

# Let Them Eat Paper

**W**alk with confidence, shoppers, the streets of Santa Cruz belong to you. That is the real message of the Downtown Association's controversial new program, "Real Change not Spare Change". Downtown shoppers are to be given little yellow cards listing services and advised to give them to sparechangers in lieu of change. Following on the heels of planting flower beds where the homeless used to sit, installing hyper-intensive surveillance lights at Pacific Avenue and Cathcart, and most disturbing of all, police harassment of homeless people, a merchant-inspired campaign to "help" the homeless seems out of character in Santa Cruz.

Wary shoppers finally can cope with the horror of a homeless person confronting them directly with an appeal for help. Never mind the numbers listed, send a homeless person on a phone-tag pursuit of services which were overwhelmed long before the cards were printed. And never mind that pay phones for this fruitless search cost money.

Panhandling, or begging, has a deep tradition in most major religions. Buddha and Saint Frances of Assisi supported themselves by asking for alms. Jewish tradition considers giving to the poor a duty. It is the most direct form of charity a shopper could practice, and it is constitutionally protected under the First Amendment's right to free speech. But to attorney Ginaia Kelly, and to Downtown Association Executive Director Linda Steinau, panhandling is a scourge and a blight. What have they been reading lately? Rush Limbaugh?

The average shopper lives in a secure home, leaves a garage with an electric garage door opener, and arrives in the shopping district in a locked vehicle. Only between car and store is it possible to encounter personally the human suffering that fills our community due to homelessness and poverty. Is protecting the wealthy from any personal contact with the poor the proper mission of the likes of Councilman Scott Kennedy or Homeless Community Resource Center Director Karen Gillette?

Why not advise shoppers to safely make all of their purchases on cable-shopping networks and on-line?

Merchants catering to this kind of paranoia are designing public policy according to a grotesque standard. It should certainly not influence our own personal religious and ethical practices toward the poor.

The streets are places where all people can meet, converse, strut, hang out, people-watch, cruise, flirt, network, commune, photograph, listen to music, share a story or secret, enjoy a beverage, rally for a good cause, debate and critique all matters trivial and profound alike, as well as a place where people can shop. The irony is, panhandlers or not, business is up on Pacific Avenue.

Crumpling up this mean-spirited insult and throwing this misinformation in the trash does not "lack insight," as suggested by a recent *Santa Cruz Sentinel* editorial. It rather reflects the more basic insight of retired welfare intake worker David Silva, who accurately dubbed this program, "Let Them Eat Paper."

It is bigotry to paint a whole class of people as drunks and junkies. It is bigotry to define the homeless as lazy or bums. Many homeless people do not abuse alcohol or drugs. Citizens Committee for the Homeless Chairman Mike Wilker once had to panhandle for a fare on BART when his car broke down. We are one human family. So treat the next panhandler you see as you would your obnoxious brother-in-law asking you for a loan, or a bell-ringing Santa, or a Girl Scout selling you cookies.

"Real change" would be sufficient shelter space, needed health and dental services, true job training programs, a homeless campground, an ISSP program with more than two participating churches (in summer), and a carpark for the vehicularly housed. Real change would be a celebration of diversity, culture, and community that includes the young, the poor, and the homeless.

Spare change should continue to flow directly, person to person, as it has for centuries. Spare change is the way each of us, one-on-one, situation by situation, can help another for a tiny price. Spare change can purchase homeless newspapers, such as *Street Spirit*, which are

sold by homeless people to raise money for themselves, while providing an alternative to panhandling.

Yes, do donate to services for the homeless. Donate often and generously. But don't think these cards are really going to help. If the merchants care so much for the homeless, where were they when the Santa Cruz City Council recently spent six hours studying issues concerning the homeless community? Now, if the Downtown Association truly intends to help the homeless, that would be a real change.

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**Editorial by Becky Johnson**