

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

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Column #33



Bob and Jamie Stephenson, homeless travelers

SENIOR “TRAVELERS” ON THE ROAD

How to be healthy, happy, and houseless by choice

By Wanda Sue Parrott

IT’S ALMOST SUMMER. Travelers are coming to, and moving through, the Monterey Peninsula. A fine line separates Tourists from Travelers; Travelers are homeless. They’re reputed to earn cash by panhandling and/or harvesting marijuana up and down the coast.

There are also Travelers like Bob and Jamie Stephenson.

Although technically they are a retired couple who live on their fixed incomes, they definitely fit the categories in the hypothetical “Encyclopedia of American Homeless Nomenclature” that defines Traveler as: A class of people who are always on the move.

The Stephensons seldom stay anywhere more than a day or two, unless they’re serving as volunteers with church agencies that provide disaster relief. Then, they spend a few days in service, and receive room and board. Bob performs maintenance. Jamie is an accountant and bookkeeper.

Bob started going on disaster-relief trips in 1999 after he retired from the publishing company where he was a graphic designer and cartographer. One day Jamie joined Bob in the disaster relief office and said, “We need to do this fulltime, or not at all.”

They applied as a couple, were hired, and started in January 2000 with a Baptist mission-sending organization that provided housing, insurance and a modest salary. They rented out their house in Kentucky, but later sold it.

The Stephensons qualify as western nomads in the hypothetical encyclopedia: Secondary definitions of Travelers could include: social cousins to gypsies; vagabonds (including hitchhikers, bike riders, rail riders and hobos), and western nomads.

Bangkok, Thailand was a 3-year assignment that nearly ended in disaster for the nomadic duo. They had booked a room at the beach devastated by the tsunami on Dec. 26, 2004, but cancelled reservations and were safe in Bangkok when the waters leveled the shoreline. They also spent time in Hong Kong and China.

Bob Stephenson traveled as a military-family child. His father was stationed at the Presidio in Monterey and Bob occasionally returns. This time, he and Jamie left Panama City in the Florida Panhandle five weeks ago and spent four weeks crossing the country. They came to Monterey via Tucson and headed out to Sacramento.

They are parents of three grown daughters and have four grandchildren, so fit the Senior slot in the homeless encyclopedia's imaginary Travelers section: Age definitions could divide Travelers into six sub-sets: Teens through age 18 (including runaways); Youths, 19 through 24; Young Adults, 25 through 40; Middle Aged, 41 through 55; Senior, 56 through 75; Elderly, 76 and older.

How does this healthy, happy couple sustain their homeless life on the road? Their only physical address is a post office box in Florida. They travel with enough clothes to fit in a couple of suitcases, drink mostly water, and frequently split one meal in a sit-down, not fast-food, restaurant.

Electronic equipment is vital. It includes a laptop computer, several digital cameras, cell phones, a GPS, HG Light that uses 250 megabytes, and Wi-Fi Hot Spot that assures internet access if it is not available in a motel room.

Jamie says, "I sit in the backseat and do business on the computer via the Wi-Fi device while Bob does the driving." Business includes everything from electronic banking to booking a room at a hotel or motel for their next stop on an itinerary they make up as they go.

Bob says, "People don't write checks like they used to." They use credit and bank cards and don't sleep in the car or camp out. They choose motels with great free breakfasts, keep soap, and tuck unused packets of sugar, creamer, and tea in their carrying cases, along with bananas or other snacks.

The Stephensons drive a 2011 Toyota Avalon with manual and automatic transmissions that enable Bob to safely execute sharp turns and steep roads. "Gasoline is the lowest expense," Bob says. "We average \$15 to \$25 per day for food."

For nearly five years, they have been traveling around America in order to visit every state. "We've visited forty-nine states," Bob says. "We took a cruise to Alaska and still plan to visit Hawaii." His advice, based on their success as homeless Travelers, includes:

"You don't need a day-by-day itinerary, but you do need a budget. You need to spend below your budget. Your overall average for the year is more important than what you spend per day."

Jamie says, "I'm not strict. I'm just frugal by trying to get a decent place for us to stay while we travel." She estimates the average cost per night for hotel or motel rooms is \$40 through \$60.

Both agree you should check your motel bill for expenses that are sneaked in, like a "Safe Tax," "Resort Tax," or other "Entertainment Tax." Always get a printout of your bill. And ask to have expenses removed. It might work.

After the Stephensons go to Hawaii, they plan to retire as homeless Travelers. Bob says, "We will end this chapter, but may do more traveling later... to other countries."

TRAVELERS

Do you feel the sweet call of the long open road?
Do you sense the new life in your soul?
Can you hear the soft song the whole universe sings?
Can you feel your heart suddenly sprouting new wings?



What a glorious feeling, this "Farewell to Home",
As you lift up your pack and you set out to roam.
The world is the playground of peasant and king,
Where the Travelers all go at the coming of spring.

Wanda Sue Childress, March 1962

Oops!! And The Real Tony Tersol Is. . .



In last week's column about tiny homes, attractive artist Claire Fullerton was incorrectly identified as Rancho Cielo's solar-energy instructor Tony Tersol.

The handsome hunk responds:

"Just looked at the online version. It's not *Vanity Fair* -- I hope my friends don't think I'm trying to keep up with the Jenners." - Tony Tersol, Pacific Grove

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