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Hitting 'the beach' on campus

Nicolette Ong
Freelance Reporter

Panhandling may be annoying to students, but think about people asking for money or drugs every few steps down the street. Think about the overwhelming smell of dog excrement emanating from the sidewalk and trying to dodge skateboarders in order to get through East 13th Avenue. Or imagine a bustling marketplace, filled with students sitting on the curb and street entertainers filling the air with music and laughter.

It might be hard to believe that as recently as five years ago, these were daily scenes near campus.

Over the years, East 13th Avenue has changed dramatically. Once dubbed "the beach" and "the candy shop," East 13th was more than just a street filled with restaurants, shops and pubs. It was a gathering place for people, and it was also a place to seek drugs, women and money.

Uncontrolled substances

Several years ago, there was a string of transients and drug pushers on East 13th. These people preyed mostly on students because they were an easy target, Eugene Police Officer Jeff Collins said.

"It was an environment of people who victimized other people," said Collins, who has been working at the Eugene Police Department's West University Public Safety Station for three years.

Drugs were prevalent on East 13th, Collins said, and it brought along with it violence, crimes and transients.

University Assistant Archivist Sharla Davis witnessed the drug activity firsthand.

"I've seen the sales go down," she said. "People would walk by, make a drug sale, shake hands and leave."

Davis also said that the drug sellers would stand around the streets watching people and approaching those who looked like potential buyers.

The pushers weren't only interested in making sales, however. They also approached women.

Innocent women were harassed, and the area became known as the "candy shop," according to Davis.

"There used to be a lot more attacks on females," she said. "Girls did not travel by themselves after dark."

A 'spanging' district

As in many larger cities, the busy shopping district along East 13th was a popular hangout for panhandlers. People were constantly being asked for spare change, Collins said.

"You couldn't walk up and down the street without a gauntlet of people asking you for money or cigarettes," Collins said.

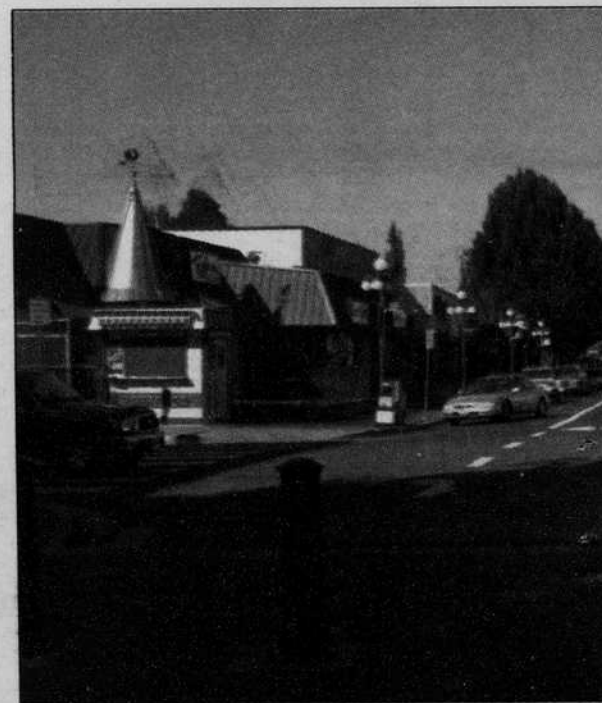
Since students were the main population on the street, they were the most common targets. The transients, often older male alcoholics and drug addicts who did not have a job, regularly intimidated and demanded money from female students and foreigners, Collins said.

"They were so addicted to alcohol that they couldn't hold a job even if they wanted to," he said.

Davis said there were so many transients hanging around asking for money that it was easy to get hit by six or seven panhandlers "spanging" (asking for



East 13th Avenues, as seen in 1994 (above) and September 2002 (below).



Above: Courtesy Jack Liu

Below: Adam Jones Emerald

There were vendors everywhere, she said, carrying their goods on the street and laying them on a blanket.

Given the blankets and the atmosphere, East 13th acquired the nickname "the beach," Saylor said.

People would sit on the curb, bask in the sun and sip on their coffees, according to University Bookstore General Manager James Williams. It was like a social version of surfing, with waves of people passing by.

"The curb was like a chair," said Williams, who has been working at the bookstore for 27 years.

This beach image was such a phenomenon that at one time, the bookstore wanted to make it more realistic and throw sand on "the beach," but the idea never took off.

Street musicians and entertainers such as Eagle Park Slim and Frog were also part of the street scene back in the early 1990s.

"The street musicians were well-received, and they didn't cause any harm," Williams said.

Policies for change

East 13th was a place of transition for people. There were all sorts of characters passing through the street to go home, to school or to work, Collins said. As time passed, students and merchants began to feel more and more uncomfortable with the ongoing activities on the street, he said.

Dog excrement was everywhere, and skateboarders were a hazard to pedestrians, Collins said. And the musicians and entertainers at various spots all contributed to the deterioration of the street.

In 1989, the first policy against skateboarding was enacted. In the ensuing years, policies such as no dogs and no street entertainers have been enforced.

In addition, area merchants, Sacred Heart Medical Center and the University joined efforts to have a patrol and probation officer on the street.

"(East 13th) got cleaned up physically and psychologically," Collins said. "Things turned around 180 degrees."

He said that today's cleaner, safer East 13th can be credited to EPD and Officer Randy Ellis.

"It was just a pit, and a challenge for Randy to clean this place up," Collins said.

Today, East 13th Avenue continues to bustle with activities. It is still a gathering place for people, but there is one big difference — it is a relatively safe and comfortable environment.

Nicolette Ong is a freelance writer for the Emerald.

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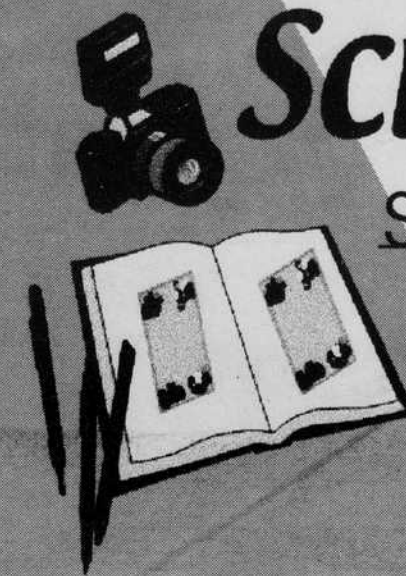
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