

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 SHOPPING CENTRE \$27.05

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 \$212.20.

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.



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