

# Kirby: There's a gulf between me and the homeless — and I'm making it wider

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I've never been homeless for more than 72 hours at a time. This doesn't qualify me as an actual street person, because I always knew that eventually I had someplace to go.

Whenever I did feel homeless, it was my fault. Either my wife had locked me out of the house, or my parents had kicked me out, for behavior they were tired of trying to correct.

There was also that time after high school when I was in the wind because of an arrest warrant for something really petty but that the state remained adamant was worth \$150 or me.

I avoid these situations now because I'm old, easily victimized, and I can't sleep on the ground without serious pain meds. I also prefer waking up to the smell of someone else making waffles.

This means there's a huge gulf between myself and homeless people who gather in the downtown area of Salt Lake City. As per Pamela Atkinson's advice, I try not to give them money because it merely enables them.

Note: A staunch advocate for the disadvantaged, Atkinson is No. 4 on my personal "Top Ten Best People in Utah."

But then came the day when I realized that I could no longer ignore the homeless problem because it decided to no longer ignore me.

Several months ago, while skirting Pioneer Park, I heard someone shout, "Kirby!"

When I turned and looked, there were half a dozen rough-looking sorts lounging in a group surrounded by packs and carts.

The scruffiest one started nudging the others. "Hey, you guys. It's Roger Kirby."

The group waved before returning to rolling cigarettes and dozing. The guy who had pointed me out rummaged beneath him and held up a badly wrinkled copy of The Tribune. He brought it over.

"This is you, right?" he asked, pointing at my picture. "You're Roger — oops — Robert Kirby."

I admitted to "Carl" that it was me. Photo or in the flesh, there's no denying that I look like I just woke up in a holding cell.

Carl, who like me apparently reads before going to sleep every night, expressed his appreciation for my column "even if you was a #\$\$%@ cop before."

Except for the part where he told me that he only needed 75 cents more to get to Ogden, that was the extent of our conversation. I gave him a dollar. I can't afford to lose readers.

That was months ago and Carl is still in Pioneer Park. I sometimes see him when I'm driving along 400 West to The Tribune. Maybe he only needs a few more "75 cents."

There are a lot of reasons people are homeless. Drug addiction, mental issues, poor planning and just really bad luck. I get it. Some people actually do need help reclaiming their lives.

But let's not forget those who choose to be homeless or act like they are.