

EVERGREEN GUYS

A sub-zero sub-culture

By Brian Levinson

Joel* doesn't like coffee, but thanks so much for asking.

It's the dead of winter, and the dead of night. He's thousands of miles from his Swedish home, selling Christmas trees on the Upper East Side. He works every night of the week, from 10 p.m. to 10 a.m.

"Yeah, it gets lonely," he said.

There's not much client interaction on the night shift; mostly he's just guarding the trees. At least the neighbors are friendly. They dearly want to buy him coffee. For Thanksgiving, he got a meal's worth of leftovers. And last year there was cheesecake.

In New York City, nothing hints at Christmas—not Black Friday sales, not even the incessant carols—like the rich, piney smell of a Douglas fir on your street corner. The city's tree industry is mostly controlled by New Yorkers, but it's the workforce that captures hearts, minds and a whole lot of food. They hail from Europe, the U.S. and, most notably, French Canada. In a city that claims to never sleep, these rugged individuals seem to be the only ones actually still awake. Sub-culture by day, sub-zero by night.

The radio is tuned to 101.9 FM.

"It's the RXP. New York Rock Experience," Joel said, the station identification by now drilled into his head. "I love that it's not Christmas music."

Joel was a medic in the Swedish army, and he plans to study medicine in school. But he's not done traveling yet. With the money he saves this month, he's heading off to East Africa, and will journey from Zanzibar down to Capetown.

Fredrik, another Swedish tree-seller who works the night shift on Columbus Avenue and West 90th Street, has found time for sightseeing while in the city, hitting the Empire State Building and New York Public Library.

"I have been waiting to do this a long time, and now I got the opportunity," he said, cupping his hands for heat.

His girlfriend, also from Sweden, is doing a one-year stint as an au pair on Long Island.

Food options abound for Fredrik. There's a Domino's Pizza down the block, and a 24-hour grocery store. Doughnuts and bagels are real American treats.



Joel makes wreaths while waiting for late night customers on the East Side. Inset: shelter for the coldest days.

York from the Dominican Republic.

"Maybe next year we'll bring a microwave. One guy on Broadway has a microwave in his shelter."

Raphael is charmed by New Yorkers.

"This experience of people bringing you food," he said. "In Germany we would never have that."

He's living with his girlfriend—and windsurfing equipment and three surf-

His girlfriend, who sells the trees by day, has more luck meeting good Samaritans. She even showers in the home of a local family.

"For me, in the night shift, it's a little different," Raphael said. "Because the only people I know are on drugs mainly, or people going home from a party."

The doorman in a nearby building gives them access to a bathroom. Or it's a Rite Aid down the block. "We've got, for emergencies, our portable toilet in the van."

Raphael studied philosophy, education and psychology back in Germany. The philosopher most likely to sell Christmas trees in the middle of the night, he ventures, is probably David Hume. "The guy was always trying to experiment with the world."

Ultimately he'd like to settle in Canada, where his girlfriend is from. "I'm too intelligent to expect that I'm going to go traveling for my life."

He's not exactly sure why so many Canadians come down to sell trees in New York. "Maybe because they're more

"Oh, and Starbucks. I love Starbucks," he added

A local resident, Nancy, brings him coffee and food almost every night.

"She's one of the nicest people I've ever met," he said.

The Swedes pay their own way to the U.S., but the rent here is mostly covered by the boss—for whatever that's worth. In one case, four day-timers and two night-shifters are tucked into a small studio on the East Side.

Their salary is paid in a lump sum at the end of the month, but the amount is not pre-determined. Estimates for night-shifters range from about \$1,500 to \$2,500 for the whole month.

"First off, when I get my paycheck, I'm going to get a whole new wardrobe. Because the clothes here are really cheap compared to Sweden," Fredrik said.

"You get a lot of lamb, steaks, everything. It's cold, that's the only problem," said Raphael, a German windsurfing teacher who traveled through Baja California on his way to New

Raphael studied philosophy, education and psychology back in Germany. The philosopher most likely to sell Christmas trees in the middle of the night, he ventures, is probably David Hume.

boards—in a van on West 97th Street. It's parked next to the wood-and-tarp shelter that Raphael built out of an old futon.

"In New York City, there is so much furniture in the garbage," he said. "We have to do it all as low-budget as possible."

ANDREW SCHWARTZ

weather-resistant. That's what makes the job tough."

He's listening to some jazz on 88.3 FM, though during the day 106.7 Lite FM is the station of choice because "they play non-stop Christmas music." Still, he's not tired of the music. He's not tired of the holiday either.

"For me, when I sell a tree to a family, and you have the kids there, it's amazing. I love it."

With the exception of some public parks, for which the city auctions off permits, most of the Christmas tree operations are on city sidewalks, and only require consent from the property-owner fronting the sidewalk.

That permission often comes at a price, and stores are sometimes reluctant to allow anything that will obstruct their signage.

But even while new space is hard to find, the Christmas tree industry has increasingly flooded the New York market with new product lines and new marketing tags.

The sheared balsam comes "from Nova Scotia's most exotic forests," reads the SoHo Trees Website. The grand fir, "offers unique, ultra-wide silver tipped needles and incredible citrus fruit aromas."

Other well-known conifers are Douglas firs from the Pacific Northwest and Fraser firs from North Carolina.

Greg Walsh, who owns Greg's Quality Christmas Trees, says the balsams dominated the industry two decades ago. The



ANDREW SCHWARTZ

Adam from Serbia pulls the late shift on Broadway and West 72nd Street.

Douglas and Frasers would later secure a bigger market share.

But there's momentum behind the noble firs, perhaps the richest looking trees, with branches that can take on the heaviest ornaments. A big noble planting boom on the West Coast is expected to drive

down prices in coming years.

Walsh has been selling trees in New York for a quarter-century. This year, for the first time, he equipped his locations with live-in trailers. The trailers are by no means the lap of luxury, but don't tell that to the sellers.

"I got some guy with a full couch and flat screen in Queens," he said. "It's a family thing. And the mother's helping him out."

Walsh says he employs people from as far away as Arizona and Alaska. One local seller will start work on Wall Street in January, but needs some money in the meantime.

Two of his sellers, from the Niagara Falls area, have turned their trailer into a kind of vegetarian resort. "They're like hippies living on kasha," he said. "They call it urban camping. They're having a ball."

"They've got mounds of vegetables. They're cooking beans and stew. They're inviting people over for dinner in the trailer... and they make lovely dinners."

Though not everyone's taking advantage. For sellers who commute to their site, rather than live in the trailer full-time, "it just becomes a grind," Walsh said.

He pokes fun at one of his more undomesticated sales teams in Manhattan: "They're doing nothing. They're just pathetic. No coffee maker, nothing."

Pete Lance splits the night shift at an East Side tree stand, in a frat-bar-infused corridor of Sec-

ond Avenue. He says the alcohol can be good for sales.

"Sometimes somebody comes stumbling out of Rathbones and they're feeling pretty jolly," he said, pointing to the popular restaurant pub.

He's listening to Lite FM, as the station's overwhelmingly festive playlist is good for business. The tree stand is crowned with a giant, illuminated elf. The neighbors, he said, don't complain. "Everybody in the immediate area has been nothing but nice to us."

On the snack front, he's received cookies, cupcakes and hot chocolate.

During the non-winter months, Lance works as a commercial scallop fisherman based out of Cape May, N.J. Selling trees, he says, makes sense in winter.

"It kind of translates well to commercial fishing because it's a lot of odd hours," he said. "Long and odd hours. Nothing I'm not used to like staying up all night."

He's been staying in a nearby apartment to avoid the long commute back to South Jersey.

"I'm actually mostly here for fun. Any excuse to come to the city," he said. "This was just a perfect reason to come spend a month in New York and be here and have that experience."

** Some sellers requested that we not print their last names.*