

The woman outside the library

Call her the Library Lady. She's almost a morning and evening fixture at the main city library on Church, a plump gargoyle stuffed into an outside recessed niche near the south entrance door, feeding time to her 34 years.

Donna Ward is her name. In Santa Cruz four or five years she hails from Denver by way of a broken home, but blames no one for her lifestyle.

The morning we talked, she sat almost Buddha-like in her niche, with 60 pounds on her body she says she doesn't need, and a small red radio at her side, talking aimlessly at her.

A near-toothless smile effectively brightened a round face capped, like a Christmas cookie, by a blue stocking hat.

Her legs were wrapped in a green blanket and the last layer of upper clothing was a college sweater with "Portland 17" on the front and a Beaver patch on the arm.

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Donna hasn't slept in a real bed since February. She's made the library one of her bedrooms over the past nine months because there are handy niches that fit her sleeping bag, an exceptional roof overhang that keeps off the rain, librarians who have shown her some heart, and "it's near the police station." This seems to give her a sense of security.

There is a friendly good-heartedness to her makeup that adds to her struggle. Street people have taken advantage of her good nature and often her \$528 SSI check doesn't stretch to the month's end.

She moved to the library after the remodeling of the transit center. She used to sleep in the old restroom, but with the new fancy quarters, they got uppity and dislodged Donna.

But the library suits her better. During cold rainy days, she becomes a bibliophile and has a library card to prove it.

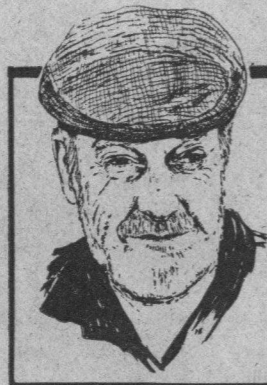
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Sure it's against the law to sleep in public places, so sue her!

"I've been given so many tickets for this," she said with a grin, "that Judge Kelsay thinks I hold some kind of record."

The worse part of a ticket is getting awakened in the middle of the night by a policeman and told to move on. So she has to get her gear together, move to another place and settle down again.

Look. It's not as if she doesn't try to conform. "I'm about a year away, in line for low-cost housing. I can't hack first and last rent and all the extras for an apartment."



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That's a move toward appeasing the troll-busting clowns who yell at her from pickup trucks to "get a home!"

Donna holds that library card, she voted Tuesday, yes sirree, and she dressed up Halloween in \$8 worth of bandages as "an accident about to happen," and won \$25 in a bar costume contest.

"For me," she said, "everyday's Halloween in Santa Cruz."

Donna never panhandles, unless, in extreme circumstances, her SSI check becomes anemic — which is often.

Miracles occur. Once while minding her own business on a Greyhound bus station bench, a woman handed her an envelope with \$20 inside. Also, townspeople have befriended her and given her rides hither and yon.

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Donna never married and has no kids. The two are not necessarily compatible these days.

Her fortunes have had rough sledding. She used to own a moped, carrying her earthly belongings on the back. A thief ripped them off. She had to sell the moped to re-equip herself. She bought a bicycle. You might have seen her walking the bike around, loaded with camping equipment. Again it was ripped off. She sold the bike again to buy housekeeping necessities.

Now she is associated with a blue Albertson's shopping cart.

"I have a note from the manager letting me use it," said Donna "I help them by collecting their carts around town."

The friendly street woman says she is seldom hassled. Not long ago she spent the night in the Grant Street Park, and nine juveniles (being juvenile) threw tomatoes and eggs at her yelling, "Troll, get a job!"

Part of her daily routine, she says, is looking for work. She sleeps until she awakens, cleans up at one of the public restrooms about town. Goes to her 75 cents per opening locker at Greyhound to obtain her daytime articles. She showers every other day, she said.

She'll pick up a few bucks cleaning motel rooms now and again and when she switches and sleeps days, she will walk about at night collecting aluminum cans which brings in six to eight dollars a night.

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

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So the days pass. She gets enough smiles by passersby to offset the glares and unsolicited badmouthing by the grouchies of our time. She'll take a meal occasionally at the local soup kitchen.

"It ain't no Hilton, but it's better than eating out of the garbage cans," she said, without fear of argument.

But Donna looks to the future with a positive mind.

Life is easing upward. "I've been downer than I am now.

"I want a job and a man who really loves me and then kids.

"Just like everyone else," she said, not really seeing me.