

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

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Column #10



With photo of Brian Mask and Wanda Sue Parrott

***THE TRAVELER'S MOTTO* AUTHOR'S SECRETS OF HOMELESS CENSUS-TAKING**

By Wanda Sue Parrott

Remember singer Kenny Rogers' popular "*secret to survivin*" lines that immortalized Don Schultz's song about winning at poker in Kenny's 1978 hit album "The Gambler"?

*You gotta know when to hold 'em,
and know when to fold 'em,
know when to walk away,
know when to run. . .*

As metaphors, these twenty-two words summarize instructions for those trying to count the number of homeless persons living in specific areas, including their own neighborhoods.

For instance, imagine you are a volunteer taking the homeless censuses in Monterey County on Wed., Jan. 28, 2015. You set out around dawn on an expedition in pre-assigned territory to find and identify as many homeless people as you can observe in one day.

You may travel by bicycle, on foot, or in a vehicle. As gear, you carry data-recording equipment, binoculars, cell phone, bottled water and snacks like trail mix or dried fruit and sandwiches.

Your one-day trek may be long and tiring, so the lyrics to The Gambler can serve as the ace up your sleeve to help you win the homeless-census game with as many positive scores as possible in one short day. How?

Memorize meanings of the lines and sing them while you work to shorten the time it takes you to count the heads of those who look homeless but might not be.

Know when to fold 'em: If person seems an unlikely fit, move on.

Know when to walk away: Be polite, respectful, non-threatening, and mind your own business.

Know when to run means: follow your intuition. If you sense danger, back off.

There is a fifth line that's not in the song. Add it to your repertoire: *You've gotta know what you're looking for if you're going to succeed.*

That's where Brian Mask's guidance comes in. At 58, the "transient voyager" who hails from New Jersey and Pennsylvania, describes himself as a "happily divorced father of three" who has been "homeless by choice." His key advice is: Learn the three major kinds of homeless people:

Homeless by chance: They did not choose or desire to be homeless; it happened and they struggle to survive regardless of the personal conditions of their homelessness.

Homeless by profession: They make their livings by appearing homeless, whether they panhandle to raise money or freeload; they may or may not have shelter.

Homeless by choice: They are on the move, whether lovers of the outdoors, runners from responsibility, or fiddlefoots by nature.

Brian Mask is author of *The Traveler's Motto*. He answers the question "Are you lost?" by replying: "*I'm not lost; I'm between places.*"

He is currently relocating to Seaside from Northern California. In 2013 he spent three nights in the Monterey Peninsula's I-HELP (Interfaith Homeless Emergency Lodging Program) but left when he realized other men needed the space more than he did. He recently returned to the peninsula and is job seeking while living with friends.

"I'm never lost—ever—if I have enough time, food, energy and money to get from Point A to Point B," Brian says. He has traveled by motorhome, car, bus, and train, and is familiar with how to spot homeless communities. "They frequently locate their camps under bridges and overpasses, and along or near train tracks because railroads tend to be lenient."

By profession, Brian is a chef, but he is versatile and can perform many kinds of jobs that require the use of his hands. He says, "See these hands. They have a sixth sense." He rolls a one-handed cigarette, seals it with his tongue, lights it.

He is immaculately dressed and witty. He finds a green feather, sticks it in his mouth and quips, eyes twinkling, "I just ate an Irish chicken."

He grows serious. "If their clothing is filthy or they stink, they're homeless."

For details contact The Coalition of Homeless Services Providers at 831-883-3080.

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Photo of Brian Mask and Wanda Sue Parrott (photographer unknown).

Wanda Sue Parrott is author of *The Boondoggler's Bible—How to Fight Like City Hall to Win!* Proceeds from book sales benefit homeless women of Monterey Peninsula. Details from amykitchenerfdn@hotmail.com.