

Dumpstering for Christ

Contributed by Sarah Mirk
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The Holy Diver Digs for a Living — and Meaning — in Portland's Trash

Monday morning as the sun rises; Hammer, Ankles, Pastor Steve, and Holy Diver are sitting on sofas in their North Portland living room, eating a concoction called breakfast pie and discussing the Bible. Breakfast pie includes bacon Diver found in a dumpster weeks ago and stashed in the freezer. Diver is a lifelong dumpster diver and on-again-off-again drug addict. His current drug of choice is Christianity.

Editor's note: Rather than be economic refugees standing around in a soup line, some resourceful folks are DIYers: Do It Yourselfers. Pedal power is the future, and these Portlanders are livin' it. A bit hard in this blizzard, but life must go on, mustn't it? - JL

After the Bible discussion (which is short, frank, and pleasant—Pastor Steve, who doesn't wear shoes, is a minister to the homeless), Diver gets his bike in order and then, while the rest of Portland is just waking up, makes his daily dumpster rounds. He's been scrounging a living from Portland's trashcans for 20 years. But unlike most people who have lingered in Portland's back alleys for that long, Diver is still mentally sharp enough to explain all that he's seen.

"There are three things I've never found in a dumpster," says Diver, now 41 with a weathered face, short gray hair, and bright eyes. "A crying baby, a dead body, or a working handgun."

Diver's bike trailer rattles behind him as he pulls onto N Williams—he welded the trailer together himself and now it's loaded dangerously high with about 300 glass bottles and cans. "Dime!" he says, swooping down into the gutter (a car veers out of the way) to scoop up two old beer cans.

The first stop of the day is a North Portland assisted-living facility, where Diver delivers a hard-boiled egg to a schizophrenic friend. The friend doesn't eat much unless someone stops by to encourage him and the whole egg-delivery routine is part of Diver's new Christian approach to life.

"I want to help other people, I feel like I have a gift, through God, to provide for other people," says Diver. Digging through Stumptown garbage, Diver finds food and clothes for Pastor Steve's entire little homeless ministry commune, where Diver, Ankles, and the others sleep rent free as long as they stay off drugs.

"If it's all about just me then I don't really have a lot of ambition. I'm happy with a book, a sleeping bag, something to eat, a clean pair of socks. But there's nothing better than finding something that someone else threw away and saying, 'Hey, I know exactly who this is for.'"

The egg hand-off goes well. During the rattling ride from North Portland to the Lloyd Center, Diver explains that before he got saved and all that, he dumpstered for meth money. It was a completely different rhythm. He rode fast and dug desperately through trash, staked out territory and sold whatever he could find.

"There's lots of illegal things in dumpsters. I've found enough marijuana to fill a MAX train," he says.

Diver crosses NE Weidler and rolls down into the vacant, grimly fluorescent parking lot under the Lloyd Center Safeway. This is where the can redemption machines live. They're big metal boxes that crunch aluminum and shatter glass, creating a ruckus before they print out a tiny receipt Diver can turn in for cash.

"It smells like a kegger gone bad," Diver laughs, sorting his trailer trash as he launches into a string of numbers that defined his life for many years.

"It takes 400 cans and bottles to buy a \$20 bag of speed. And it turns into a monster at that point, because you do a \$20 bag of meth and get high and your whole mission is to find 400 more cans to get another bag of speed, etc., etc. It's vicious," he says. "It's rough. It's a rough life. I'm so glad that's not part of my equation anymore."

Diver's parents were addicts, too, he says. They moved around a lot, settling early on in a cheap Los Angeles apartment complex surrounded by a cinderblock wall.

"I was an introverted kid, I spent a lot of time by myself. I used to walk around that wall, just daydream or whatever, and it looked down on this huge dumpster. One day I looked down and it was full of cool stuff—Vietnam memorabilia, a chemistry set. I brought that stuff home and was hooked ever since."

He moved to Portland when he was 20, and for a couple years he got clean and made good money as an unlicensed electrician, owning a five-bedroom house and a Cadillac.

"Before my name was Diver, it was Caddy," he says over the roar of shattering glass.

For a while after that, he slept out in Gresham with a tight-knit community of homeless people and was a "Satanic crackhead" before getting into a rehab program at Central City Concern. He wound up at Pastor Steve's after relapsing.

"To say that I have 100 percent faith in what the Bible says and that Christ is my savior—I would have never ever thought that. I've been through the whole gamut of being atheist, Satanist, drug-addled. But I consider myself an intelligent mammal and I think I've evaluated all the information correctly."

The Safeway machines won't accept all his cans, so Diver heads inside, claims his \$5 or so, and then rides out again toward the Hollywood Fred Meyer. He stops at some dumpsters on the way. Some are "nickel dumpsters"—ones that usually just have cans—while others are known for their occasional gems.

"Let's check this goodie box right here," he says, pulling into the parking lot of a convenience store that shall remain

nameless. "I found six pounds of weed in this dumpster once!" Diver reaches in, pushing aside last week's tabloids. No drugs today, but he seems elated at what he does find: "A perfectly good cup of soup!" he shouts, victoriously waving a chicken-flavored Cup-O-Noodle.

Diver prefers the low-income areas of town to the affluent suburbs, even though the Southwest has the best dumpster loot. Among the richer communities, his trash picking garners at best indifference—and sometimes hostility. In North and Northeast Portland, he says, café workers on smoke breaks will point him toward the best bags. Like Freegans—anti-consumerists who salvage food—and others who occasionally pick through trashed Whole Foods produce or old Hotlips pizza piles, Holy Diver sees his dumpstering as a political act.

"If I recycle or renew this much stuff in one day, I think that's amazing... I'm doing a service to humanity whether they like it or not," he says. "It would hurt capitalism if everybody just waited until the FDA-regulated date came up, the food had to be thrown away, and everybody just got it for free."

Fred Meyer takes most of Diver's remaining bottle load—his trailer is empty and ready to be filled with food and assorted treasures. He climbs up a tall cargo dumpster in the grocery store parking. On the right days, this dumpster is filled with flowers. Today it's empty, except for a few light cords he eyeballs at being worth \$20 to metal scrappers.

"That's a hit of speed right there," he says, shaking his head and climbing down.

Behind the bar Club 21 on NE Sandy, Diver finally hits a goldmine: giant bags of pasta sauce and nacho cheese, expensive organic cranberry juice, piles of canned food, and, inexplicably, two "build your own gingerbread house" cookie kits. It's enough food to supply the next homeless ministry movie night. He gleefully loads the goods into his trailer, smokes a cigarette and turns around to ride home again. It's 11 am and he's done working for the day.

Biking the wrong way up the sidewalk on NE MLK, Diver says, "I don't believe in working for someone else, making minimum wage. I don't believe in paying rent my whole life. In fact, I could do without money completely."

He pauses for a moment, and then adds with a sheepish grin, "...If I didn't smoke cigarettes."

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