

The Art of Panhandling

By David “Shaggy” Hurley

When I was a young teen I would lay on the couch, flipping pages in a comic book, hearing my father yelling at my mother. This went on and on, until one day I decided to run away from home. I found myself in the town of Framingham, on the road to destruction. Soon after I was in the city of Worcester, either in the Pip Shelter or on the railroad tracks. I was drinking white port wine or Wild Irish Rose with the old-timers – they taught me how to survive out here in the weeds.

One day while we were drinking an old-timer showed me how to jump railroad freight trains. Then he taught me how to panhandle. He said that during the Depression they had this school out in Pennsylvania, where they taught people how to panhandle to get their needs or wants. I remember the first time I tried it. I felt embarrassed, less than, asking for some spare change like they owed me something. It’s hard work. You stand there for hours, waiting for a drop, and what you get is snide comments, or somebody wanting to stand next to you, or trying to say that you’re in their spot and even wanting to fight you for it.

Many years passed and I found myself in the city of Boston, still on that road to destruction – down on Summer St. in front of Dunkin’ Donuts, with my empty medium-sized Dunkin’ Donuts cup, harassing people for spare change so I could support my addiction. It got to the point where I would make up stories – that I needed twenty dollars to get to Portland, that I was stranded and had to get home to celebrate my birthday, or the holidays. I was out on that sidewalk until the wee hours of the morning; people thought I lived there.

Years went by and I was doing the same thing, but now I was doing it without harassing people. And no more stories, or being out late. I needed to change myself in order to meet people with honesty – to let them know, even while I was panhandling, who I was and what I was doing in my life that was different.