

Seattle: Day 1

Contributed by The Boxman
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Seattle may be home to the luxury priced cup of coffee, Microsoft, Boeing and outdoor gear giant REI and a bunch of neo hippies saving the earth by riding their bikes to work, buying locally, and recycling everything. This probably explains why they are the west coast bum capital as people land in Seattle to recycle their life as a panhandler.

Generally our team has to seek out bum infestations. Traveling to seedy parts of town where they find bums in their natural habitat sleeping in abandon buildings and urinating in alleys undisturbed; or around tourist areas where bums find a fresh and ample supply of new people to hustle for change. In Seattle, our agents just had to drive down the street. It was as if we had turned on the kitchen light in a cheap apartment and found cockroaches scurrying on every surface – the street people in Seattle where everywhere. They roamed over every highway off ramp, around retail shopping centers, along busy streets, sleeping under trees, and hanging out by college campuses.

Surrounding one intersection we ran into three panhandlers. One at every turn and light. Going left – bum with a sign, going right – scraggly unwashed bag of flesh with a sign, Going straight – lost young person hustling change. It was cage match panhandling as every bum was fighting for their territory in this one block intersection. The panhandlers would pace the median between cars when the light was red trying to cover as much territory and reach as many cars before the other panhandler working their way from the other end of the median made it the same stopped car. It was speed panhandling as each bum fought for territory and access to the stopped cars.

The pleasure of the three bums was each used a different pitch to solicit change. Two of the street people where women – the younger, blonde who would remind older office workers of their own daughters tugged at the heart strings with a simple sign of “student who needs extra help for food”. I guess she did not get the meal plan on campus this semester. The second woman, older with frazzled hair, and looking like the witch that tried to stuff Hansel and Gretel into the oven pulled the Disabled Veteran sign with a twist. She did not claim to be the veteran but announced her husband was a disabled vet and she was panhandling to support the family. This is a great twist. Imagine the emotional impact a sign like that would have as you realize that the veteran is so disabled they are burdening the family with bills that the only solution the spouse has after working all day, taking care of the disabled spouse, tending to the family is to panhandle. This is the only way to make ends meet and afford a can of deviled ham to make lunch. It really is the only way to trump a cute, homeless blonde college student that is panhandling change on the other side of the median.

Our final member of this stop light trio was languidly walking the median looking for change as cars passed between the two female panhandlers. He took a very unique approach. His sign fabricated from an Arizona tea box announced that he needed money because he was struggling and needed medicine, plus a few smiles. There is a danger in using an “honest” sign of this nature in an effort to encourage people to roll down their window and hand you change. It leaves people with the impression that maybe you are just a little unstable, off your medicine, and might be capable of anything. Rolling down the window for this person could open up a dose of crazy that you don’t want to deal with on your morning commute. He did not look like he was having much luck as eyes down cast he wandered up and down the median in a slow amble giving everyone plenty of time to see his sign and downtrodden expression, of course that could have just been an expression of extreme depression that a few pills might have helped. But then how much could the pills really help? So, now you are homeless, hungry, unwashed with retching body odor from sleeping under a bridge but the neurotransmitters in your brain are flush and firing bringing you a sense of well being. It seems the natural state if you are living under a bridge would be a state of depression.

Our agents had been in Seattle a night. Long enough to get off the plane, get a hotel, have a beer and prepare for the next mornings tour of this west coast town only to be hit at the first intersection they pull off to explore Seattle with a wild pack of bums separating weak commuters from the herd and in a pack frenzy shaking them down for change. If this is Seattle before we stop at the drive through bikini coffee shop (yes they exist in Seattle) what would be in store for us as we hit the heart of the city.