



Lawn and order

Witness's green thumb keeps DUMBO shining

By Gersh Kuntzman

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The season is finally over for the Lawnmower Man of DUMBO.

That's how most people refer to Tom Combs, an elusive figure seen many summer evenings atop an old riding mower as he cuts the grass along the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway.

Few know who Combs is, but they all recognize his handiwork: where once there were only overgrown weeds and erosion scars, there are now three perfect lawns, ideal for picnics or sunbathing at the gateway to the rapidly gentrifying former factory area.

Combs has been the neighborhood's anonymous mowing man since 1971.

"It's just a neighborly thing to do," said Combs, now 67.

That's nice for a press release, but there's a method to this man's mowing madness.

Combs, a Jehovah's Witness, moved from Oregon to the sect's world headquarters in Brooklyn in 1958. He's worked in the print shop cranking out the latest issues of "Awake" magazine, plus Bibles in virtually every language, but his calling has been those overgrown hills.

"One of God's commands to Adam and Eve was to take care of the Earth," he told me once. "But Adam and Eve failed, so it is up to us."

It may sound naive in this day of private-public partnerships, but maintaining city property used to be the responsibility of city workers, not volunteers. But Combs has been doing his work for so long now that the Parks Department only objects when another agency tries to stop Combs from doing the Lord's (or, in this case, their) work.

That's what happened a few years back, when a police officer stationed on the BQE wrote up a Jehovah's Witness volunteer for pushing a mower across a Brooklyn Bridge entry ramp towards a hill that was part of Combs's domain. Eventually, the city took back the mound — but not without a fight from the Parks Department.

"We are greatly disappointed, since we would now have to continue doing the work and we could not do anywhere near as well as the Witnesses," a Parks official wrote to his Department of Transportation counterpart.

Things turned out much better for Combs on a personal level. He's a beloved neighborhood fixture as he does his mowing. And he got to see a neighborhood change little-by-little, high-end-condo-by-high-end-condo, from the seat of his Murray mower.

"This used to be an area of old factories, but now it's smartly dressed people, artists, nannies and dogs," he said, pointing to several luxury towers on the rise.



The Brooklyn Papers / Julie Rosenberg

Tom Combs, a Jehovah's Witness, mows the lawn on three Brooklyn-Queens Expressway berms — for free — at the gateway to DUMBO.

“I can’t quite figure out where all the money comes from, but that’s not my business.”

Combs’s mowing hasn’t just raised property values in once-rundown DUMBO, but also earned him a little green.

While Combs was mowing one day a few years back, River Cafe owner Buzzy O’Keeffe hopped out of a fancy car and thanked him personally for the maintenance work. The New York Post’s late great columnist, MetroGnome, heard about the incident and shamed O’Keeffe into making his thanks a bit more, how you say?, tangible.

O’Keeffe hosted Combs and his wife, “and treated us like celebrities,” Combs said.

With winter coming, Combs has put away the mower, but he’ll still be making sure things don’t go to hell in a handbasket.

“I’ll keep busy maintaining the tree pits and filling in the turf,” he said. “I keep busy.”