

Transient 'brothers' share life on streets

"Hey man, can you spare \$100?" Elmo asks while standing outside Rainbow Optics on 13th Avenue. This bearded, unkempt man jokes with two women. On this first spring-like day of the year, they linger, obviously enjoying his company and good humor. I sense that this man doesn't just regard the next passerby as his next source of income. Instead, this looked like panhandling with a bon vivant's flair.

Elmo is a master storyteller, recounting stories about his stint in Vietnam, about growing up in the shadow of Yankee Stadium and about riding the rails. He presides over the assembled and delineates transients like himself into three neat categories: hobos, tramps and bums.

"Well there's three levels. The hobo is the highest level. The hobo rides the freight, and any time he gets a chance at a job, he'll do it. A tramp — he'll ride a freight or hitchhike, and if someone offers him a job, he'll take it. A bum won't take a job. He'll look for some bum crashed out under the bridge and steal his god-damned shoes or his bedroll."

Elmo, proudly defines himself and his buddies as tramps. He does not hold back scorn for so-called low-life bums. The insidious pecking order is defined just as in immigrant cities where each racial group is ordered according to its stereotypical character.

"We want to be presented as humans," Elmo insists. This request seems to underlie their outward requests for spare change.

"Most people say, 'Hey man, I can't help you — I'm short today. Some people are stone assholes, man, but they're in the minority. Those people won't even recognize our presence.'"



Friends Jimbo and Allen take a break from the rigors of daily street life and pass some time with their dog Lucie.

I leave for 10 minutes and when I get back, the moment has disappeared. My photographer says Elmo and his friends have gone to get a quart of Night Train wine and will meet us in the alley across from Little's Market. When we get there, Elmo's sharpness is gone.

Elmo and his friends Tim, Allen and Jimbo sit on the curb outside an apartment building bordering the alley. The atmosphere is uneasy: "Just what is it you want from us?" Allen asks at one point.

Stripped down to their humanity on the street, we talk about the bare necessities like food.

"I combed a chicken leg out of a dumpster this morning. I combed that sonuvabitch and threw it away," Elmo says. "Ain't no way I'm going to comb my hair with that sucker." Everyone laughs.

"Sahalies — they throw out so much, those organic-mechanic-hippy-dippies" Elmo says. They don't have meat though, Tim adds.

Not knowing what I can do for them, I offer to get some food. Tim says he'd like a New York steak, Jimbo says maybe some slices of pizza, and Elmo gets the idea of a root beer float. Elmo points at his decayed or missing teeth, saying he can't eat anything tough.

A short time later, someone asks who's got the "bank" and Elmo reaches into his pocket and counts the group's collective change.

"We take care of each other," Tim says.

"What could students learn from you guys?" I ask.

"A little solidarity," Elmo says. "Man, we're all brothers and the only thing we have to keep us alive is each other and the planet Earth."

Though Elmo and the gang might be brothers, this doesn't mean they tell each other valuable secrets such as where their sleeping spots are. "I wouldn't tell my mother where I sleep," Elmo says.

As Elmo sips his root beer float later at Dairy Queen, Jimbo slams the french fries I bought in Tim's face. He argues with Tim: "We could've got six hamburgers for that root beer. . . . Hey man, how much did that root beer cost?"

Tim says Jimbo's being unreasonable and arrangements are made to fight behind the restaurant. After a while, it's all forgotten. I squirm, knowing I've caused this rift.

Talk drifts to their friend Frisco who died about a month ago of a cerebral hemorrhage in Sacred Heart General Hospital's intensive care unit. Tim says they'll get his ashes and toss them in the Willamette River.



Local 'tramp' Elmo hangs out and talks to campus passers-by near the Seven-Eleven on 13th Avenue near campus.

"Frisco, he was such a beautiful brother, he didn't bother no one," Tim says, adding that Buckley House Inc. at 605 W. Fourth Ave., the only detoxification center in Lane County, didn't want to admit Frisco the night he died. Micki Knuckles, a Buckley House counselor, doesn't remember that night but speculates that possibly the center had a full house.

For these men who call themselves tramps, "getting by" isn't always covered by their own wits and the care of area social services like Buckley House and the Eugene Mission Inc., 1542 W. First Ave., where they very easily could stay if they wanted.

Story by Paul Sturz
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Increased transient activity worries area businesses

By Michael Rivers
Of the Emerald

A surge in the number of transients engaged in panhandling along 13th Avenue has some University-area merchants concerned for their customers and employees.

Richard Green, owner of Rainbow Optics, 766 13th Ave., says he has to "literally walk the women who work for [him] to their cars at night" because of the aggressive pan handling techniques employed by the transients.

"They're intoxicated, disorderly. They group together on the sidewalk harassing and grabbing at people," he says. "I've been here for eight years, and I've never seen the problem so bad. It's gotten much worse."

Dave Gibson, president of the University Small Business Association (USBA), agrees there is a problem. Area merchants have been concerned about the increased transient population for about a year, Gibson says.

"Ninety-nine percent of the people in the USBA have gotten some feedback from their co-workers about being verbally abused and physically infringed upon by drunk transients," he says.

Merchants eventually became so frustrated with not knowing how to deal with the transient situation that they took the problem to the city, Gibson says. Merchants and city officials have met several times since the beginning of the year in order to discuss how they might alleviate the problem, but have yet to come up with a solution that is workable "both to human rights and to the merchants," he says.

Several merchants and some city officials believe increased panhandling activity in the University area can be

traced to a city ordinance regulating the Downtown Mall.

The ordinance, passed in September 1985, tightened regulations regarding activities such as sleeping in the mall and sitting in areas meant for pedestrian use, such as sidewalks, says Jan Bahman, a representative from the Eugene Development Department. The new ordinance also requires anyone who want to solicit money on the mall to apply for a permit, Bohman says.

"There has been a noticeable decrease in panhandling activity on the mall," Bohman says. "There are still transients on the mall, but not as many."

Debra Ehrman, city councilor for the University district, believes the ordinance has definitely been a contributing factor.

"It was a domino effect," she says. "Off the mall, over to the University."

But Green believes the revised city ordinance is not the only reason for the increase in panhandling. More transients have migrated to the University area because students are more likely to give them money, he says.

"Students are just helping the transients commit suicide because they just spend money on alcohol," he says.

Ehrman, who has been meeting regularly with the merchants, says the group has considered several solutions to the problem. They originally looked into extending the mall's regulations to the University area, she says.

But Margie Beck, from the Eugene City Manager's office, did not believe that solution would work. If you license any solicitors, you have to license all solicitors, "Girl Scout cookie sellers included," Beck says.

"There are court decisions saying that



Richard Green, owner of Rainbow Optics, says increased transient activity along 13th Avenue threatens employees and customers of area businesses.

there are certain things you can't regulate," she says. "And begging is one of them."

Deputy Chief Bill DeForrest does not believe the licensing idea would work in any case.

"It would have to be a civil procedure and is not a jailable offense," DeForrest says. "What good would it do to give a transient a ticket?"

Increasing patrol activity by uniformed officers in the area also has been considered. City officials have discussed the possibility of merchants contracting off-duty Eugene police officers to provide the increased patrols, he says.

Other possibilities include expanding campus security patrol or bringing in a private security firm, he says.

"More visible officers would discourage panhandlers," Ehrman says. "It's a hard situation because there is no direct answer. Whatever we come up with is not going to satisfy everyone."

The next meeting between merchants and city officials is scheduled for late March.

Green says that whatever the result of the meeting, he and the other merchants want to "send a message to transients that we will not tolerate that type of behavior."