

Homeless in Baton Rouge: A Short Profile of One Man at Work

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I wanted to know how much of what people say about the homeless we see standing at the interstate off-ramps is true. Do they make \$150 a day? Do they go home in their late-model Nissans, turn on the decent-sized but not plasma screen TV and tell their wives, "Another typical day. Only got \$200 in quarters this time." Do the homeless who work the I-10 off ramps on College Drive have a better dental plan than I do?

I have to say the answer is probably no. As a July dusk descended on the intersection of Corporate and College, I glimpsed a man dressed in a straw-colored faded vest and blue t-shirt, standing on a grassy median showing the thick traffic a cardboard sign that read "Pra'in for a miracle" in black magic marker. The American flag on the t-shirt was faded more than than the vest.

He saw me long before I could get within earshot. I carried a little Sony tape recorder and extension mic. Up until I got within a few feet of him and held out my hand, I could tell he was on his guard and I reproached myself a little for going around with my shirt tail hanging out.

Just after someone in a white coup threw a half handful of change in the grass, pennies and nickels which the man didn't bother to pick up, I explained to him who I was and that I was a reporter with a small weekly and would like to interview him. He seemed eager to talk to me, but he spoke in crisp half-lines and seldom explained much. I thought I detected a slightly grapey hint of Jim Beam on his breath, but only a hint. He would later deny any problems with drugs or alcohol. Though he'd have a beer on occasion.

His name is Thomas Byrd and he's from Raleigh, North Carolina. He had only gotten into Baton Rouge that day in search of "stevedore work." No wife. No children. He said he didn't know a soul in Baton Rouge. "I got some friends in New Orleans. I'll probably be going there tomorrow. I'll just say hello and probably be on my way."

T-Byrd, as he likes to be called, thumbs his way around the southeast, going to labor halls in the early mornings sometimes for a day's work which in Baton Rouge only pays \$40. He even has the required steel-toed boots, which look worn but in good shape.

"Are you a religious man?" I asked him, intending to lead him, frankly, to the topic of free shelter. But T-Byrd at that point takes control of the interview himself. "If Jesus were to walk up to you and tap you on the shoulder and say, 'Go with me,' what would you do?" Well, agnostic that I am (at the moment), if I KNEW for an absolute certainty God Himself were asking me to volunteer, I wouldn't hesitate to say yes. I think it surprised T-Byrd a little that my answer was so definite. "Would you really? If you knew it was him? You'd go with him wouldn't you?"

T-Byrd then retold the story of Christ asking three eventual disciples to abandon their jobs and homes and follow him. I responded, old Baptist boy that I am, with an Old Testament bit about God Himself taking the form of a beggar and being turned away from the tent of a wealthy Hebrew. God got the last word as usual. "Whatever you do unto the least of these, you do unto me." God meant the homeless.

I asked T-Byrd what he thought of the people in their Cadillac Escalades and shiny new Hummers who drove right by him, pretending not to see. He said he felt no resentment and understood how they felt: "I'll be honest with you, Jeff. People when they get behind the wheel of the car, they're different. They change. It's not like they're standing in their front yard. It's not like they're going to check their mailbox. They're different. They change. They're ruthless."

At times, T-Byrd said, people will roll their windows down and yell, usually "Get a job!" But he's also heard a lot of words of encouragement. One day a "young girl" smiled and waved at him in Smyrna, Georgia, went through the drive-thru of a nearby McDonald's. "I'm digging down in the McDonald's bag.

Free fries and a double cheeseburger and a coke. Underneath the cheeseburger was a twenty dollar bill. I was like, ‘Golly I can’t believe it.’ She didn’t say nothing to me about the twenty dollar bill in there.”

So how did he get to that grass median, standing with his cardboard sign and hoping for bills instead of change? Well, as a boy he’d grown up in Raleigh and at eighteen he had gone off to North Carolina State to study engineering. He was there for two years in the early 70s. He also went to a vocational technical school to learn to repair backhoes, road-graders and bulldozers. About ten years ago, while living in Houston, he even taught this skill at a vo-tech school there. What happened?

“I got tired of putting up with the corporate bullshit,” he said in a very even tone. I chuckled sympathetically and conspiratorially. “No, I really am. I’m sick of it,” he added.

So you were able to keep a house together for a good while and pay rent, I asked. “Yeah. Yeah, but after a while you realize, these guys are not gonna give me no raise, they’re not gonna do anything for you. The more you ask them, the more they give you an excuse. You know what a heavy equipment mechanic is, don’t you?”

“My father was a heavy equipment operator,” I said. “All right, well a mechanic is an operator with his brain knocked out,” said T-Byrd. “I’m serious.”

T-Byrd later told me why it’s impossible to tell me what a typical day is like for him. There are none. He will go three days at a time without sleeping and “crash out wherever I can” when he finally has to. Last night he had slept behind a store near some railroad tracks. He says that he has often gone to shelters, like the ones set up by the Salvation Army, but the drawback is that at those shelters they make you take a breathalyzer test. If you fail, you get no bed.

What about showering? “I go to missions,” he said. “Truck stops’ll charge you \$7 to take a shower.”

Again I asked him if he had left any family back home. He said he had lived in Raleigh for a while with his wife, an orthodontist’s assistant, but that she had died in December. “I still haven’t gotten over that,” he said and certainly one wouldn’t have. Not in six months. “I’ve been pretty much on the road every since.”

Before I left him, a younger woman rolled her window down and handed T-Byrd \$5. She asked him his name and wished him well. I nearly slipped and asked T-Byrd what his take-home pay was, but fortunately recovered in time to substitute the word income. In Baton Rouge he said he would stand with his sign at intersections for an hour or two a day, hoping the police won’t tell him to move along, and would usually get enough for food and drink for the day. In Louisville, Kentucky he once made \$150 in the course of a day.

It’s dangerous being homeless, though. “You kind of sleep with one eye open,” T-Byrd said, and I could see him visibly tensing as some strapping youths walked across the parking lot of the Roadtrack store in front of us. He doesn’t carry a gun, which is why he believes police aren’t very hesitant to hassle him or take him to jail for vagrancy. “They know I don’t carry a gun. It’s a way for them to make money. It’s an easy pickup.” He tells and savors the story of a policeman in Daytona Beach he had talked to who sat for 20 minutes in his patrol car before responding to any domestic disturbance call.

At last I ran out of questions. The interview had gone on for over half an hour. And I emptied my wallet out for him. I only had around \$4 and some change, which is a lot more than I normally carry. And as I approached my car, knowing I am never far from homelessness myself, I felt very thankful for the time T-Byrd had given me.