Piano-man brings calm, one player at a time

With his plastic bag of clothes resting by the bench, Bruce Chorzelewski is sitting down at an upright piano in front of City Hall and improvising a tune. It’s the first chance he’s had to play a piano since last fall, when he was in a mental health center. The instrument is weather-worn, some keys are missing and others, he says, are dead, but playing brings calm to a man whose life has been turbulent.

“It relaxes me,” says Chorzelewski, 51, who remembers the 1980s - before a brain injury, two heart attacks and a stroke, depression, alcohol addiction and stints of homelessness - when he played guitar in clubs with a band called Destiny. The piano is part of a pop-up park that opened last year on Roosevelt Plaza, a new park in Camden, a city that ranks among the country’s most impoverished and crime-ridden.

Chorzelewski, a former supermarket manager who has been living on the streets for the past few days after a rift with his roommates, had been eying the keyboard for a while but played it for the first time on a hot day last week after an appointment at a mental health center. He likes guitar best, but given his financial condition, doesn’t have one right now. The piano is his instrument. It’s everyone’s.

“If you can play a broken piano,” he said triumphantly after his time at the keys, “you can play anywhere.” “I think this is the greatest thing they’ve ever done out here,” said Mack, 42, who sang along as he played. “There’s a lot of talent here.” The Camden one certainly isn’t the first public piano. In a project that does not include the Camden instrument, British artist Luke Jerram has been putting pianos in public places since 2008. More than 1,300 pianos have been put in 46 cities worldwide, each with the instruction, “Play Me, I’m Yours.”

Suarez plays the weathered keys of the piano set up in front of City Hall.

The piano is part of a project to bring life to underused open spaces. It’s on the site of the former Parkade building, which housed offices and a big parking garage. That building went up in 1955 as a way to try to keep suburbanites coming to the city’s department stores - now all long gone. The building stood for decades as an eyesore, and then things got worse in 2003, when the Legionnaires’ disease bacterium was detected there.

Now, it’s a green oasis in the city’s heart that has won a handful of design awards. Professionals from City Hall eat lunch there on nice days, people coming or going to a methadone clinic across the street sit on benches, and sometimes women hand out religious pamphlets. Joe Sikora, president of Sikora Wells Appold, the landscape architecture firm that designed the park and dreamed up including the piano, said the plan was to put the instrument away for the winter. But it became such a part of peoples’ routines that it could not be removed. He said it will be replaced in coming weeks with another used - and possibly more durable - instrument.

Reinaldo Suarez, whose gray beard falls to the middle of his chest, said he has been playing his salsa compositions on it since the piano arrived under a small tin roof. He shows the marks on his arms from years of heroin addiction and talks about how, when he was in prison in Philadelphia more than 20 years ago for auto theft, he spent his time getting his GED and making music. He’s self-taught, he says, and plays only his own songs - another trait shared by several of the people playing. “When you write a song,” he said, “you’ve got to write a song from your heart.” — AP photos