whom Mr. Biederman is not bitter. In his mind the perfect crowd for Bryant Park is anyone of any race or socioeconomic group who does not spit, play a loud radio, curse within earshot of another human being or feed the pigeons.

HIS most endearing quirk may be the notebook he carries in which he jots improvements for the park. This is a constant process that reveals his love of tiny details.

Today it may be a better newspaper box or ice cream cart; tomorrow cleaner bathrooms or more closely pruned trees.

Gum removal is an ever-present problem.

"If you're looking for a way to end this thing you can always say that right now we're looking for someone to solve that problem in particular," he said.

"And we'll pay a lot of money."

Photo: DAN BIEDERMAN (Photo by Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times)