

## GUEST COLUMN

# Mitch Henck: Panhandlers in Madison live tough lives

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“Madison Police are so cool, nice and understanding,” says Yogi, a 58-year-old homeless man panhandling on Madison’s Far West Side. “Eighty percent of Madison people are so nice.”

Yogi was standing for two hours at the median on Gammon and Watts roads facing north holding a sign asking for help. Yogi says he retired from traditional work as a carpenter two years ago after injuring his foot. He can only stand for about two hours at a time. I asked him where he sleeps.

“Under trees,” he says. “That’s why they call me Yogi!”

He calls himself a mountain man from Fairbanks, Alaska. He came here about a year ago after visiting family in Iron Ridge. Yogi says he can’t climb or work outside anymore. I asked him about working sitting down.

“What’s a mountain man like me going to do sitting behind a desk?” he replies. Yogi says he always tries to keep people smiling, and he appreciates that Madison police overlook the small stuff.

“As long as you don’t do anything stupid, they are cool,” he says. The best day he ever had panhandling was \$300, he says, but some days he has made zero. “There are no guarantees, it’s like going to the casino,” he says. It’s dangerous standing in the median with crazy drivers.

“Do my job for one day and tell me how easy it was,” he says. Yogi sleeps outside as long as he can until he has to seek out a shelter in the winter. He doesn’t like shelters. “They treat you like dogs,” he says. “The food is bad.” His parting words were: “Make sure you write that Madison police and firefighters are my heroes. They save lives.”

A few yards away, 39-year old Frank was holding his help sign facing eastbound traffic on Watts Road. Frank was also in the mood to talk. A native of Brooklyn, New York, Frank came west to be with his sick mother in Cross Plains. He says he has a wife with severe cancer and three minor children. He says they sleep in the shelter at Grace Episcopal on the Square at night.

Frank says it's very hard to get a job because he possessed marijuana at 19. He says it didn't matter how much you had in New York state at the time. You got a felony. "I had less than a gram," he says.

When employers see on his application he's felon, they lose interest. Frank says he worked for 15 years cutting down trees, and he still gets tree jobs sometimes. Frank confessed he committed some misdemeanor retail thefts in his 20s, but says the felony record is the killer.

He says he seeks employment all the time and recently found work at a Madison store after lying on his application. "They did a background check and let me go after they found out I lied," he lamented. As I walked away, a motorist pulled up and handed him \$2.

Jayla, 29, was standing on Raymond Road facing the fast traffic on Verona Road. I talked to her at 1:30 p.m. Wednesday. She says she had stood there since 9 a.m. and had made \$1.

"It's heartbreaking when that happens," she says. Jayla says her longest day of pan handling was 12 hours and the most she ever collected was \$100. Jayla graduated from East High. She says she made it to the level of manager at McDonald's but quit to be with her dying father. Jayla says after he died of pulmonary disease she has no family left. She says she lives in a tent off Nesbit Road and has no phone or transportation.

She applies for jobs on foot when she sees a help wanted sign or takes a bus when she sees a job opening in the paper after walking to the library. Jayla showers at the homes of female friends or takes a bus to the Salvation Army on the East Side.

I didn't track down every detail to confirm their stories. They wouldn't give their full names. But I could see the pain in their eyes. I also could see they stood for hours a few feet from dangerous traffic for a reason. I saw them as more than panhandlers in the median but as humans with tough lives.

The oldest of the three, Yogi had empathy for the motorists. "They're struggling too," he says. "You can't give what you don't have."

Then I realized I had become so consumed with my own problems that I forgot how to feel and see the world the way Yogi does. On this day, the gruff old mountain man gave more than he could ever receive standing in traffic.

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