

Herald Sun

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THURSDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2004

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\$1*
(Incl. GST)

SPECIAL REPORT: P4-5

**BEGGARS
IN OUR CITY**



HiT EXCLUSIVE

CASEY
FIRST ALBUM REVIEW

LIFTOUT

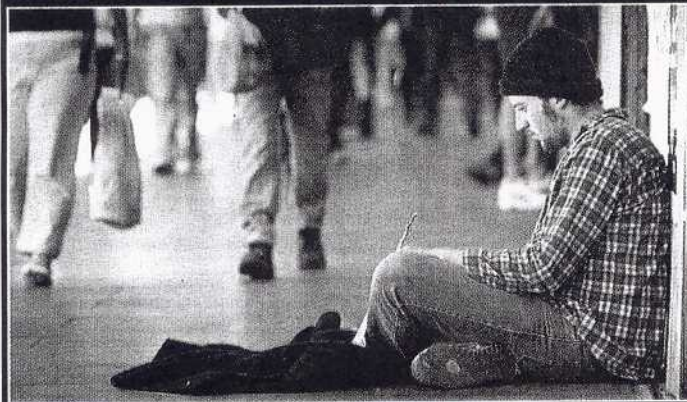
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SPECIAL REPORT: LIVING OFF THE STREETS

Beggars tapping

MONEY FOR NOTHING



DAY 1 ELIZABETH ST \$52.95

Thursday morning
(December 2)

I hit the Elizabeth St footpath unshaved and unshowered, wearing an old flannel shirt, jeans, sneakers and a beanie.

Many a city pedestrian has been harassed along this stretch by beggars asking for money for a train ticket or to make a phone call. But after a recent crackdown on city beggars, I had it to myself.

I chose my "Will Work For Money — please help" sign from my collection, which included professional beggar ruses such as "Please Help Me I Need Christmas Presents For My Kids" and "Help Me Feed My Family".

I had barely spread my jacket out when gold coins

started raining down.

A courier in his 50s asked if I had a driver's licence and offered me a job as a delivery driver. Other job offers followed. A young professional woman said: "There's good (labouring) jobs going at P&O ports. Go down to the ports, fill out an application form and you'll likely get one."

Another man squatted next to me and reeled off a list of recruitment agencies who would without charge get me labouring or factory work.

On that busy stretch about 40 people pass every minute. Even if only one in 80 donate, it's still a coin in your plate — and most give 50c or \$1 — on average every two minutes.



There was the odd jibe from passers-by. One man shouted: "You should be willing to work for free", and a woman sneered: "You're not going to get a job sitting there scabbing."

In the end I made \$52.95 in three hours.

When four policemen arrived to shut my enterprise down, an elderly Indian woman came to my defence and said, "Why don't you leave him alone?"

When I explained I was a reporter working on a story and the money would go to charity, they let me off with a caution but told me to move on.

Left: a couple beg for money to travel to Mildura.

DAY 2 CHADSTONE / CHAPEL ST

\$33.05

I trekked out of the CBD and set up at the main entrance of Chadstone shopping centre.

Whenever a gold coin landed or too many coins accumulated I would engage in the old beggars' trick of pocketing them.

This serves two purposes. It protects from predatory beggars and attracts more sympathy from potential contributors.

Using my sign, "Please Help I Need Christmas Presents For My Kids", I was expecting a good day's takings, particularly since Chadstone had plenty of young females and mothers with kids — the best donors. But in the end I only made \$6.

I was there for less than half an hour before a security guard politely kicked me off the site and watched me until a bus pulled out of the complex with me on it.

Chapel St, South Yarra

Walking to my begging spot outside the Jam Factory, I got some funny looks from the beautiful people of Chapel St. My torn clothes made me stand out like a sore thumb among the tragically hip in their summer fashions.

Once set up, I was treated either as a curiosity or an inconvenience to be stepped around.

In the CBD I had worked out

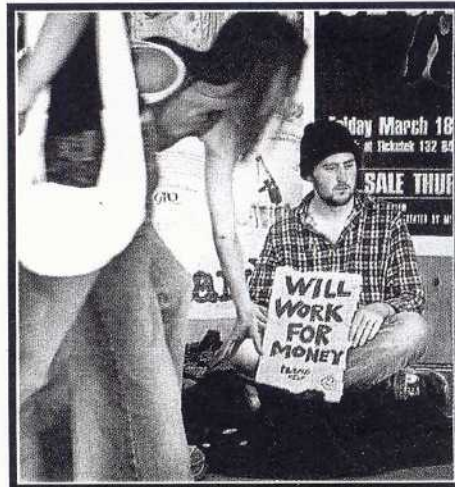
that you get a donation for every 30 or 40 people that pass and are never waiting too long between coins.

But at one point while begging in South Yarra I counted 321 people passing without a donation. A woman from the Jam Factory asked if I was serious about needing to buy presents for my kids, but went away unconvinced.

Another called my bluff and gave me a new Grover (*Sesame Street*) doll.

Donations were less frequent and smaller in Chapel St than in the city, but I still made \$27.05 in two hours.

And I didn't get booted out of the home of the fashionistas, eventually leaving of my own accord.



DAY 3 BOURKE ST MALL

\$120.30

I started my final day begging perched next to the Myer Christmas windows in the Bourke St mall.

With hundreds turning out in the sunny weather to check out the windows it proved to be a prime location.

The donations poured in as hordes of parents sent their children out of the windows queue to drop coins and sometimes notes on my jacket.

After five hours I had no more room in my pockets to move coins from my jacket. I went to a secluded part of Flinders St station and put the

coins into bags. As the Myer window watchers thinned in the late afternoon I moved to Swanston St.

A man who told me he had been on drugs for 20 years before finding Jesus, advised me to come to his church's barbecue and to get off drugs.

A young male looking worse for wear and missing a sock watched me for a while and then slumped down next to me.

Fearing he was a "cuckoo", I moved my coat and coins away from him and kept my eyes on him until he eventually pulled himself up

and stumbled away.

By 7.30pm, when two police officers moved me on, the generous residents of Melbourne had contributed \$120.30 in less than a day.

The grand total of my life as a beggar was \$206.30.

All money has been donated to the Salvation Army's Melbourne Central Life Centre for the CBD's homeless. The Sesame Street doll was donated to the Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning program for Melbourne's Sudanese refugee community.

SPECIAL REPORT: LIVING OFF THE STREETS

into a rich vein

Liam Houlihan

PROFESSIONAL beggars on Melbourne's streets can earn hundreds of dollars for just a few hours' work.

More than \$120 can be made in less than a day, a sum that rivals the daily earnings of professional workers such as nurses and teachers.

The *Herald Sun* spent three days begging on Melbourne's streets to see first-hand what our city's beggars make and how they are treated.

In one 6½-hour stint in the city, I made \$120.30.

Averaged over a year of 40-hour weeks, that is the same net income as a taxpayer on \$50,000 — more than the average Australian wage and much more than that of kindergarten teachers and childcare workers.

Police say begging is on the rise in the city. And so is use of threatening tactics to cajole money from passers-by.

Superintendent Mick Williams said the new type of beggars use harassment as a way to make money.

He said the new wave beggars, who he described as charlatans, just want easy cash and aren't in need.

"They are creating an atmosphere of fear on some streets in the city," Supt Williams said.

The *Herald Sun* investigation also revealed there is no shortage of work for those willing to ask for it.

I held a sign "Will Work For Money" during my first morning of begging in the city. Within 15 minutes there were job offers as a delivery driver, labourer and factory work.

After three days begging in the city, at Chadstone and in Chapel St, I collected \$206.30, a can of Diet Coke, a cigarette, a quarter-pounder and a *Sesame Street* doll.

The overwhelming majority of donors were young women and mums with small children.

Few middle-aged males or inner-city professionals donated. Donations ranged from 20c to \$5, with contributions of \$1 or \$2 common.

Previous estimates of what beggars earn have been much lower. The City of Melbourne website states: "Based on observations, a person begging for four hours might have received as little as \$3 or as much as \$32." I made \$52.95 in the first three hours.

An official study of begging in Melbourne by Hanover Welfare Services in 2000-01 found most beggars were on government benefits or pensions.

The unemployment pension would add more than \$10,000 to a beggar's yearly income.

The spotlight fell on Melbourne's beggars last month when mayoral candidate Gary

Herald Sun

Herald Sun reporter Liam Houlihan spent three days on our city streets to report first-hand the growing issue of beggars.

This was in direct response to begging becoming a key political issue in the recent lord mayor and council elections.

All money collected has been donated to the Salvation Army's Melbourne Central Life Centre for the CBD's homeless.

Morgan promised to clear beggars not just from the city, but all of Melbourne.

Last Friday, Supt Williams announced a pre-Christmas crackdown on beggars.

The blitz has transformed begging hot spots, including the Flinders St end of Elizabeth St once regarded as the beggars' golden mile. During three days on the street, I saw only one other active beggar.

Supt Williams said there was a more visible police presence as part of the crackdown.

He said police diverted beggars who genuinely need help to support services, while the "fakes" were arrested.

Supt Williams said police had prosecuted 116 beggars since January and issued hundreds of warnings.

But he said the public could help curb the problem by not giving beggars any money.

"They should also avoid eye contact with people and if they feel threatened, call the police," Supt Williams said.

But yesterday's beggars have become today's "snuckos" — people who prey on the remaining beggars and try to rob their takings.

On Swanston and Elizabeth streets, I had two close calls with would-be beggars who noticed my collection and lingered nearby ready to pounce.

In both cases the men waited for a gap in passing foot traffic but left when crowds continued to pass.

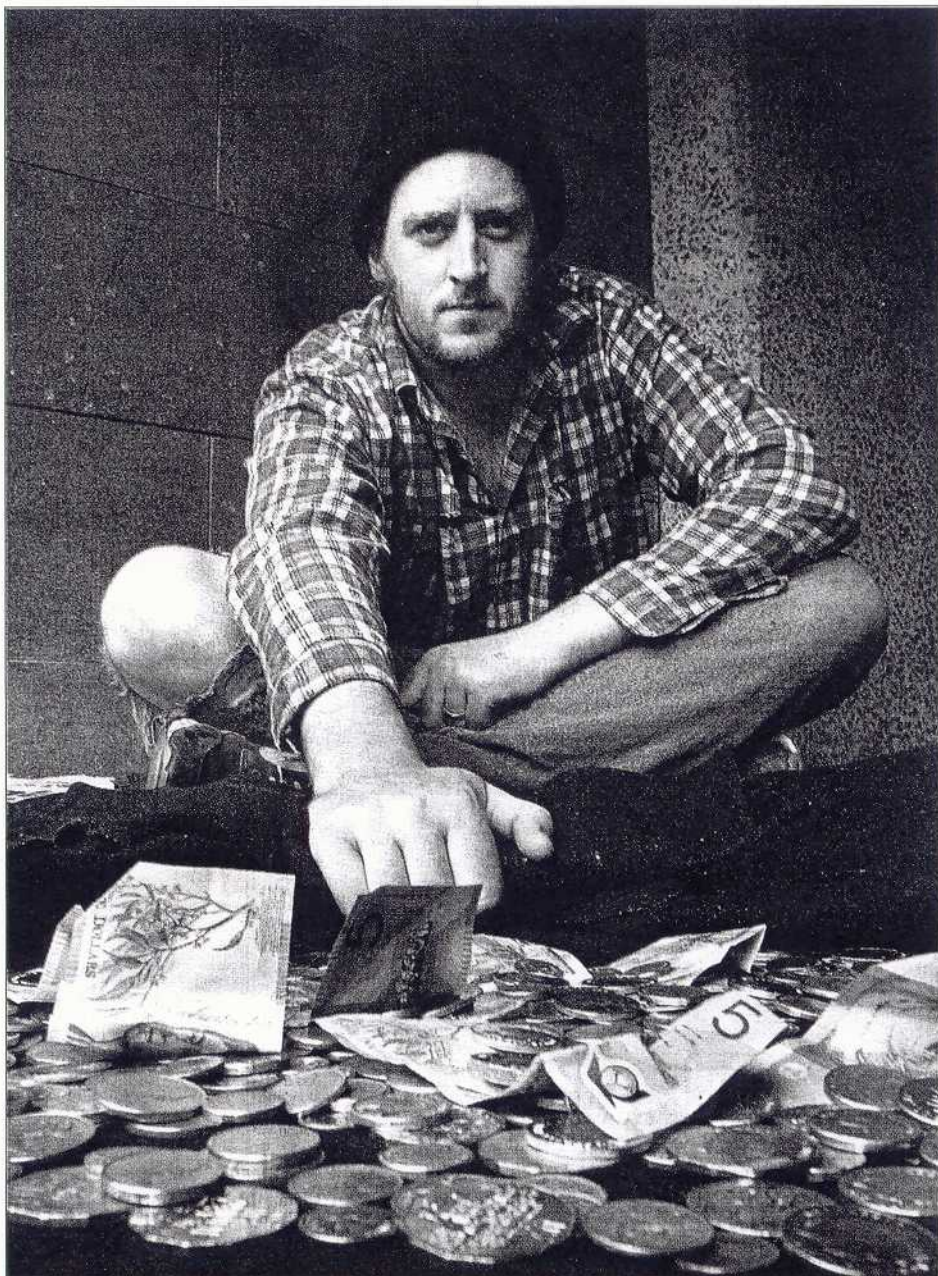
As well as rivals, beggars have to be on the lookout for police. I was shut down twice by police and face a charge of "begging alms".

On my first morning, four police officers told me to move on after three hours begging that netted \$52.95.

On Sunday, I spent all day in the Bourke St mall and Swanston St before being moved on by police at 7.30pm.

On Monday, police charged me under the Vagrancy Act.

Have your say:
Voteline, Page 21
Heart of a city, Page 22



Booty: Liam made \$120 in one 6½-hour stint in the city. Pictures: DAVID CAIRD