

# The Homeless Experiment

by: Neville Medhora

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The Time: May 2009

The Place: Austin, TX.

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On Thursday June 4<sup>th</sup> of 2009 I left the comforts of my home in Austin, TX. with no food, no money and no place to stay for 5 days and 4 nights. I did this voluntarily as a small experiment to see what it was like to live on the streets of Austin, TX.

I always wondered what would happen if someone around my age (26 at the time) with a weak support network in their city were to simply lose their income and subsequently their dwelling. Where would they go? What would happen? Would it be easy to get food? How could they make money? Where does one sleep in the city?

I wanted to answer those questions and just in general find out more about the life of a person on the street. I also wanted to document it in real time on the web.

Thus I began **The Homeless Experiment**.

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## **QUICK FOREWORD:**

I would like to clearly state that I could never truly experience the worst homelessness has to offer in 5 days. Not only did I have the advantage of a privileged and great upbringing, but also the advantage of performing this experiment in Austin, TX. which is notoriously homeless-friendly. This experiment was done to catch at least a glimpse of the homeless world in my area.

## **HOW TO READ THIS:**

This story is meant to be followed as if you were a reader of my blog [www.NevBlog.com](http://www.NevBlog.com) starting in May 2009. At this time I was planning on doing this experiment, and you will read my preparation, follow me through the days leading up to the experiment, the uncertain start where I walk out of my home, the final comeback and the things I learned.

Starting....NOW:

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**THE HOMELESS EXPERIMENT / EXPERIENCE:**  
**MAY 28<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

**Experiment:**

Leave my house in Austin, TX. and live on the streets for 5 days and 4 nights.

**Purpose of Experiment:**

There's simply not one solid reason for performing this experiment, but several:

1. To learn what it's like at the bottom rung of the socio economic system.
2. I've studied how many successful people get successful...it would be interesting to see how some people have "failed." Getting to live directly with these people would be a great way to learn.
3. I've always considered myself pretty spoiled. Not in the spoiled brat kind of way, but in the fact that I've never once in my life really have been worried where my next meal was going to come from or where I was going to lay my head down at night. It seems important that every once in a while I **give myself a good whack over the head** to realize just how good I've got it, and that all those opportunities I have should be utilized to their full potential.
4. Ostracism. I'm Indian, but have never experienced any real discrimination that I know of. If I walk into a fine hotel to use the bathroom, I'm always allowed based on my overall appearance. However what if I was disheveled, carrying bags, looked like I was dirty and smelled? It might be a different story. I personally discriminate against these kinds of people who come up to me on the street. It'd be interesting to see what it's like on the other side.
5. I've always wondered: If someone got kicked out of their apartment, had no money and no friends/family to stay with...what would they do?

So on **Thursday, June 4th, 2009** I will officially begin my Homeless Experiment and start living on the streets for 5 days and 4 nights.

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**MINI HOMELESS EXPERIMENTS:**

May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2009

During the upcoming Homeless Experiment there's a couple of things I want to try out. Now since I don't have a defined plan of how I'm going to acquire food, shelter, water and other **basic necessities of life**...there will obviously be a massive amount of variables in how much free time I get to do some of these mini-experiences.

### Here are some things I'd like to try:

- How much money can I make in an hour holding a sign asking for money?
- How much money can I make holding a FUNNY sign?
- How much money can I make holding a SERIOUS sign?
- How easy is it to get food on the street corner by asking for it? Perhaps holding a sign that says, **"Don't want money, food would be great."** I personally think this would work pretty well as a way of procuring food or leftovers. Since I'm walking out of my house with no food or money, this will probably be one of the FIRST things I need to do.
- Where exactly will I sleep? Parks, benches, under bridges, homeless shelters, under a tree, in the woods?
- What if it rains?
- Access to restrooms. I can always pee in the bushes, but what about going #2?
- Can I just show up at a homeless shelter and get a place to sleep? I already partially know the answer to this: At most homeless shelters you have to "reserve" a bed, but they'll often let you sleep inside on the ground if it's not too crowded.
- Can I take a shower somewhere and get a clean change of clothes?
- Get drunk one day.
- Where can I get a decent meal? I'm purposely not researching where the soup kitchens are located in order to make this experience more authentic. I might actually have to go without food for a few days if things don't go so well.
- What are most homeless people like? I kind of know the answer....most homeless people are just like you and I. The VAST majority of homeless people are not the crazy looking bums on the side of the road. I've had some experience talking to a wide variety of homeless people, but not AS a homeless person. I'm wondering if their perception or attitudes towards me will change much.
- Can I get a temporary job at one of the day labor camps in downtown?  
How much money can I make like this?

There are a lot of experiments I want to try, but time is a factor. I still think doing THIS would work well:



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## HOMELESS ALIAS

May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009

For the upcoming [Homeless Experiment](#) I can't go living on the streets and telling everyone I meet, **"I'm not actually homeless, I'm just trying it out."**

That makes me a bit of a target and probably won't inspire trust. It might also piss a few people off.

So I've **made up a story for myself**. It will be easier to stick "closer" to the truth since it's much harder to lie. I'll be using places where I actually grew up instead of other places in the off chance someone may know the area.

So if I somehow get involved in a long conversation about this, here are the story details I will give:

My name is Nev. (I'll go by my full name if asked, but "Nev" seems nice, short and easy to pronounce).

I grew up in Houston but in recent years my family moved to upstate New York...I might also say they're divorced just for added drama (but they're not in real life). I moved to Austin recently and was working at Radio Shack selling phones. I recently lost my job and couldn't pay rent for the last few months so I was evicted from my apartment.

I don't have many friends here, and the only ones I know are in school, but they're gone for the summer. I have a friend who I'm going to live with, but he moves into his new apartment in about two weeks, so for now I am living on the streets till he gets back into town and gets his apartment. From there I will stay with him and find another job.

I went to HCC (Houston Community College) for a few semesters but didn't go all the way through.

I had a car in Austin, but I got in a wreck a few months ago and it was totaled. I didn't have insurance and can't afford a new one. I've been walking and taking the bus everywhere for a while now.

SO that's what I'll be telling people if they ask. I made up this story because it's how I believe MOST people end up homeless....through a simple sequence of unfortunate events. For the most part homeless people are NOT the dilapidated looking bums you see on the side of the road holding signs. Those people are in the minority, however they are the most visible, which is why people think all homeless people are like that (I learned this pretty clearly when I would do work for homeless shelters). Even most homeless people don't like THOSE homeless people!

Most of this story relates to some experience I've had or someone I know. For example I had a temporary roommate who worked at Radio Shack selling phones, so if someone proceeds on that line of questioning I can deliver believable answers.

**This will also be the pretense for the whole Homeless Experiment:** That I'm just a 20-something guy down on his luck for a little while and has no place to go for a few weeks. I feel this story will allow me to freely ask questions about homeless life, instead of telling people I've been homeless a long time and asking dumb questions about it. It won't sound congruent if I told that story.

I'll probably also try to "dumb down" my speech a bit just for effect depending on the person or situation I am speaking with. I'll play it by ear as I know for a fact not all homeless people are dumb bums like some may think.

So there ya go: **I will be Nev the Bum.**

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## **AN UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCE:**

**June 01, 2009**

There has been one unforeseen element to this [Homeless Experiment](#) that has me wanting to get it done soon as possible:

I find myself "**thinking like I'm homeless**" all the time! Every time I drive by an area of Austin where I may find myself this upcoming Thursday-Monday I have thoughts such as:

- "Hmmm...I could probably sleep behind that store and no one would know."
- "If I REALLY need to take a dump I can go in that patch of woods on 9th St."
- "I could totally sleep under those bleachers at the baseball park behind ACC."
- "The South West corner of this intersection gets traffic that comes out of the Burger King parking lot, I bet I can score some food on that corner."

There is a constant stream of these types of thoughts, and it's MAKING ME ACTUALLY FEEL HOMELESS! **In a way this is good**, because my experiment is [based on my alias](#) who gets evicted from his apartment with no money and no place to go.

A person in that situation probably sees living on the street as a viable option a few days before he actually becomes homeless...so in a way these thoughts are making this experiment **more realistic**.

So now every time I go Downtown to a coffee shop, bar, the library etc. I look at things in a more survivalist way.

**It's weird.**

For this reason I'm sticking to my June 4th starting date. That's actually a horrible weekend to pursue this experiment because there's a lot of fun events I'll be missing, however this thought process has to stop soon. **I'd rather forgo some fun for being able to think normally again.**

Since I've also stopped all facial grooming these last few weeks, my hair is quite a mess and I have to wear hats all the time (Haven't had a hair cut in roughly 2-

something months). I can still put gel in it, but it's so long I have to slick it back like an Italian goodfella. When it's not done, the homeless look really starts to show:



The beard came in REALLY quick. I stopped shaving May 15th, now 17 days later on June 1st this is how it looks:



I'm also starting to grow a uni-brow, plus my eyebrows are getting kind of bushy:



....I mean, they're not on the [Ramit Sethi](#) level yet, but they're catching up everyday:



So not only am I starting to "think homeless" but I'm also slowly beginning to look the part. When you think like that all the time, then are re-affirmed by scruffy looking face in the mirror, it's an odd feeling.

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## MY FIRST HOMELESS INNOVATION

June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2009

Some of the [mini experiments](#) I want to try during the Homeless Experiment involve holding up different types of signs on the side of the road, sort of like an [A/B Split Test](#) to see which is the best play for making the most food/money in an hour:

- Funny signs
- Serious signs
- Asking for money
- Asking for food

I was a little concerned about this because from what I've seen, **cardboard** seems to be the medium most bums on the side of the road use (old boxes or real estate signs generally). This means I will have to procure a new piece of cardboard for each sign (since generally only one side is blank).



**Well I inadvertently came upon a solution:**

I ordered something online the other day, and the packing material was a single, long strip of brown paper just crumpled up and stuffed in the box.



Great packaging for the products, but even better sign material! If you un-crumple the paper it gives you a tall writing space of 14" and unlimited width.



So instead of having to carry around a sign I already made, I can discard and make new ones on the fly. It'll look something like this:



So in addition to the few things I'll be carrying, I'll add this small roll of paper to the list. It folds up nicely, and will provide me with about 15 - 20 signs.



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**HOMELESS PREPERATION**

**June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2009**

By tomorrow afternoon I will hit the streets of Austin, TX. pretending to be homeless. I won't have shelter or money for 5 days and 4 nights.

If this were a properly planned out hiking or camping trip I'd have a tent, proper hiking backpack, nice sleeping bag and all sorts of comforts...but that would effectively "**plan the hardship out**" of this experiment. It would also make it look like I'm hitchhiking rather than homeless.

I'm trying to make this congruent as possible to my [alias story](#). This means I would have been evicted from my apartment with no car, no friends to stay with and not many belongings worth taking.

### **Equipment list:**

- Backpack - Will be using the backpack I've had since middle school. It's about time I've got a new one. I will say Jansport makes a damn good and sturdy backpack. It's been around the world and on all sorts of adventures with me and is still ticking.
- A \$5.00 sleeping bag I bought at Wal-Mart. It's rated to only 45 degrees which means this is possibly the crappiest sleeping bag you can buy. However it weighs only 3 lbs. which is a plus. I somehow doubt it's very waterproof, that might be an issue. I was wondering how its possible Wal-Mart sells a \$5 sleeping bag for a profit, so last night I slept in it at my house on the floor and found out: **It's a big piece of crap**. The zippers hardly function, and it took me 4 minutes of finagling to get it zipped up fully. I'm almost positive the next time I use it the thing won't zip at all. My alias doesn't have any money to buy a new one, so this will have to do.
- Pocketknife.
- My Full Wardrobe will be: 1 old jeans, 1 old shorts, 1 short sleeve shirt, 1 long sleeve shirt, 1 hoodie, extra pair of socks. Hopefully I won't run into any extreme weather.
- Two bottles of water. These will be old Coca-Cola bottles filled with water.
- No food. This will force me to immediately start scavenging for food somehow.
- No money.
- [Mini Netbook](#) - So I can document things.

- iPhone - Will be off except twice a day to let the family know I'm OK. I'll also turn it on to blog directly from the phone if internet is unavailable (as it certainly will be unavailable the first day or two).
- Camera - I want to document this trip with some pictures and perhaps video.
- Glasses and one spare pair of contacts.
- Small amount of toilet paper. Will probably end up jacking some from the public library at some point. Possibly from the same [library I donated a computer to](#).
- Toothbrush/toothpaste. That's all I'm taking in the way of hygiene products. No deodorant + Texas heat + walking everywhere = Stinky Neville.
- Emergency Info Sheet and ID card - Insurance information and directions of which hospital I should be taken to in an emergency. If someone thinks I'm homeless they will take me to a public hospital. It's best in case of emergency that it's known I am to be taken to a private hospital for more immediate care. This is just a security precaution. I'll keep this information in all my bags and on my person. This will also contain emergency contact numbers of friends and family. Doubt this will have to be used.

I feel this list is pretty relevant to what some in the alias situation would bring.

### **Word on the electronics:**

Yea yea yea...I know a bum or homeless person wouldn't have all the electronics (although you'd actually be surprised...)

...however I'm trying to document this trip, and I also have family/friends who are pretty concerned about this. Plus it's my mom's birthday one of the days I'll be out and I want to call her. The electronics won't be used for fun or entertainment...in fact carrying these things actually makes me a target for getting jumped and robbed, so I WILL NOT visibly use these around other homeless people for safety reasons. They also take up very valuable space in my backpack and add weight. I'd prefer not to carry any of these things, but documenting the trip as I go is important to me.

Writing about an experience in a comfortable coffee shop and writing while famished and under a bridge would probably be different things. For the times when I can't access my netbook (for safety reasons, it gets stolen or because I'm out of battery) I'll write in a small notebook then digitally transcribe later.

Even if I don't have access to the internet on my netbook (which on Riverside I

most likely won't), I can always post to the blog via email through my [iPhone](#) as [shown in this post](#).

I took my last shower yesterday morning, and will be sleeping in the Wal-Mart sleeping bag on my floor today. Tomorrow I hit the streets!

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## **HOMELESS PLAN AND ROUTE**

**June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2009**

For the Homeless Experiment starting tomorrow I'll be out for 5 days and 4 nights. Thursday till Monday (June 4<sup>th</sup> till June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009).

In this time I'll have to scrounge for food, search for places to sleep, [perform the experiments I have set](#) and document all this at the same time. I'm reluctant to set out a solid plan, but I'll make a very general (and changeable) plan.

### **Thursday:**

Leave the house sometime around 3pm. Walk to the nearest big intersection and hope I can somehow get food. Find somewhere on Riverside to sleep (possibly the woods or under a bridge). I won't be able to make it all the way Downtown by night time, so Riverside will be home. Not sure where. For those of you that don't know, I live in a part of Austin called Riverside. There is a newly gentrified area which I live in which is decently nice, then there's "the other part" which is relatively ghetto. On a drive through Riverside in the day or night you'll generally see a few bums.

### **Friday:**

Start making the trek towards the downtown area. Try to score some food around Riverside and eat in the morning. Visit the homeless shelters and see if I can get a place to sleep at night. Since this is the start of the weekend I'm not fully sure how this will work.

When I think about it, I'll probably be waking up early on Friday morning and have the whole day to spend doing.....what? I really have no clue. I'll probably try to befriend and then furtively "interview" some homeless people I find interesting. I frequently see homeless people around Downtown basically just chilling...probably because they have nothing else to do. Boredom might be a major issue since I won't have much in the way as sources of entertainment.

### **Saturday:**

Hopefully will have found a place to get a decent meal such as a soup kitchen or shelter. Try [holding signs on the side of the road](#) for a while to see how much money I can make with different signs. I'll be around Downtown so the legality of this might be an issue. May spend some time at the public library documenting. At night I will most likely avoid all the partying areas of town and the homeless shelters. Downtown gets a little crazy at night, everyone is drunk, and I feel even homeless people hanging around the shelter will be doing the same with whatever they can get their hands on. Drugs, crazy people and party-goers just doesn't sound like a combination I want to be around during such an exposed stage. I will most likely try to sleep on the outskirts of Downtown in a lower-key part of town to avoid all this.

I have a strong feeling by this time I'll be pretty fed up with pretending to being homeless.

### **Sunday:**

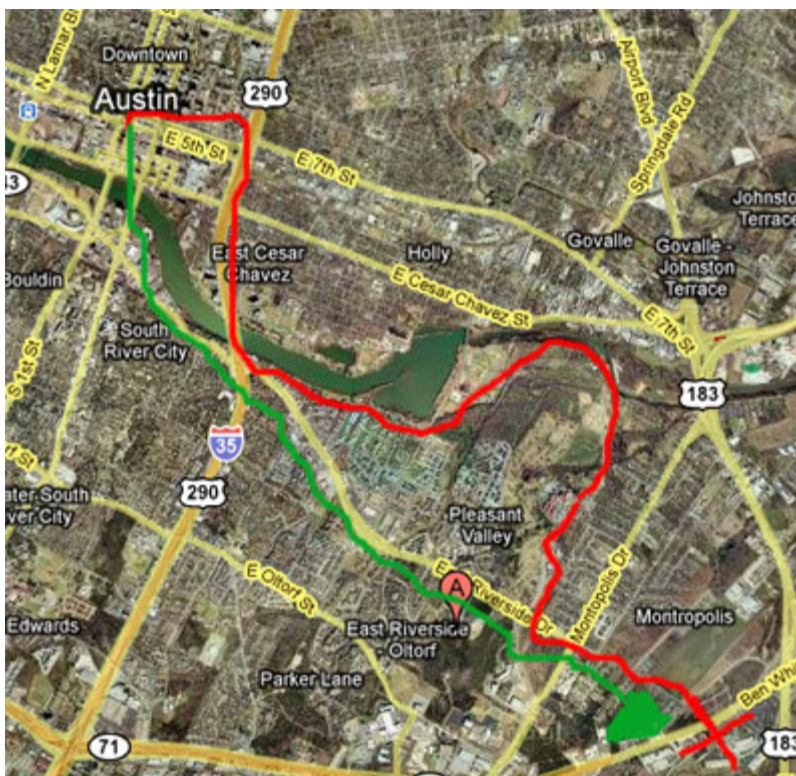
I've seen Meals On Wheels trucks in several downtown locations on Sundays, so hopefully I can catch some food at those. They also have a free concert under the bridge for homeless people on Sunday's, and they generally serve some sort of meal. That should be a good place to go. It almost sounds crazy...**a free concert for homeless people!** [Kevin was right](#), Austin is pretty homeless-friendly. I'll also try to get a change of clothes from somewhere if possible. Will start making the trip back to Riverside. Will most likely sleep near the lake on a bench or under the freeway overpass near the threshold of Riverside and Downtown.

### **Monday:**

Wake up in the morning and head back home. Take shower. Shave. Take another shower. Get a haircut. Take another shower. Get back to work.

Here's a rough map of the general start path (**red**) and return path (**green**) I'll follow:





This is of course a VERY rough estimation as the nature of this experiment has a **vast number of variables**. This short experiment will hopefully have some sort of long term positive impact on me. I'd say the MAIN reason I'm doing this is to get out of my safe/fun/comfortable bubble of a life for a short period. I love it, but every once in a while I feel **a good kick in the ass is necessary to fully appreciate what you've got**.

I'd like to state that this is really in no way a philanthropic expedition to raise awareness to the plight of homeless people. It's pretty much all for selfish self-improvement reasons. If in the process someone, be it me or someone else, find some small way to improve or uplift the lives of those on the streets or any other station in life because of this experience, wonderful. I'm sure this experiment will reinforce all sorts of good wisdom principles I already know, but don't fully pay attention to all the time.

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## LEARNING PREDICTIONS AND START!

June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009

It's around 3pm here and I'm about to embark upon The Homeless Experiment in less than an hour.

**Here are some predictions of what I'll learn from this Homeless Experiment:**

- Almost all people are pretty much physiologically the same. Donald Trump and the hunched over guy with the shopping cart standing on the corner are nearly identical. It's the contents inside the 3 lbs. of grey mass between your ears that counts.
- The system that helps people who are homeless inadvertently puts them in a cycle of homelessness.
- Most of the people who end up chronically homeless have some sort of hardship past, social skills problems or mental illness.
- Most of the people who end up temporarily homeless are probably not that different from the everyday middle class person with a house, car and family.
- Hope for the future is probably not very evident within the chronically homeless population.
- A lot of the people I talk to will "Just want a decent place to live and relax." ...however won't be seriously willing to work that hard for it.

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I've got everything packed and ready to go. Being true to the alias there's really not much stuff that I'm taking. I'm only carrying what I can fit in a school backpack plus a sleeping bag:





I'm bringing no money and no food with me. In case you're wondering, here is what I look like at the moment....this is my "pity-pose" I'll be using to look sad and deserving of leftover food:



Pretty convincing eh! While I'm posting these **I can't stop laughing** at what I look like! My first agenda item is to score some food, so after a long walk in the Texas sun during the hottest part of the day, I'll whip out this pre-made sign I have on a big intersection street corner:



I personally think this sign will work VERY well, and within an hour I'll probably get a decent amount of food to last me through the night.....at least that's my prediction.

Well, without further adieu, I'm off!

-Neville

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## **WELL, I'M LIVING UNDER A BRIDGE**

**June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

I'm under a bridge now, made a friend named Mike. A friendly black guy I met who is staying under this same bridge. All the bums on Riverside are relatively stable compared to downtown, that's why they like camping out down here.

I used my JUST WANT FOOD sign for 45 minutes on the corner of Riverside and Pleasant Valley and scored enough food for the night!! Here's a picture:



The result of my JUST WANT FOOD sign

A couple gave me a box of crackers, and a college aged guy stopped me and asked "Hey man, will you be here in 15 minutes?" then when he drove by again a little later he handed me a bag of groceries!

I have more than I can comfortably carry now, so I stopped flying the sign. I'm still 100% penniless but have ample food/water for the day and night. Life is good :-)

It's getting dark, so I'm back under the bridge with friendly company (he's out panhandling right now) and about to eat my Ritz cracker, string cheese, bagel and chewy bar dinner!

Something I didn't expect...there's a lot of damn birds under bridges. Constant cooing and cawing. There's also a zoo of other animals that waltz by from time to time.

Ok, time for iPhone to go off, goodnight!

Sent from my iPhone

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**NOTES FROM UNDER A BRIDGE:**  
**Thursday, July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

So as I posted earlier, I am sending this from Under a bridge (ironically also one of my favorite Red Hot Chili Pepper songs). I remember talking to my new buddy Mike earlier, and he kept talking about all the funny things all these animals do under this bridge. Well it's night time and the show has begun! They all stay in the brush and rarely venture onto the concrete.

I understand why he was so interested in the animals: There's absolutely nothing to do here and they're somewhat entertaining to watch!

Living here is actually dare I say....relatively pleasant. The birds finally shut up at night, there are no bugs, no chance of rain under here and pretty much no disturbances.

On the other side of the bridge live 5 Mexican guys. They're all talking, but the sound is faint and not disruptive.

I setup my sleeping bag on top of a large piece of cardboard and feel very secure and quite comfortable here.

Boredom seems to be an issue. I thought it was midnight by now but my phone says 10:48....no wonder I don't feel tired yet. It's too dark to read, I'm not tired and it's quite warm so it's difficult to sleep. Not much to do.

I bet by tomorrow I'll start developing a slight stench. I only have one shirt and I got pretty sweaty on the walk here in the sun.

So far the homeless experience actually hasn't been that bad. I've got food, water, shelter. Maslow's basic needs have been fulfilled.

Goodnight.

Sent from my iPhone

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## **WAKING UP UNDER A BRIDGE:**

**Friday, June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009**



My view waking up this morning. Sleeping under a bridge is surprisingly pleasant through the night. Who would've thought?

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## **HEADING TO DOWNTOWN**

**Friday, June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009**



Last night was a good experience, but very easy. It was pleasant, quiet, had good company and more than enough food.

I see why some homeless choose to live on Riverside, it's like an extended camping trip! Near a lake, bountiful panhandling locations, very little danger. Far as locations to be homeless Riverside is the promise land!

So today I'm trekking over to Downtown. From all my experience with homeless people, I'm well aware this is where the crazies, lunatics and all sorts of psychos hang.

This is where you have to watch your bags at all times or they'll get snatched, and this is where you'll see crack heads and people that have prolonged conversations with themselves.

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## **LIVING CONTRAST**

**June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

As I walk to the center of Downtown I saw this building:



I used to live on the entire top floor of that building. 4,000 sq ft. of prime downtown real estate, now I'm scrounging for a meal two blocks away at a homeless shelter :-)

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## **FOOD & SHOWER FOR FREE**

**June, 5<sup>th</sup> 2009**

I asked around and found out right across the ARCH homeless shelter an organization called Caritas gives away free lunches (which I just ate at) and the ARCH across the street gives you a place to stay and free showers/bathrooms. I'm about to take a shower:



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## **FIRST DAY AT THE HOMELESS SHELTER**

### **June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

Well here I sit in the public library, a very common thing, except this time the tables are turned and I am one of the homeless guys I so often resent having at the library.

I'd like to share how my 2nd day pretending to be homeless went (keep in mind I generally have no idea what time it is. I'm basing these off rough sun position or from the few times I pulled out my phone to post):

#### **Around 6-7am:**

Was awoken by a beautiful sunrise under the bridge. The first time in a LONG time I have seen a sunrise. The night was a bit warm, but it cooled off nicely late at night. I could hear college kids partying in a nearby apartment. Me and Black Mike spoke for an hour or so before trying to sleep.

It took me several hours to sleep as I'm not used to sleeping before 2am. I woke up around 6 or 7am, but was still tired so dozed off till 10-something.



**Roughly 10:45am:**

Started making the trek over to the Downtown area. Mike was wondering why I would want to stay down there when it was so nice over here. He had a point. Still, part of this journey involves experiencing Downtown homelessness, so I took off.

I still had plenty of leftover food from the other day's successful panhandling attempt.

Stopped several times, picked up a free newspaper at a bus stop, leisurely read it. Filled up my water reserves at a spigot on the side of a gas station. I took a poop in the woods nearby one of the bike trails I frequently ride on.

**12:10pm:**

Arrived in the Downtown area. Ironically passing up the massive loft I used to live in (which is now appropriately remodeled into a nightclub) to get a free meal at a shelter.

**12:15pm:**

Asked around and found out the Caritas organization provides free meals from 12:00 till 12:30pm. Went to check it out. I walked in past the security guard, and they immediately hand you a school-type lunch and glass which you can fill up with water, orange juice or milk. The place could probably hold between 50 and 80 people at a time...I'd say at any given time I was there about 50 people were eating.

It's bizarre because all sorts of people you WOULD NOT EXPECT to be in there were. I thought maybe a lot of people were just freeloading a lunch (ahem.....like me....) and going back to work, but I later confirmed many were in fact homeless because I saw them at the homeless shelter later.

As for 80% of the people, they looked homeless, but not the stereotypical-pushing-a-shopping-cart kind of homeless. Just homeless.

I was by far the youngest person there...except for a little kid who came in with his mom. Everyone was very courteous, I didn't feel threatened one single bit and the food was actually pretty good. Every meal came with a pasta, banana, slice of cake and bologna sandwich. You were also welcome to take as many sandwiches as you want and as much bread....they even give you old bread bags to fill up for the rest of the day.



Almost all the people serving the food were probably between 21 and 25, all looked like college students volunteering. They had two older people working, one was a chef, the other a supervisor I suppose. Everyone was extremely nice, the food was good and the environment pleasant.

If you remember, Caritas is actually heavily funded by Michael and Susan Dell. I crashed a Caritas fundraiser a while ago....so I've now got to see the rich and poor side of the foundation!

### **1:00pm:**

I'd want to try sleeping in a homeless shelter at least one night, so I went across the street to the ARCH and walked in. They x-rayed my bags and confiscated my pocket knife, but gave it back when I left. I told the lady at the front I needed to stay for one night, so she gave me a number. Apparently it's a lottery system, so at 6:00pm I'm supposed to line up behind the ARCH in the alley and they'll call numbers. If you're called, you sleep inside...if not, tough luck.

So Linda, your concern might actually come true: If I get selected to sleep inside, I will displace an actual homeless person. I'm going to use the "I'm a taxpayer" excuse on this one.

Anyhow, another word on the ARCH.....the lady handed me my number and said, "The showers are upstairs and the laundry room in downstairs." HUH!?! **I didn't expect to take a shower!** I went upstairs and they have a volunteer handing you small tubs of bath gel, shaving cream, toothpaste and other things you might need. The women could ask for complimentary feminine products if needed.

The showers were decent. There was no strong stench like I expected and they were relatively clean. Each had its own chair inside the small shower room and a curtain for privacy. Pretty swanky for a free shower! As I stepped in the shower it dawned on me that **I had no towel**, and they don't provide one for you, so air drying was going to be the only option. I took my shower using the bath gel they provided and felt pretty good. I knew I was starting to smell and I could just feel the grime coming off.

Afterwards I basically stood naked in the shower for 10 minutes trying to dry off but it was very humid in the room with all those other showers going and I could only get to a certain level of dryness. Luckily the shorts I brought are nylon board shorts that are essentially water resistant, so I put those on (no boxers

since I only have one clean pair) and walked out (my slippers were on the whole time).

I ended up drying off under the hand dryer.

So I was clean and dry...but one problem, **I had to put the same stinky clothes back on!** By this time I confirmed my shirt does in fact smell a little. It was only later that I realized I should've washed my clothes first then showered. However I'm doing an experiment here and **DON'T** want to look or smell too tidy.

So after eating and showering I had nothing in particular to do, and flying a sign is quite prohibited (and enforced) around Downtown, so I figured I'd kill some time at the library.

#### **I will say something:**

So far from the cross-section of people I've seen, A VAST MAJORITY are not dangerous thieves looking to jump me like many might think. The feeling of security is still quite high over here. I've got my guard up of course, but it almost seems unnecessary. I have a feeling at night the freaks (aka CRACKHEADS) will start showing up.

#### **I will say something else:**

If you give money to a homeless person you see on the streets all the time, **I almost guarantee you** a large portion of that money is going towards alcohol or other drugs. That doesn't seem to be a myth. More on that later...it's kind of interesting.

#### **Another thing:**

For all of you that said, "You can't bring a laptop, that won't be realistic..." There's another homeless guy I saw at the shelter a few minutes ago right behind me. He just whipped out his laptop and plugged into the same outlet as me. BOOYAH!

#### **Some pictures off my camera:**

I can post pictures from the street off my iPhone, but must upload to the computer for camera pics:



Sleeping under the "Million Dollar Roof." Quite safe, quite comfortable. Really not bad as I expected. Almost (dare I say)...pleasant?



Snapped a quick picture in the shelter bathroom. It looked like a modest bathroom you might find in a gym or airport. P.S. Checkout those abs ;-)



Homeless Mike's setup. The guy has a **queen sized mattress under the bridge** that he got near a dumpster during moving time at one of the nearby college apartments.

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**MY SWANKY DIGS AT THE HOMELESS SHELTER:**  
**June, 5<sup>th</sup> 2009**

Just found out my shelter lotto ticket paid off. I got the swankiest digs available at the arch PLUS a dinner! Check it:



## MY EXPERIENCE AT THE ARCH HOMELESS SHELTER

June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009:

So tonight was a pretty interesting and very easy day. Earlier in the day I registered for the ARCH homeless shelter sleep lottery. This means you show up behind the facility in the alley at 6:00pm and stand in line for a lotto ticket. You pick a number out of a bucket, then they call a group of numbers at random (so people can't sell the first tickets).

I was #4 and the first group they called was 1-25! Score! I got in! Almost everyone there was familiar with the system, I was the only new one in my group. First they sent me through the X-rays again. I checked in my pocket knife, but they found a **small bottle of alcohol in my bag**. It was a 375ML bottle of Kentucky Whiskey or some cheap thing like that which I planned to get drunk on as an experiment. The girl checking the x-ray immediately told the head guy, and all the people waiting in line let out a collective "**Uhhh ooohhh**" expression.

The head guy told me there's an uber-strict **ABSOLUTELY NO ALCOHOL** policy on premises PERIOD. Anyone of the other guys would've been thrown out on the spot, no exceptions. He felt leniency towards me because it was my first time, so he allowed me to (first pour out) then discard the bottle. It was completely unopened and I noticed a couple of the guys cringe as I was forced to pour out a perfectly good bottle of alcohol! A bottle like that is a hot commodity in a place like that. I could tell some of the guys would've rather taken the bottle and got kicked out for the night!

Anyhow, I filled out some quick paper work with the guy, lied on all the questions about how long I've been homeless and proceeded to check in. First order of business was to take a shower. Everyone sleeping there has to **take a mandatory shower** (good thing or else it'd smell like sin in here). I went through the whole shower routine like I described earlier, still had no towel and dried off under the hand blower.

They sent me to my bunk which from what I understand is in the best part of the shelter. I am bunk E3, and the E section is an open hall which is the nicest. The whole third floor is dubbed "**The Penthouse**" because it's so nice (well...in relation to the other floor of the shelter). There is a very large outdoor patio with a TV, fans, and a bunch of benches. You could over hear guys saying, "Man, it's been almost a week since I've got The Penthouse!"

I was then given a **meal ticket** (one of the lucky ones who got a place to stay PLUS a meal)! I was served a great meal, and once again all the volunteers were exceedingly nice to deal with. Get this: I got salmon, salad, lasagna and macaroni & cheese plus a Three Musketeers bars and ice tea to drink. **I was for the third time today STUFFED!** This is not really what I expected when I was planning the Homeless Experiment!

It's after dinner now and most people are just sitting around smoking cigarettes out on the third floor patio. It's very nice out there (sans the cigarette smoke

which I stayed upwind from). I watched the sunset from a third floor primo location in Downtown Austin. There was an old January 2009 issue of Texas Monthly on my bunk, so I proceeded to slowly read that for 2 hours since I had nothing else to do.

**Funny note:** There are two guys openly playing on their laptops here and one guy with a portable DVD player watching a movie. Many people have cell phones and MP3 players. I'm sitting in my top bunk typing this while most people are still outside. I now realize it's not dangerous to have a laptop here, but I'd still rather not raise my value as a target.

When outside you can start to catch glimpses of party goers starting to hit 6th Street. I'm usually one of those people who tries to avoid this area to stay away from people at the homeless shelter. **Talk about flipping the script.**

It's funny because this place reminds me of something....a COLLEGE DORM! It's a bunch of guys living together, sharing a bathroom, hanging out, chilling, eating together. Difference is everyone is circa 45 years old. Everyone is very friendly, there are no "bullies" or anything like that here.

I'm not sure what time they'll kick us out of here. Lights off is at 9:30pm, but you're welcome to hang around outside as long as you want. I'm guessing they'll wake everyone up sometime around 6 or 7am.

Well, I'm safe, clean, well fed, well stocked with food/water and have a comfortable bunk to sleep in. I see why so many chronically homeless people choose to live like this. **IT REALLY AIN'T THAT BAD.**

**Written at 9:05pm on Friday June 5th, 2009. Bunk E3 of the ARCH Homeless Shelter while eating a Three Musketeers candy bar.**

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WILL YOU ALL SHUT UP!?!?!?  
June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009

It's late at night and I'm sleeping here at the ARCH, it's great, comfortable, air conditioned etc....but **EVERYONE around me is snoring...LOUDLY.**

At any given nanosecond I can hear at least 4 different snores, each inhaling and exhaling at different times, and one guy who just sounds like he's choking.

The guy adjacent to me snores louder, LOuder, LOUDer, LOUDER until he lets out a snore SO loud he actually wakes himself up! It's kind of funny actually :-)) ...however not very conducive to sleep.

I suppose I could get used to the rhythmic snoring of one person, but this is just snoring insanity.

There's also random bouts of coughing and the occasional loud flatulence erupting from various bunks.

Like a freaking human orchestra over here!

Goodnight.

Sent from my iPhone

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## **GOODMORNING FROM THE ARCH**

**Saturday, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

Well, they woke us up at the ARCH homeless shelter at 5:30am. By about 5:45 you have to be out of the dorm area. I packed up then went downstairs and I saw pretty much everyone just sitting in the main holding area. Like a sheep in a herd I sat around like everyone else. I figured they would let us all out at the same time....it was still early so I wasn't thinking, "Wait, this isn't jail, they're not HOLDING us!"

I eventually realized I could leave at will, so I got up and left, it was still dark outside. I have no idea what those people are going to do all day. Probably just chill.

Anyhow I figured I can't kill a whole Saturday doing nothing, **I'd go insane**, so something must be done. I started walking towards the day labor center....apparently they've moved, bummer. Walked back to the ARCH, found a guy with work boots strung around his neck and asked him if he knew the new location. It was two miles away by bus and he was going there. I hopped the bus with him and got there. Turns out it was a slow day and they had **no more jobs left**. The guy who went with me already had a repeat job, so he went off. I waited for an hour for the bus to come back then went back to the shelter.

Ok, NOW WHAT? I went over to the public library, it doesn't open till 10am. Oye ve...SO BORED. So now I'm sitting on a bench across the street:



Me with my backpack and garbage bag with a sleeping bag and food inside.

Most of the other homeless people are just bumming around doing nothing. What an untapped labor force this is.

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## **HOMELESS DRINKING EXPERIMENT, TIME TO GET DRUNK!**

**Saturday, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

From past dealings with homeless people **I know they drink a lot.** It's not that they're alcoholics (necessarily), but that they're bored.

Let's say you throw a party at your house. In the beginning things get started slowly. The drinks are poured, more and more are consumed and soon people are feeling pretty loosey goosey. Now people are dancing, talking to each other and having fun.

Alcohol is a well known social lubricant because it can help make a dull time into a fun time. Do you NEED it? Absolutely 100% not, but it can help.

So imagine you're one of the homeless people living Downtown or on Riverside. Your food needs are taken care of by either gifting for a few hours or going to a homeless shelter and getting food. You don't work, you don't do much of anything....so what can help pass all that time?

**Drinking and drugs of course!**

On any given day a homeless person whose food/water/shelter are taken care of



probably has about 10-12 free hours of the day. That's a lot of time when you're doing NOTHING....and doing nothing can be **excruciating** if you do NOTHING all day long, everyday.

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**So my experiment for today is to get drunk and bum around.** From the meager proceeds of asking people here and there for money, I mustered up \$6.00. For \$4.50 I bought a plastic 375ML bottle of J.T.S. Brown Kentucky Bourbon (whaa???) and started drinking. I've got a good buzz going and am sitting here in the "Homeless Park" (aka a park by the library that's always populated with homeless people) and am typing this up (I can skim the library wireless from here)!



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**Quick Story:**

There is a liquor store RIGHT across the street from the homeless shelter. I'm talking maybe 25 steps away max. As I was buying the bourbon I asked the clerk if, "He gets many of us homeless people in here." He responded, "Nope, I don't get many of them in here." Puzzled why he classified them as "Them" instead of "You" I asked if he thought I was homeless. He immediately replied, "**Nope, you don't have the tell-tale signs of a homeless person.**" I was a bit relieved and disappointed by this.

**Relieved** because I didn't REALLLLYY look homeless (despite entering his store with a beard, ripped/dirty shirt, carrying a garbage bag and asking for only

bottles made out of plastic). **Disappointed** because perhaps I didn't do a good enough job of disguising myself....although I think I did, this is what I look like right now:



(That's one homeless looking dude from my perspective).

Anyhow, surprisingly he does "very very little" business with homeless people because he doesn't carry much they can afford. The store stopped carrying things in the **\$2.00 price range** because, "The sales were too small, took too much time, the shelters didn't like it and the cops didn't like it." Basically it was bad for business AND social causes. Interesting.

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So right now it's 1:39pm and I'm buzzed (actually maybe a little drunk). How does it feel? A lot better than being sober!

This is only because I'm pretending to be homeless and have nothing else to do.

Otherwise I'd MUCH RATHER be completely sober and reading and jotting down notes from Epictetus or other interesting personality at the library.

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## **DRINKING EXPERIMENT RESULTS**

**June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

**Written on Saturday 06-06-2009 at 9pm from a park.**

So the results of the [Drinking While Homeless Experiment](#) went good and bad:

I started drinking around 12:30pm, and soon the **time after that passed quickly**. I slowly started becoming less aware about my degenerating appearance and social status, I spoke with more people than I usually would (even had a long conversation with Crazy Cat Lady in the park) and the time in general **was more tolerable than simply doing nothing**.

I laid my head down around 4pm I believe (once again, I still don't have much sense of time unless I turn on my phone or netbook) and took a nap (or passed out...one of those). Some loud noise woke me up at 6pm and I had a pounding headache. Newton said, **"For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction."** Yea, the opposite reaction is called a HANGOVER.

I woke up by a tree lying in the dirt. So far I've managed to stay "relatively" clean, but now my one and only shirt is completely covered in a permanent layer of dirt. The whole thing is brown now instead of white.

I downed an entire 375ML bottle of cheap, strong bourbon. For those that don't know, think of a normal sized alcohol bottle: it's half of that. Needless to say I got buzzed (I wasn't completely ass-drunk, but more of a very heavy buzz). If I was driving and gave a breathalyzer test I definitely would've been hauled off to jail.

This is also the day I'm supposed to sleep Downtown at a non-shelter location (because that was obviously WAY too easy), I brushed off as much dirt as I could and started the journey.

For the first time in this experiment I TRULY FELT HOMELESS when I woke up in the dirt by a tree with a pounding head. I struggled to open my eyes, clumsily got up and started to gather my dusty backpack and garbage bag. To the outside observer I must've **truly fit the homeless stereotype**.

Here's what I looked like as I clumsily got up and tried dusting my shirt off:



I walked through a charming neighborhood area for a while, noting places I could possibly sleep for the night. I've now ended up in a park somewhere around 9th St. I found a large slab of concrete, brushed it off and laid down to work off this hangover. It's now 9:00pm, sort of dark and I think I'll sleep here for the night. It's hot as hell and there's no way I'm pulling out a sleeping bag in the heat.





I'm just going to sleep on this slab of concrete and hope there's not too many bugs biting. Definitely not that comfortable right now and I still have a hangover, but I'm safe, have food and a place to lay my head.

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### **WAKING UP IN THE PARK: Sunday, June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

Laid out in the park last night. very nice waking up this morning to birds chirping.

Wish I had a hammock!



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### HOME SWEET BRIDGE:

June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009

I made the 5 mile trek from Downtown to Riverside this morning. Just got back under the bridge. Black Mike is here, he's working off a hangover from last night, he was drinking all night with some of the other homeless guys in the area.

Weather is excellent right now, nice cool breeze under the bridge and I'm cooling off on my cardboard floor:



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### BUM BOXING LESSONS:

June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009

Just sitting here under this bridge is quite boring, and me and Black Mike have been talking for a while. He was talking about his career as a semi-pro boxer, and how he used his fighting skills to defend himself in the penitentiary.

He started showing me some moves, and I must say he is GOOD! I was swinging full force and couldn't hit him because of his speed. Even when he wouldn't move, his blocks were simply too fast for my fists!

So I'm a trained fighter. Would YOU mess with THIS guy now??



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## **LAST NIGHT OUT**

**June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

So tonight is the last night of my Homeless Experiment. I'm sleeping under the same bridge I did the first night.

Tomorrow morning when the sun rises (which is generally what wakes me up) I'll pack up and head back home. All my clothes, shoes and backpack will go straight in the trash. A shower will immediately follow.

I will leave Black Mike my sleeping bag, hoodie jacket, jeans and my extra pair of socks. I really didn't use those much this trip, and I was going to throw them away soon as I got home, so I guess he could get more use out of them.

Mike's out grifting right now, and is supposedly bringing back a pizza later tonight.

This will be my last goodnight as Homeless Nev! GOODNIGHT!

Sent from my iPhone

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**AHHH, FEELS GREAT TO BE BACK HOME!**

**June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

I made the walk back home, immediately threw everything I was wearing (shoes and all) into the trash. Took two showers and am enjoying my newly shaven face. I was starting to forget what I looked like!



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**SOME AFTER THOUGHTS:**

**Monday, June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

Well the Homeless Experiment is finally done, I'm back home where I fully showered, shaved and got a haircut.

Here's what I looked like right before I entered the house:





(Look how disgusting my shirt got)

Feels pretty good to get out of those old, stinky clothes! Some recent observations:

**Viewed humans as more of a species than people:**

Typically you view humans as much different than animals because of how we live, but when homeless it became more and more apparent that we are strikingly similar.

For example, when staying under the bridge all I could really do was watch several families of birds that nested under the bridge.



As I watched them I realized they're **not much different than I was at the moment**. The birds would scrounge around for food for a little while, stop when they had their fill, then go back to their little nests they built out of whatever they could find.

During the time I was (pretending to be) homeless I would do.....well, basically the exact same thing as the birds and all the other animals. Instead of small branches as a nest, I used cardboard and a sleeping bag. I would go out on the streets scrounging for food, and when I had more than enough, I'd go back to my nest.

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### **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:**

This ties in with the above. I noticed when homeless my mind thought about completely different things as opposed to a normal member of society. I realized **I wasn't really thinking about *anything***. My mind was for the most part devoid of deep or interesting thoughts.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs popped up in my head and I realized how much further down the scale I had placed myself by living this homeless experience.



Normally I think of ways to improve myself, have fun, short/medium/long goals and ways to overall improve my life for myself and others.

When I was homeless I thought about where my next meal was coming from, or if I had enough water to last through the night, or where I would sleep, or where I might use the bathroom if I need. The thought process rarely got beyond those simple questions.

This was a true testament to the validity Maslow's theory. I didn't particularly care about anything above that first rung because that first rung wasn't completely fulfilled at all times.

#### **Day to Day Living and lack of long-term thinking:**

This ties in with the Maslow observation...since my priorities were set on the basic necessities of life, hardly any heed was paid to long-term thoughts. I could see this in the people who are truly homeless...they had no goal or long-term plan for themselves. This is one of those things I would never understand unless I did this experiment.

I'm not saying everyone needs a step-by-step plan...but at least a vague map of where you want to end up is important (well, actually we all invariably end up at the same destination)! When living on the bottom rung of the Maslow hierarchy, I can definitely see how some people never create a long-term plan for

themselves.

This observation may play one of the many small factors that keeps some people in a perpetual state of homelessness.

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## **HOMELESS DRINKING: Monday, June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

From ALL my dealings with homeless people (especially the ones you see flying signs on the road), there's always **some element of alcohol** involved. I was further confirmed in this "fact" during this homeless experiment.

From hanging out with the Riverside bums (which is comprised entirely of people who have been homeless for long periods of time) you quickly learn that **LIFE IS ABOUT BEER.**

It almost sounds funny, but it's absolutely true from what I experienced. Nearly every action they take is geared towards scoring money to buy beer, getting people to buy them beer, or just flat out stealing it.

Certain people definitely also use other drugs, but I've not seen enough of that evidence with my own two eyes to know (nor would I want to be present when it's taking place). However by far the prevailing intoxicant of choice is beer (or malt liquor which is like strong beer).

If you ever want to COMPLETELY MAKE A BUM'S DAY....give him a 6, 12 or 24 pack of beer. I've already proved [food is easy to come by](#) if you ask for it or know where to go, so when you see a bum asking for money, it's usually going towards something such as beer, cigarettes or drugs. Sure some of it goes to buy food, but I'd say a much larger portion goes directly to the brew master.

**NOTE:** This is pretty true at least in Austin from what I've seen.

Now most "normal" homeless people are not asking for money on the street. These people are not necessarily categorized into this hardcore drinking group. The chronically homeless are what I'm talking about.

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I already figured alcohol was a good escape and way to pass the day by if you're homeless, and I wanted to test this by my homeless [drinking experiment](#). The

experiment consisted of me having a full day of nothing to do and a 375 ML bottle of straight bourbon. I was trying to see why alcohol is such an attractive commodity when living on the streets....and well, **it just sounded like a lot of fun :-)**

Here is some of what I wrote in the [experiment](#):

SO imagine you're one of the homeless people living Downtown or on Riverside. Your food needs are taken care of by either grifting for a few hours or going to a homeless shelter and getting food. You don't work, you don't do much of anything....so what can help pass all that time?

### **Drinking and drugs of course!**

On any given day a homeless person whose food/water/shelter are taken care of probably has about 10-12 free hours of the day. That's a lot of time when you're doing NOTHING....and doing nothing can be excruciating if you do NOTHING all day long, everyday.

Did drinking help pass the day? ABSOLUTELY! Were there repercussions? Yes. I explain them in my [Drinking Experiment Results](#).

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**SO CAN YOU BLAME THEM?** I mean, billions of people on this planet enjoy a good drink now and then, so what's the harm? I think what's socially acceptable is going out, having a good time and using alcohol to **enhance** your good time....it shouldn't be *needed*. What's not socially acceptable is to escape your boredom and problems in life through alcohol. That's where it starts to get dangerous.

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### **DUMPSTER DIVING:**

**June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009:**

Ever see someone (most likely a homeless person) take a peek inside a garbage dumpster and pull something out? That's called **dumpster diving**.

Even all the bums I met during my Homeless Experiment call it that. I personally think that's a gross name, I'd preferably euphemize the name and call it "Alley Fishing" or "Refuse Rumbling" to give it a more appetizing sound.

Anyhow, it's a **more common practice than I expected amongst the chronically homeless**. I thought this was a practice relegated to only the bummiest of bums, but it's not, and I see why.

Let's say there's a Domino's Pizza store somewhere. A person never picks up their pizza and now the pizza doesn't have a customer to eat it. What do you think happens to that pizza? Well 99% of the time it gets thrown out.

Later on around 10pm the pizza shop is getting ready to shut down. What do you think happens to all the left over pizzas? Employees may take some home, but the majority gets thrown out (enforced by health code laws) into the dumpster behind the store.

Now let's say you're REALLY HUNGRY and had no other food, and you see an employee dump four hot pizzas (still fully boxed) into the top of the dumpster. The pizzas are resting neatly on top of a stack of discarded cardboard, and they're right within your reach. **Would you reach in and grab the pizzas?**

I believe most humans *would* depending on their hunger level.

Now think about a busy fast food restaurant such as Wendy's. Literally **hundreds of burgers, fries, orders of mashed potatoes, chicken nuggets etc. get thrown out every day.** Whenever an order is wrong, a person got ketchup and didn't want it or if they just made too many cheeseburgers for lunch, this all must legally be thrown out. Where does it go? Usually into a big food bag then later thrown into the dumpster behind the store.

Imagine you're hungry and find a giant bag full of food (most of which is still hot) resting in a dumpster. I hate to say it, but that's pretty tempting!

I learned in my short time pretending to be homeless that dumpster diving is one of the **most lucrative forms of scavenging for food.**

You can panhandle or fly a sign for hours and make between \$5 and \$20 to buy food or simply take a quick peek into several dumpsters and hit the jackpot (then you can use the money to buy beer). In the Riverside area where I stayed under a bridge, there are about 20+ eating establishments (most of them fast food) less than a 5 minute walk away. Most of them are literally 50 paces away.

At the right times you can find large quantities of still hot, still wrapped food floating near the top of the dumpster..."Like an angel" as George Costanza described it. There is so much food from this type of scavenging that a lot of the bums have **preferences of what types of food** they dumpster dive for! One guy told me he loves Chinese food so he rummages through those restaurants most often. Another guy loves the pizza, so he goes behind CiCi's Pizza Buffet and Pizza Hut (buffet places throw out HELLA food).

**So did I do it during this experiment?** No.

However when I was eating Ritz crackers with packaged tuna for dinner and Mike was eating a medley of Wendy's burgers, mashed potatoes and Popeye's Chicken, it makes me wonder if I should have.

**Would I do it if I was actually homeless?**

Hell yes!

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## **DONATING BACK:**

**June, 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

For the Homeless Experiment I ended up leaching off some public services for a few days to see what homeless life was like. In all honesty I don't feel like giving much back (I was much more enthused to donate a computer to the library than I am to give to the homeless shelters), but something tells me I should at least **replace what I took**.

Therefore I think there's three places I should donate back to:

### **The ARCH of Austin:**

I stayed here for a night in "The Penthouse", got to take a shower and was fed a meal. **I don't like** how they've put a homeless shelter right in the heart of the Downtown Entertainment District, but I do like the services provided. If someone were to **actually want to get out of homelessness**, the ARCH provides everything you need to live for a while at no costs....thus giving you valuable time to get back on your feet. The basically fill the bottom rung of Maslow's hierarchy for you.

The ARCH has an [online donation page](#), so I pledged \$30 as a donation through PayPal.

### **Caritas of Austin:**

I ate here several times through this experiment and also took extra food to survive on. They let me in, no questions asked, allowed me to take as much food as wanted and were very kind to everyone. I also crashed one of their fundraiser events a while ago, so I suppose some small donation is well deserved for this organization.

Their basic function to serve meals to the needy is fulfilled, however their success at consistently serving good meals to anyone in need almost makes some people feel **entitled** to this service. However I'm guessing those feeling entitled are a small majority...it was mainly some of the obvious drug addicts I saw who were a little rude to the people serving food. Almost everyone else there very much appreciated the valuable community service they provide.

Caritas has a [donation page](#) where you can donate online and select a particular service to send the money to. I donated \$30 to the Community Kitchen which I ate meals from.

**Black Mike:**

This is the guy [I met under the bridge](#) my first day out and my last day out. Mike is actually quite intelligent, able bodied and yet still homeless. He is the kind of guy who makes you want to say, "WHY DON'T YOU GET A JOB YOU BUM!?"

I spent the most time with Black Mike and was amazed by how much he reads. **He loves reading fantasy novels**...big, giant 500+ page fantasy novels that have over 10 series of books in them. He enthusiastically told me elaborate stories about blue dragon eggs, faraway fantasy lands and a bunch of other crap I didn't care about....but he really loved that stuff.

I asked him, "Well you're smart, imaginative and have a lot of free time, why don't you write your own fantasy novel?"

**He was almost floored by the question!**

I quickly realized in his world people rarely highlight his better qualities or give him motivation to move beyond his current state. The people he begs from don't, the other bums on Riverside don't. I started hounding him on this line of questioning because I think it could actually help him.

**Imagine this:** A homeless guy whose been to the penitentiary and ended up living under a bridge for years becomes a fantasy novel author....now THAT'S a success story to tell! He could milk that story for all it's worth to gain notoriety and therefore gain exposure for any books he writes.

I actually **do not support** him living under a bridge and begging for money to buy beer with day after day. Therefore **I will not give him money and I will not give him beer** (although that'd be a great gift to almost any bum on the street).

**So here's what I'm going to donate to Black Mike:**

- Before I went home I left him my sleeping bag, jeans, extra socks, poncho and sweater hoodie.
- **A plastic storage container** to store/organize his stuff. All his stuff is collectively dumped into a cardboard box with no top. Raccoons and cats routinely get into it. This should help curb that.



- **A book on how to write science fiction.** The book is actually called, "How To Become A Famous Writer Before You're Dead" and has a lot of information that he could use to at least ATTEMPT becoming some sort of writer.
- **A composition journal** (the kind I almost always carry with me).
- **Two Zebra pens** (my favorite pens).

So monetarily-wise I'm not giving him much back, my total bill for all this stuff (sans the old stuff I left him) was around \$35 (book was most expensive), but I think if he takes some advice and tries to get a novel off the ground it could have some long-lasting impact on him....much more than a couple of bucks would. Perhaps he won't become a best selling author (although you never know), but at least if he takes on writing as a serious hobby it could somehow lead to a better and more fulfilling life.

I can't say I'd be willing to help walk him through all the steps, but I'll have given him the encouragement and tools to make it happen. **"You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink."**

So tomorrow afternoon I'm going to swing by the ole bridge and give him this stuff:



This should even out what I've taken from the world for this experience.

**BLACK MIKE DONATION UPDATE:**

I drove down to the bridge to give Black Mike the book, storage container, journal and pens I bought him around 1pm in the afternoon. He was still sleeping, and from the looks of it was very hungover.

I told him it was me in case he didn't recognize me without the beard, and he warily said hello. I explained to him that I was living with my brother now and didn't have much money to buy him stuff, but I wanted to give him something (I told him I was homeless earlier and would be living with my brother soon as my homeless alias). I began to explain I got him the storage container to keep raccoons and cats away, and the book/journal to maybe start trying to write a fantasy novel.

He said, "Oh cool, thanks. You got \$1.40?"

I was immediately put off by this, because he frequently talks about the amount \$1.40 because it's the exact amount you need to buy a 16 oz. Steel Reserve malt liquor from the gas station.

I told him, "Nah man I don't, but enjoy what I got you. I hope it helps." ...and with that I walked off. I could tell from where I parked he could probably see that I drove away in a Lexus. I'm curious what he thought of that.

I wasn't mad that he wasn't more enthused about the gift because he had JUST woke up. I know when I first wake up and someone tries to have a conversation it generally doesn't go so well.

Anyhow, hopefully this gave him at least a small boost in his ability to succeed and some tools to do it. Whether or not he uses them is up to him.

From talking with Black Mike so much and judging by how long he's been living on the streets (over 15 years) it seems like he's pretty OK with his situation. From what he told me about his family history, many of his relatives were homeless too, so it seems he's simply grown up around that type of environment and thinks it's normal, or at least acceptable.

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THE HOMELESS EXPERIMENT IN PICTURES:  
Tuesday, June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009

Though it'd be interesting to visually see the transformation from Neville Medhora to Neville the Bum and back:



How I normally dress. Everyday.





12 days of no shaving



17 days of no shaving. Hair is starting to get a little out of control.





My new invention: [Lightweight homeless signs](#)





A [few hours before](#) starting







Putting on my best "[pity pose](#)" face



I'm sure my Mom wasn't happy that her first born was[sleeping under a bridge](#).





Home sweet bridge!



Does YOUR house have a river running through it, an aviary, garden, plenty of fresh air, large backyard and a million dollar roof?!





My room.



[Black Mike](#) sleeping on his mattress.





The bum just bumming around





After brushing my teeth in the public library bathroom





Kicking of the [Homeless Drinking Experiment](#)







Waking up from the aftermath trying to clean my clothes.





Hungover + Broken slab of concrete = bed



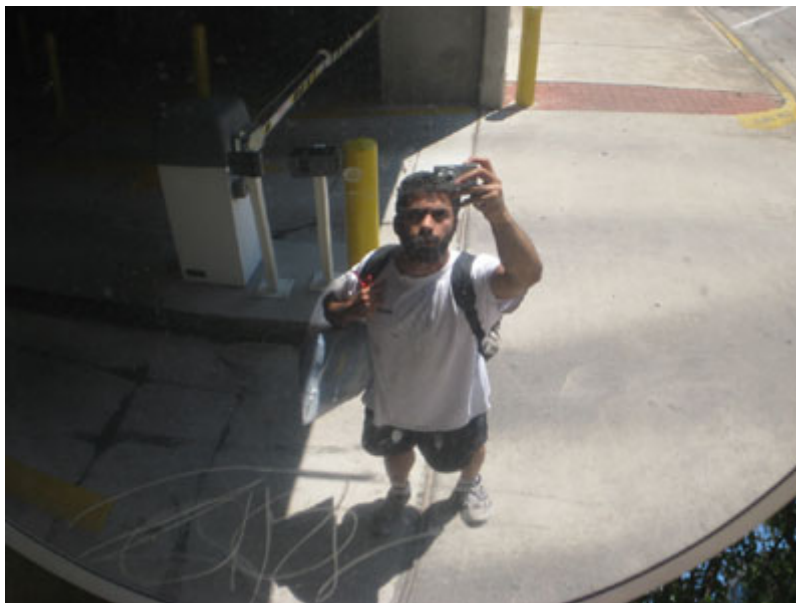
Was it comfortable? Hell no! Did I get bitten up by ants? Yes.







I'm now a trained street fighter



I often didn't know what time it was or what I looked like.



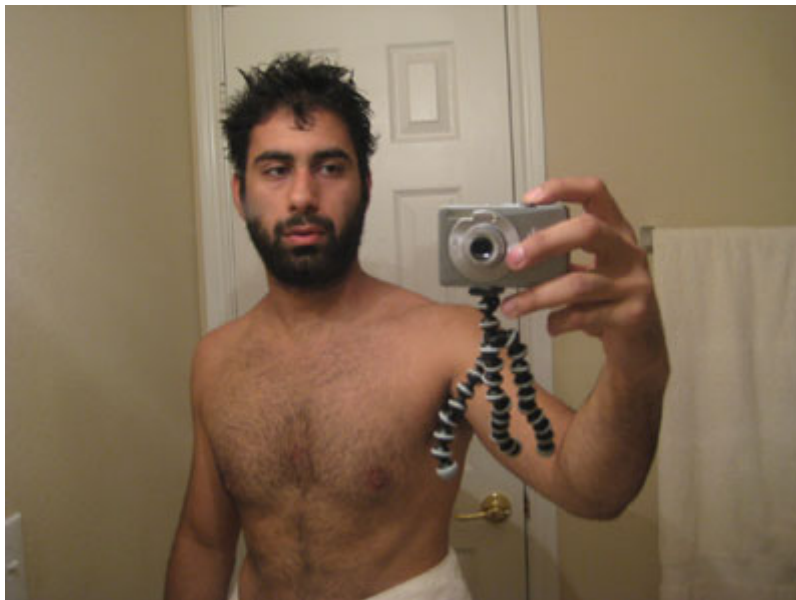


This is what I looked like right before I stepped back into my house after 5 days.





First order of business back home, discard of EVERYTHING.



2nd order of business: SHOWER





I was VERY happy to take a *proper* shower



Even though I kind of liked the beard, 3rd order of business was to shave





All smooth again!



Back to normal. I look 5 years younger and 10 years less mature.

Did I develop more sympathy for the homeless = **Not really.**

Did I learn much = **Yes.**

Glad I did it = **Yes.**



Do I plan on doing this again = **Nope.**

Do I understand more about why people get trapped in homelessness: **Yes.**

Will I donate to the homeless community = **Already did**, **probably not much more for now.**

If you had to change one thing about the homeless shelter, what would it be  
= **Have Earl Nightingale playing on repeat ([link](#)):**

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## **SHOULD I GIVE MONEY TO HOMELESS PEOPLE?**

**June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2009**

You're driving in your car, come to a stoplight and see someone holding a sign on the side of the road asking for money. **Should you give them money?**

That decision is totally up to you, it's your money.



### **Here's what I think:**

After doing my Homeless Experiment I got to know more about homeless habits, even more so than when I did the [Bottled Water Experiment](#).

**There are several ways bums commonly make money:**

- **Flying a sign:** Holding a sign on the side of the road.
- **Panhandling:** Walking around at gas stations, streets, busy parks, supermarkets etc. and asking people for money.
- **Random Hustles:** Washing windshields at stoplights, pointing out parking spots and other relatively useless services.

Different areas, climates and populations promote or discourage different types of efforts.

This time I experienced a part of Austin, TX. called Riverside as well as the Downtown area. **Riverside bums** camp out in the woods or live under a bridge. To get food they dumpster dive, panhandle (aka walking around at gas stations or supermarket asking people) or fly signs. People often give food.

For food the **Downtown homeless** population simply goes to one of **many** free soup kitchens or organizations that provide free meals. I was VERY well fed when pretending to be homeless in downtown Austin. For extra money they may panhandle for a short while, or they can go to a day labor center and get a manual labor job for the day (although it seems almost none actually do this).

For the most part food seems to be easily available (at least here in Austin) no matter where you go.

So if food is taken care of, where does that money you give bums go? I'd say less than 20% goes to food, and most goes to drugs and alcohol (from what I saw, mainly beer).

After first-hand observing the lifestyle many of these people lead, I feel relatively little sympathy, and don't particularly feel like giving them any money.

**So should you give money to bums on the street?**

In short, my answer is: **NO.**

**Why I won't give:**

- It supports bums standing on street corners begging or panhandling all over the place, and I don't like that.



- It almost all goes towards alcohol.
- There are usually plenty of places to go for a meal.
- Many of these bums get welfare checks and blow most of it on alcohol or drugs.
- It's usually only chronically homeless people that stand outside flying signs or panhandling for money.
- Most "real" homeless people who have temporarily fallen on hard times ***rarely*** ask for money in any of these ways.

So those are some of my reasons. It's very obvious that many people DO give, it's an economic truth that if no one gave, they wouldn't be out there trying for very long.

However if YOU decide to give away YOUR money, that's your personal decision. A lot of people will even voluntarily buy bums cigarettes or beer. Once again, that's a personal decision.

I especially hate giving money to bums downtown in my area, because I found out just how easy it was to get a free meal, plenty of extra food and even temporary jobs.

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The End.  
-Neville Medhora