

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

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Column #54



Part 4: WINTER IS COMING

Newly homeless person's guide to dumpster diving and dining

By Wanda Sue Parrott

(**THIS FOUR-PART** series is based on Pacific Grove City Councilmember Rudy Fischer's question *With winter coming, are homeless persons eligible for Section 8 housing?* It raised another question: *If you were suddenly homeless, what would you do?* We suggested following the Boy Scout motto "Be prepared" by letting the experienced homeless lead the newcomers—or about to be first-timers—to homelessness. That theme is continued this week.)

Imagine you lost your place of residence, and you followed all steps recommended in this series, but still find yourself without a new roof over your head or food to eat. While you wait for social services agencies to call back on your cell phone, night creeps up like chilly fog while you sit on a bus bench and try to figure what's next.

A noise startles you with sounds like a snarling dog. "Feed me!" Your stomach growls again and a pain like a knotted fist jabs your midsection, fully awakening you.

"Omigod, I'm homeless," you gasp as the tantalizing scent of greasy fried food wafts toward you. A man in a hoodie is eating out of a discarded takeout box from a nearby trash can.

Rising, you reach for the loose dollar bills you stuffed in your shirt pocket so you could buy a cheeseburger and fries but come up empty-handed. While you dozed, your money and your watch were boosted, which in homeless lingo means stolen.

The advice you read in the standing lead of this series flashes to mind: Let the experienced homeless lead the newcomers—or about to be first-timers, to homelessness. Thus, your first night of homelessness begins by trash picking for dinner and ends with trying without much success to sleep in your car.



ABCs In The School Of Homelessness

Your first full homeless-person day starts when you unink from your cramped position behind your driver's wheel, after policemen have made you move four times between midnight and 6 a.m.

You know business people who resent homeless individuals loitering near their shops call the unwanted beggars and hangers-on because you were one of them before the national retail chain corporation for which you worked closed your branch.

As a newcomer to the Homeless School of Survival, you've learned their ABCs before 9 a.m.:

A - Arise early and get ready for work.

B - Beg as if you are a professional butcher, baker, banker, or lawyer.

Collect cash and whatever else you can find to boost (borrow without permission, barter as trade, and sell outright) for survival, but be sure most of it is disposable.

Fortunately, you heeded the advice from this column and locked your wallet and credit cards in your trunk, so you now retrieve a few dollars and drive to a fast foods restaurant in a shopping mall to use the toilet, freshen up and buy breakfast.

You find the bathroom occupied, with six homeless persons in line, cups of coffee in hand and duffel or tote bags at the ready for shampooing hair, shaving, brushing teeth, sponge bathing and changing clothes.

One by one they exit the bathroom, some headed for real jobs and others going to work on street corners by waving signs or holding cups. Your turn comes more than an hour after you arrive.

Survival Depends On Being Savvy

Your success in business depended on how savvy you were, and so you bone up on homelessness as if it is a career path. You enter “skank” into your cell phone and read: a sleazy or undesirable person; a swindler, con artist, or cheat. You look up “beggar” and read: someone who asks for something for nothing.

You have never been sleazy, or begged anyone for anything, but as a skank-to-be you need to get work experience, so you stop a passerby and say, “Pardon me, sir. Someone stole my watch. Can you please give me. . . the time?”

“Sure. It’s 9:45.”

Blue Plastic Diamonds

Nearby, an old woman drags a black garbage bag full of discarded plastic water bottles that sparkle like blue plastic diamonds. The recycling center will pay her cash for each bottle she turns in for a refund. You realize the meaning of the old cliché “one man’s trash is another man’s treasure” and think: survival can depend on the art of dumpster diving and dining as well as getting a safe night’s sleep.

In business you recited a mantra for success before choosing your shop’s address: Location, location, location. You apply the same mantra to homelessness and wind up spending your second night in Veterans Park in Monterey where overnight parking is allowed.



The Beginner’s Guide To Dumpster Diving And Dining

Your second day of homelessness was spent scoping out dumpsters. Easiest to access are open-can street-front containers in which passersby toss everything, from bottles, beverages, cans and paper to food, rags, yard clippings and dog droppings. Bees, flies, and wild animals share such bins since they can be hungry, too.

Waist-high round plastic and corrugated metal containers with lids that can be lifted easily are often found in back alleys or behind stores. Contents are easy to see and pick through.

Slightly harder to access are plastic storefront containers with swinging door tops that require sticking one’s arm blindly through the opening to fumble through contents.

Fast food places that serve meals on stackable trays are almost impossible to raid because their bins are in cabinets with round openings just large enough for a man’s head to enter. These are the best providers of cooked food, as diners throw away chicken skin, bones with meat left on them, soggy fries, and cold buns. However, after the indoor containers are emptied into outdoor dumpsters, the homeless can feast on bones, skin, and fat.



Monster-size dumpsters are most prolific producers of goods and food. Supermarkets throw away produce and outdated packaged foods daily, and retailers discard clothing, seasonal items, and dry goods in which the homeless can wrap up and roll on. Athletic prowess is needed to get in and out of big dumpsters that, like swimming pools, require diving skills.

On your third morning of homelessness, you set out to acquire a sturdy pair of garden gloves from the local dollar store in preparation for future need: Never dig or dive in a dumpster without gloves, you are thinking when the cell phone rings.

An agency is calling you to say housing is available if you still need it.

You respond, "Thanks. What took you so long to get back to me?"

A young voice says, "Sir, we're closed on weekends."

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