



BY CHRISTINE HANLON/WESTERN REGIONAL ADVOCACY PROJECT

The streets are alive with the good, the bad and the ugly

The streets are hot, literally. It's summertime in the city. People are everywhere. If you are a Portlander then you're probably spending as much time as possible soaking up the sun. It's that time. The days are longer. Our senses seem sharper. The morning coffee and the evening breeze taste and feel just a little bit sweeter. The city is alive. If you listen close enough, you can hear it breathe.

Summertime also means tourist season. Family and friends are visiting from all over the world to celebrate graduations and weddings, to enjoy outdoor adventures or to simply fall in love with the Rose City. The reasons are endless.

After all, to the rest of the world, Portland is simply an amazing city, nestled somewhere in the middle of paradise. It's no lie. We have

magical waterfalls and beaches, mountains covered with tall trees, beautiful streams and rivers, too. For people with resources, Portland, and the rest of Oregon, is the place to be, or at least to visit.

One thing tourists and transplants to Portland mention time and again, along with the great food, of course, is the amount of visibly homeless that are in Portland. It's shocking. Unfortunate. Filthy. Heartbreaking. Why don't we help these people? Why don't they get a job? The opinions are many.

For many newcomers and tourists alike, especially those who haven't experienced urban environments, poverty can be traumatizing. Saying that, imagine how the people actually experiencing poverty must feel? Yep. Traumatized. Especially considering the amount of wealth that permeates in everyday life throughout the city.

The comments about the homeless are mostly sincere, even if they aren't always politically correct.

How can people live like this? It's a great question. How can people live like this? It's surely isn't normal. No it is not. For some, seeing people suffering and being asked for spare change throughout downtown is heartbreaking. For others, seeing people surviving on the streets is infuriating and it disgusts them. The idea of people begging for money is both unsightly and a nuisance. Either way, their response typically comes from a place of wanting something to be done about.

No one ever thinks, when coming to visit or moving to a place billed as paradise, that they will witness raw poverty. Being panhandled, or seeing people sleep en masse in Waterfront Park, or witnessing someone have a mental health collapse wasn't in the brochure.

Longtime Portlanders, for the most part, are either engaged at a very intentional level around the issue of

homelessness and poverty, or they have simply become fatigued in trying to come up with a solution to the problem. Of course, there is the more radical element of the business community that believes the answer to solving the problem of the visibly homeless is to create stricter laws against people on the streets, which includes advocating for stricter sidewalk laws, camp sweeps and banning panhandling.

In Oregon, panhandling is considered constitutionally protected free speech.

That's why it was no surprise that this week the business community launched what is called the Real Change Spare Change program. It promotes not giving money to panhandlers, but instead giving money to organizations that help the homeless.

Programs like this have a long history in American cities. They almost always fail. They tend to be demonizing to the poor and rarely tell the whole story. Instead of conveying a message of compassion and empathy, or helping to take action on a nationwide housing crisis, they tend to feed the stereotype that homeless people are all boozers and drug addicts. It's ridiculous.

I personally think readers should give their money to whomever they like, people selling Street Roots, panhandlers, or your favorite nonprofit. It would be so easy for Street Roots to join a campaign like this, but the reality is, it's not where you give your money, or what people are spending their money on that's the problem. It's not having access to housing, jobs and livable wages that's the problem.

Last year, The Oregonian asked me my thoughts on panhandling. They haven't changed:

I have a one quarter or dollar rule, I told The Oregonian. The first person who asks me for change each day gets a little something. After that, I tell people no. It's a quick and easy way to give, but to not bother myself with the complexities of trying to understand if I should give, or why I should give to a specific person.

I would advise people to be aware of your environment, to use your gut instinct and to give as little or as much as you like. There's nothing remotely fun about living in poverty and having to beg for money. The idea that people panhandling are somehow making out like bandits is an urban myth.

Does panhandling help someone? My grandfather taught me at a very young age to never judge a person unless you've walked a mile in their shoes. Who am I to judge? Giving to people that are less fortunate, in my mind, is the measure not only of a person, but the community as a whole. I also believe the simple act of offering people a smile and acknowledging they exist can also go a long way.



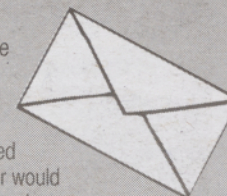
DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

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Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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