

## HOMELESS IN PARADISE

March 13, 2015

Column #20



### **Monterey's Missing Men Mystery and Magic!** ***Where are the winners of the Peninsula Panhandlers Writing Contest?*** **By Wanda Sue Parrott**

**NAMING** winning slogans in our “Kites without Tails” Writing Contest was easy. If we ever find the 1<sup>st</sup> Place winner, we might announce his name. Along with the two other finalists, he disappeared the first week of March. So, all we know is:

Fifty-five people served as judges during the ten days after publication of “Homeless in Paradise” (Fri., Feb. 27 edition of *Cedar Street Times*) which cited clever signs flown by homeless hustlers.

Judges included poets from as far away as Israel to whom copies were sent via e-mail; seven members of the SatChat critique group of writers who meet on Saturday mornings at Juice ‘n Java in Pacific Grove; and nine homeless men from the Monterey Peninsula’s I-HELP (Interfaith Homeless Emergency Lodging Program), who also provided possible insight into the above-mentioned mysteries.

Poet Von S. Bourland of Happy, Tex. e-mailed her vote for the 1<sup>st</sup>-Place winner, with this message: “We, too, have our share of sign-beggars in Amarillo, but I’ve never seen any as original as the ones you shared.”

Thanks to all who made this contest more than a spontaneously devised street-smart literary success for the investigative reporter still lurking inside me at age 80. It also provides glimpses into homelessness from more than mere surface level, and some of what I discovered was—well, for lack of a better word--magic! First, the facts:

### **The Winners Are. . .**

There were three finalists from which to choose one’s favorite. All were located in Sand City. Select comments from judges follow each slogan.

**1<sup>st</sup> Place** (34 votes)

Sign propped on sleeping bag of a young man who was playing with his black lab mix outside Pet Smart near SaveMart:

*Spare a buck  
Change our luck*

Judge: "I like it because that is what they are out there for."

Judge: "I'd give them a buck."

Judge: "I have 12 children and 52 grandchildren, and I like dogs."

The most-creative response was from Southern California poet Charlene M. Ashendorf, who e-mailed, along with her vote for the young man and his dog, this untitled poem inspired by his sign:

*Sign unseen  
one untruth  
the other mean  
sleeping bag  
with sign for boy  
whose life's a drag  
a dollar will do  
change's the thing  
and wishes come true*

--Charlene M. Ashendorf

**2<sup>nd</sup> Place** (12 votes)

Sign propped on bicycle with attached cart loaded with tent and blankets:

*Travel partner--girlfriend needed*

Judge: "Too bad it wasn't a bicycle built for two."

Judge: "I chose this sign because it was very original and, though needy, it was the only one that made me smile."

Judge: "I like the lightheartedness in this sign."

**3<sup>rd</sup> Place** (9 votes)

Sign held by a clean-cut sunburned man on a bus bench.

*Ex-wife had better day.*

Judge: "Doesn't have a good vibe."

Judge: "He could have been the cause of the breakup (too much information)."

Judge: "He's telling the world, 'I'm not really a bum. I've just had a bad break. She took everything'."

After the three finalist slogans from Sand City's homeless ran in the weekly edition of Cedar Street Times two weeks ago, two note-worthy things happened.

First, I spotted a man flying a sign almost identical to the one that won 3<sup>rd</sup> Place in our contest. He was not the same clean-cut man I described sitting on a bench. He was taller, younger, more stringy-haired, and strung-out in appearance. His sign said: “Ex-wife had a better lawyer.”

Apparently, plagiarism and pirating of intellectual property is as common in the homeless community as in the public domain at large, and some slogans sell better than others for dishonest hustlers like the man I witnessed last Saturday.

I was scoping out the parking lot near Home Depot in Seaside at 9:45 a.m., looking for panhandlers who partner with dogs to beg from the weekend breakfast crowd at McDonald’s.

A flashy silver late-model expensive sedan pulled up by the stop sign at the exit onto Canyon Del Rey and a burly old black man quickly emerged. He was costumed in stocking cap, stained tattered jacket with torn left elbow, and rundown shoes.

He pulled a crudely lettered cardboard sign from the back seat, waved his driver away, and went to work as a beggar. He was a master performer, weaving and waving, compared to the twenty-something homeless white couple wandering aimlessly around the parking lot with a brown boxer on a loose leather leash.

Second, a man at my church said, “I read your column and now read all the homeless people’s signs. I’m hooked.”

I’m hooked, too, which leads to the magic.

After announcing the contest Feb. 27, I checked daily to see if the anonymous finalists were still in Sand City so the winners could be contacted when judging ended. All three vanished on March 3.

An I-HELP member suggested, “They were travelers who moved on. Or they got paid and went off to buy booze, drugs and food. Social security comes in on March 3.”

So, the youth may never know his heart-tugging two-liner won a writing contest; that is, if he even wrote the couplet.

Moe Paccione, a judge from West Virginia, called his number. “...a basic panhandler, unfortunately using an animal to pull on heartstrings. I have been duped by a panhandler, so when I see them, I am very wary of them.”

Last Saturday I found a 28-year-old traveler named Mike, who looked a lot like the man in the above Clip Art illustration, hustling outside Pet Smart with his six-month-old feline partner, Stella. His sign claims he needs cash to pay for the kitten’s second round of shots and a ticket to Seattle.

I asked his line of work. “Gardening, landscaping, odd jobs,” he said. Where do they sleep? “I rent a hotel room.” How do people contact him to do work? Mike gave me his cell, but I won’t publish it, since he’ll be gone by the time this column is published.

When one animal-loving panhandler vanishes, it’s like magic. Another appears.

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Photo of man with cat on shoulder, source unknown; no copyright infringement intended, used for illustrative purposes only. Contact Wanda Sue Parrott at *Books for Beds* by leaving a message with The Yodel Poet at 831-899-5887 or e-mail [amykitchenerfdn@hotmail.com](mailto:amykitchenerfdn@hotmail.com).