

## HOMELESS IN PARADISE

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### Column #5



## THANKFUL HOMELESS DINE ON FANCY HOLIDAY DINNER FROM A DUMPSTER

by Wanda Sue Parrott

While turkey and trimmings were standard Thanksgiving food for most families, I witnessed a holiday season banquet where festive fare was recycled garbage spiced with “boosted” essentials that fed a homeless “family” at Laguna Grande Park in Seaside.

“Boosted means stolen,” the 40-year-old gay host I call Ernie confided. “We only boost essentials, things we really need, like ketchup, salt, pepper and sugar. We never take things we won’t use.”

Ernie, an unemployed cook, said he has been homeless for two months. “We make a shopping list. Then, each takes a shopping cart and we spread out through a store. If we have any money, we pay for bigger items like soda pop or instant coffee. We put our book bags or back packs in the front part of the cart and hide things we are boosting under them. I might put a can of pepper under mine, and Juan puts salt under his bag.”

Juan (not his real name) is adviser to the loosely assembled family group that steals and dines together. He is a 30-something healthcare worker who recently lost his job after 14 years. He does not expect to remain homeless long, nor do Susie and Tim, teenage sister and brother who sleep in a late-model van with their employed mother and two small dogs.

They gathered outdoors while Ernie prepared the feast on a barbecue grill beside a picnic table set with paper plates, plastic cutlery, napkins, and cups from nearby Starbucks.

Ernie said the cooking fuel was “wood we gathered down by the campsites by the creek near the bridge where the transient woman’s body was found.”

That evening’s dinner was to be barbecued beef ribs with potatoes, carrots and cinnamon rolls whose expiration dates had passed.

“We are known as ‘clean’, meaning we don’t do drugs, smoke or drink,” Ernie said. “And we don’t sleep near homeless people who do those things. We are spiritual people.”

Although no one divulged the spots where they sleep, Ernie hinted his place is near Seaside City Hall. “During recent rainy weather, I wrapped up in plastic. I would have gone into a warming shelter, but there was none.” He has applied for transitional housing and, like Juan, does not plan to be homeless for long.

“I am learning to live like the Native Americans did--with nature,” Ernie said. “The hard part is seeing new friends like Saint Nick fall victim to addictions that keep them homeless. Saint Nick is around 70. He has a white beard. He’s our Santa Claus because he goes into the dumpsters, which we will not do. He gives food as gifts to all of us. Unfortunately, he uses meth and is cooking his brain.”

The strong odor of roasting ribs assaulted my nose buds. “Is that meat safe?” I asked.

Ernie nodded. “I threw out the bad oranges from the dumpster and marinated the ribs in juice from the good oranges. It kills bacteria.”

“How often do Smart & Final and Safeway throw out food?”

“Every day,” Ernie said. “If they would give it to us, we wouldn’t have to forage or boost anything. . .”

“They can’t give it away,” Juan interjected. “If someone gets sick, he can sue the market for \$300,000. If a lot of people get sick, the market could be sued out of business and then no one could eat.”

When the ribs were done, and Ernie offered me a plate, I said, “Thanks, but I don’t eat meat.”

The matching-funds challenge, first presented by Pacific Grove council members Rudy Fischer and Ken Cuneo in February 2014 to resolve homeless issues across the peninsula, is slated for Seaside City Council’s mid-year budget review agenda in February 2015. Details about the date and how the public can participate will appear in this column in January. Or contact Seaside City Hall, 440 Harcourt Ave., Seaside, CA 93955, [cityclerk@ci.seaside.ca.us](mailto:cityclerk@ci.seaside.ca.us) or call 831-899-6707.

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