

I get around on foot. I have a couple of eye problems that result in me having very poor depth perception. You don't want this cross-eyed guy coming at you in a car. Outside of that, I actually like to walk. Even in the middle of a pandemic, it is necessary for me to go to the grocery a few times a week. When I head out from my duplex just off of Gallatin Road, I usually go to Aldi or Kroger, just short of Old Hickory Boulevard. Unless I go the long back way to Aldi, my walk means passing the corner of Gallatin Road and Neely's Bend. There is a bus stop there, and some low stone walls around some landscaping. There aren't many places to sit in Madison. This spot attracts a lot of panhandlers.

That corner, and the stretch between there and Old Hickory Boulevard is a frequented by panhandlers, and apparently homeless people. This has become increasingly noticeable in the last seven or eight years, as this population was pushed out of downtown Nashville, and subsequently, East Nashville. I say apparently homeless, because I have seen a lot the same people here all during that period. My guess is that they have decided this a good place for them to be.

Across Neely's Bend there are two churches that attempt to meet the needs of the homeless. They have had to scale back because of the pandemic. Still, City Road Chapel United Methodist hosts a van from Layman's Lessons. It provides showers and a place to do laundry twice a week. They had always provided a community meal once a month. They still provide that as a meal to go. Next door, Madison First Baptist provides a hot lunch to go on Mondays. I understand they used to provide breakfast regularly. They also collect and pass on used clothing. Between there and Old Hickory Boulevard are several substance abuse counselors, Centerstone, Crossroads, and Serenity House among them. Set Free Church is an independent church that ministers to the homeless and people in transition from homelessness. It is decorated with a vivid, feverish mural that proclaims, "No Perfect People Allowed". In the next block The Seven Day Adventist Store also provides help with utilities and rent, and gives out bus passes for their clients going to job interviews.

Given all this, it is not surprising that the area sees a lot of transient traffic. I have to admit that I haven't often responded to requests for money. I am by myself, and I have go through that gauntlet on a regular basis. I don't want to be seen as an easy touch. Outside of that, I am hesitant to pull out my wallet in front of a stranger. So, generally I keep looking straight ahead. I know I am putting up a front, but so far that has kept me safe. Still, I do see some of these often enough to exchange a hello and a wave. I ask them how they are doing, but that is pretty much my reflex greeting to anyone. One of those people is a street paper vendor named Charles.

Charles is in his early fifties. Originally from Memphis, he has lived in the Nashville area since 2008. He lived here briefly before. He said he has mostly done warehouse work. He has been in AA for twelve years. He credits AA and FaithUnity with helping him out of homelessness. The housing organization Open Table helped him get into his apartment at Madison Towers, where he has lived for the past sixteen months. He previously sold The Contributor for a few years. He has been a vendor for the FaithUnity newspaper for the past six years. He likes that better, he says, due to his Christian background.

He walks around two miles each way to his usual spot on the corner of Gallatin Road and Neely's Bend. It takes about a thirty minutes. If someone else has his spot, he goes across Gallatin Road to one of the fast food drive-throughs. I asked him how he felt about people passing him by, or not even looking his way. He said, "I might get impatient, or a little frustrated. But, I know somebody else will help me out."

I asked him what he would like everyone to know about people in his shoes. He replied, "If people look and talk good, and they appear to want to try and improve their situation, help them out. If they are staggering around, drinking or using something, that's not going to help them out to give them any money." He explained further, "People are out here because of their financial situation. People might have lost a job, got a divorce, or whatever." He thought that a man, especially, might lose his home in a divorce. But, he added, "I have never been married, so I don't know a whole lot about that."

I ran into to Charles one day as I was walking out to the Madison post office. It was threatening to rain, but he had his umbrella, and he was heading to his usual spot. That is when I discovered that he was walking both ways. He is dedicated about putting in his time. When we spoke weeks later, as he took a break to answer a few questions, he said, "I have a place to stay. All my needs are met on a day to day basis. I'm not missing any meals. The quality of my life has improved one hundred percent."

As I said, I pass among these people often. It is a more immediate experience than most people probably would be comfortable with. When I go to Aldi, I take my own bags. So, I might be walking back home with bags from a few different stores. To anyone driving by, I might appear to be homeless, or struggling myself. Just this week, I was walking back from grabbing take out from Cal's Country Kitchen. One of the regulars on the corner asked me where everyone was getting "all those meals". I explained that I had bought mine, but they were serving meals outside of First Baptist right then. I encouraged him to go over before they stopped at 1 PM. I see this fellow often, and I assume he recognizes me. I know he drinks in public, so can't be sure. I always speak to him. Once I saw him at Bojangle's, and he was on a laptop. I guess he carries it around in the pocket of his walker. That is a long list of assumptions. How could I know his journey if I don't stop to ask? What I do know is that for many of us, the loss of a job, or even a paycheck, an illness, or some other circumstance could land us among the regulars I see most days. I recognize that most of them really are just asking for a little help. I hope the front I put up doesn't keep me from realizing that in an instant, I could be one of those regulars.