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A look into life on the streets of Boston

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by Angela Yang



Harsh winter conditions complicate the lives of Boston's homeless population, including Betsy Lambiase, 51, who says shelter from low temperatures and extreme wind chills is hard to come by. ANGELA YANG/ DAILY FREE PRESS STAFF

Fifty-one-year-old Betsy Lambiase is in the midst of her second winter out on the streets. Though this January's temperatures have proven milder than most, extreme wind chill still buffets Boston's homeless.

For Lambiase and her partner, 40-year-old Jesse Rebelo, home base is a busy McDonald's on a Fenway street corner. It's where they purchase their cups of coffee every morning, and it's the last indoor place they occupy until the staff casts them out at closing time.

Come 2 a.m., the two must move on to seek other shelter from the cold. Winters are always especially tough, Lambiase said, because it is harder to get warm than it is to cool off.

"Mainly we go to, if it's not here at McDonald's, it'll be stairwells, doorways, alleys, that type of thing," Lambiase said. "Anywhere where you can get some type of shelter from the wind."

Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless Associate Director Kelly Turley said rates of street homelessness in Boston are significantly lower than in other major cities, mainly because many shelters willingly expand their capacity to meet demand.

"That may mean there aren't necessarily beds but there's places for people to be inside, out of the cold," Turley said. "Less of an issue of the capacity is more the conditions at times. Do people feel that it's a safe place or welcoming space for them?"

This means that despite the cold, some homeless individuals — such as Lambiase and Rebelo — will choose not to rely on shelters.

The couple rises at 6 a.m. each day to clear quietly out of the spaces they camp out in during the night. Then, Lambiase said, they run errands, such as picking up clothes and toiletries from charity vans, or simply spend a morning at the dog park to watch the animals.

"We used to play a lot of cards," Lambiase said. "But now with the wind and everything, it's kind of impossible to find cards and you can't really sit in the hallway and play games. That's going to be too awkward."

The starkest difference they see in passersby throughout the winter months, according to Rebelo, is the shift in attitudes.

"People are crankier in the cold," Lambiase said. "Nobody's happy in the cold, they're all miserable because they're freezing."

Rebelo and Lambiase also said they noticed some people will cross the street to avoid walking past the couple. Women will also clutch their purses when they near Rebelo.

"Just because we're homeless doesn't mean we're all strung out and going to rob everything," Lambiase said. "And [Rebelo] gets really insulted by that a lot."

Yet Rebelo said they “constantly” find their own belongings stolen: the pair has lost four backpacks within two or three months. When in need of more supplies, Lambiase said both the streets and the dumpster are hidden treasure coves.

“Anything you need, you will find it on the streets of Boston,” Lambiase said. “Anything. I found tweezers the other day, and then I needed them.”

From city dumpsters, Lambiase said she has discovered anything from money to jewelry to computers. Much of her wardrobe is comprised of these finds, as the clothes in the trash don’t tend to be dirty — they’re wrapped in plastic bags.

“A lot of things come out of the dumpsters, especially when the college kids go home,” Lambiase said. “They throw everything away. It’s amazing what money does to people.”

Life on the streets is a series of highs and lows, Lambiase said. Oftentimes small successes mean an initial step forward, but an obstacle will soon set them two steps back.

“We give back and forth to each other out here,” Lambiase said. “We’ve got a girl that we know, she just lost everything again, and we’re going to give her a pair of socks and a cup of toiletries. But yeah, you just, you lose it, start back up again.”

While many within the homeless community take care of each other, gestures of empathy will also arrive from strangers. Lambiase said she was in Cambridge during a snowstorm earlier this January when a woman approached her.

“I had two soaking wet jackets, couldn’t walk anymore, stopped at the bus stop and the lady gave me this jacket off her back,” Lambiase said, motioning to a dark coat draped over her chair. “I would never get rid of this coat. I don’t care what happens.”

Barbara Trevisan, spokesperson for Pine Street Inn, an organization providing services for the homeless, said Boston’s winter weather can severely affect the health of individuals who cannot escape the streets.

“People can get hypothermia, they can get frostbite,” Trevisan said. “It can be very serious because a lot of them have underlying medical conditions, and the street is never a good place for people to stay.”

Both Lambiase and Rebelo said they are currently ill, but previous experiences with hospitals have put them off of seeking professional medical help.

“They assume we’re just looking for a bed,” Rebelo said, “always looking for drugs.”

After she fell on the commuter rail and hit her tailbone, Lambiase said her back began spasming and her left leg grew numb. She said she made her way to a hospital and emphasized to the staff she did not want narcotics.

“And they were just so stuck on: we were there to either get a bed or drugs,” Lambiase said. “I was like, ‘I don’t need drugs, just figure out what’s wrong with my back and why it’s doing this.’ They were just horrible.”

People can be “very, very cold” to the homeless, Lambiase said, yet she finds a home in Boston because its residents can also

be some of the friendliest.

“You get that one random person that comes by with the biggest, brightest smile that makes you regain hope in humanity,” Lambiase said. “You know, it’s, everything’s good, bad, whatever. Out here, I guess, we just see the rawer side of it than what the normal person sees.”



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One Comment



Charles Eilert

January 31, 2020 at 10:17 pm

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