

'A refrigerator without a light'

Sometimes,
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SANTA CRUZ — You can find the darnedest things in city trash bins, say three admitted "dumpster divers."

"I already scored this morning at the county government center dumpster," said Jay Green, 33, a "houseless" man active in the protests against the city's camping ban. "I found a six-pack of beer and a wallet with a bunch of identification in it," Green said. "They don't lock the county building dumpsters up, but every once in a while this one sheriff will come out and yell at us."

"I've found blankets stained with blood, bicycle parts, all sorts of things. When they dispose of evidence, it's always exciting," Green said.

"I found a big baggie with a white substance in it, a pound of it. It was later identified as baking soda," Green said with a smile.

Life on the streets sometimes calls for drastic survival tactics, said Green and dumpster-diving cohorts Bob Hillman II, 20, and Colvin "Pete" Pascoe, 39.

Pascoe, a Vietnam veteran who said he "got shot at in rice paddies" and suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, said dumpsters have "saved my life at times. When you're out there traveling around, stuck between cities with no money, sometimes a dumpster is all you have."

"I usually try to avoid eating out of dumpsters, but there are times when it's unavoidable," Pascoe said.

Green and Hillman consider themselves "houseless" rather than homeless. Both claim to have homes — Green in Los Angeles, Hillman in Boston — they just don't have homes in Santa Cruz. Pascoe, who suffers from "claustrophobia" as a result of his PTSD, is originally from Pittsburgh, Pa.; he has traveled across the U.S. "from Fort Lauderdale to San Diego five times."

All three men are experienced in sifting through garbage for food, fun and profit. But they hesitated to name the best dumpsters in town, because "we don't want to disclose some of our sources," Green said.

"Places that leave food that's already wrapped — bakeries, certain restaurants — are the best," Hillman said.

"Pizza places and fast-food joints are always good," said Pascoe.

"Sometimes if you hang out outside a pizza place until they close, the pizza will still be warm, or they'll even just give it to you," Hillman said.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

'Pete' Pascoe peers in to see if a meal awaits.

"We don't mind eating seconds. They won't let us cook on the streets, so it's a matter of knowing what dumpsters to look in," Green said.

Hillman explained that a experienced dumpster diver uses his senses — smelling, touching, squeezing — to determine what is passable dumpster fare.

"After a while you get a sense — you smell it or look at it and you can tell if it's edible or not," Pascoe said.

"It's kind of like reaching into a refrigerator that doesn't have a light," said Hillman.

Green said he never dived for food until he came to Santa Cruz and became active in the protests against the city's camping ban, or "sleeping ban" as it is called by activists for the homeless.

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"I went dumpster diving for the tables and chairs at the homeless table in front of the post office," he said. "I get all my stationery from the dumpster at the county building."

"Today, I managed to get a full box of tobacco," Hillman said. "You never know what you're gonna find," Green said.

Green and a homeless buddy were surprised last week to find several en-

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velopes full of blood samples in the county building dumpster. Green turned the potentially dangerous vials over to county Environmental Health Department, which traced them to a sheriff's deputy. Such evidence is supposed to be turned over the the Coroner's Office for safe disposal, said a spokeswoman from the Health Department.

"I'm from Boston, and I dumpster-dived there in the past. But it's a totally different style out here," Hillman said. "Here, people indiscreetly leave things, leave things purposefully for us."

Some California cities have advised merchants to pour bleach over discarded food to foil dumpster divers. "And a lot people are locking up their dumpsters. Some of them are disposing of things they don't want people to know about," Green said.

Santa Cruz Police Lt. Dave Larson said rummaging through dumpsters — or "rhino lunchboxes," as some members of the force call them — is against the law.

"It is private property until the garbage people collect it and take it to the dump. When somebody throws their trash out, that is private property and nobody has a right to it," Larson said.

"Obviously, it's not real high on our priority list," Larson said. "At this point, we only respond to complaints from merchants. The only reason that would gain our attention is trespassing behind buildings or throwing garbage around or setting fire to a dumpster."

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