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## Kansas City Star, The (MO)

December 15, 2006

**Section:** News

**Page:** B1

### Overtime on his panhandling shift

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*The Kansas City Star*

HEARTLAND JOURNAL - A silent entreaty for handouts at an offramp

Jeff looks at the sky, squints, does a fast bit of calculation.

Yeah, about a half-hour has passed.

Shift change.

He waves at another **homeless** man about a block away from where he stands near the Broadway offramp on northbound Interstate 35. Sometimes six, seven guys wait to work this spot. Everyone knows the deal. Do your 30 minutes and then get to the end of the line.

"Go to work!" a driver shouts.

Jeff, 40, has heard it all before. Get a job, this that and the other. Yeah, yeah. But would they hire him? If they won't, he wishes they'd just keep their mouths shut. I'll wear your shoes and you wear mine, he often says. Easy to judge me, especially if you have comfortable shoes. That's how he sees it.

One guy last year hired him on to his lawn crew. Jeff drove around and helped people decorate their houses with Christmas lights. No one knew he was **homeless**, and for a moment it seemed to him he was just like anybody else on a job waiting to punch out and go home.

He looks again at the other **homeless** guy, who doesn't seem interested in taking his

turn. Jeff decides to put in extra time. He holds his sign waist high, bows his head and waits for the light to change on Broadway, for traffic to stop on the exit ramp, for drivers to be confronted by his solitary appeal.

**Homeless.** Very Hungry. God Bless.

"Hang in there," a woman shouts.

Jeff turns his head against the exhaust fumes. Grit speckles his black beard, sweatshirt and blue jeans. He adjusts his cap and wipes sweat from his forehead. The light turns red, and cars stop. No one looks at him. He adjusts his grip on his sign. His hand gets tired holding it. The drivers stare straight ahead.

Before he became **homeless**, Jeff worked in shipping and receiving. Bad luck and alcohol put him on the street. This, that and the other, the same old song and dance. He was born in Kansas City to a family not poor, not rich, just about right. His mother knows he's out here. It pains her. He hasn't seen her for a long time.

"Get off the street!" a driver yells.

Jeff lives under a bridge not far from the exit ramp. Been about three years now. Warm feet, that's the thing. Go to bed with cold, wet feet, forget it. No such thing as enough clean socks.

"Are you working too hard or hardly working?" someone shouts.

He knows the rap. Don't give money to **homeless** people, because they'll spend it on booze and drugs. That's true for some of them, he admits. But people should give anyway. The sooner the wine heads and dope fiends get what they need, the sooner they'll get off the corner and someone who really needs money for food can get out here with a sign and make a dollar. That's how he sees it.

"God bless you," he says to a passer-by who hands him five bucks. He listens to a siren. He respects paramedics and cops. When the cherry's going, they got business to take care of, and he stays out of their way. Police sometimes give him a hard time, but he understands they have a job to do. Besides, if they put him in jail, they've done him a favor. They've got to feed him. He either sleeps on cold concrete or warm concrete. That's how he sees it.

Jeff can't imagine even with a job how he'd save for an apartment. He's not sure whether he would live inside even if he could afford to. The walls might close in. He doesn't know. It's been such a long time. Out here, it gets cold, but he doesn't mind as long as he has dry socks and a blanket.

He wanders down Broadway and taps the other **homeless** guy on the shoulder. He shows him his five bucks. I got mine, he says and points to the exit ramp, now empty, waiting for shift change.

Besides, if they put him in jail, they've done him a favor.

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Photo

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