

Panhandler poster draws satirical response

Laurie Loisel

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Pair calls city's efforts
'tendency to scapegoat'

By KRISTI CECCAROSSI
Staff Writer

NORTHAMPTON — When Northampton resident Wilton Hall, a former panhandler, saw the posters most Main Street shop owners hung late last year encouraging people to "say no to panhandlers," he said he felt like he was under attack.

The posters are one element of the city- and Chamber of Commerce-sponsored campaign meant to encourage people to donate money to area homeless resources rather than panhandlers, whose presence, business owners had said, was bad for business.

"There is a chilling tendency in America to scapegoat the poor and treat them like trash," Hall said. "If Northampton can't swim against that tide, who is going to?"

To express himself, he joined forces with friend Vikki Gilbert to create a satirical spin on the city's campaign.

Calling themselves "Friends of the Tourists," the pair has distributed their own set of posters downtown which, in layout and design, look identical to the city-sponsored signs, but they encourage people to "say no to shop owners" instead.

The so-called "Make a Change" program, Hall says, alienates homeless people, and makes unfair generalizations about people who are poor.

"It was very spontaneous," said Hall, who works at Broadside Bookshop on Main Street. "We just felt so outraged."

The pair has also launched a corresponding Web site where they have set up a forum, inviting people to discuss or just poke fun at the city's campaign.

"Humor is one of the best weapons," Hall said. "It gets attention and it's urgent."

Hall and Gilbert, a writer from Amherst, both do volunteer work that has introduced them to many past and present panhandlers. The goal of their counter-campaign, they say, was to turn the table on shop owners by making patronizing statements about them.

For example, "Make a Change" signs advise that donations to panhandlers may actually support drug addiction — Hall and Gilbert's

poster plays off this, suggesting that shop owners might use the money they earn for "substance abuse, gambling or a destructive lifestyle."

Just as the city's sign gives instructions on how to reply to panhandlers, their posters recommend responses to shop owners who are frequently asking people to spend money at their stores.

"Acknowledge business owners with a smile and a nod. If seeing a business owner makes you feel uncomfortable, make eye contact with a mirror and politely say 'not today,'" the poster reads.

"Make a Change" was largely prompted by complaints from shop owners, residents and out-of-town visitors who said an increased number of people asking for spare change was changing the climate of downtown and hurting business.

Soon after Main Street was dotted with the city's signs, Hall and Gilbert asked a friend to design the poster for them.

They took copies to every local shop where they say business owners either shared a laugh or gave them an icy response and declined to take the posters.

They also hung signs on newspaper boxes and other public spaces downtown, but say they have been torn down.

Suzanne Beck, executive director at the Chamber of Commerce, who helped coordinate the 'Make a Change' campaign, said she hasn't seen Gilbert and Hall's posters but has heard about them through a chamber member. And although she doesn't agree with their statements, she says she's happy to see a public dialogue about 'Make a Change.'

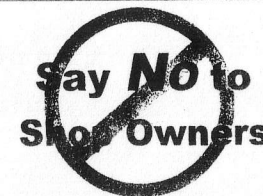
"With a campaign like this, there is a dilemma. It came at the request of downtown customers who were fed up with a situation and expressed their frustrations to merchants. We mobilized a response and folks are going to disagree with it. It's their time now to do that," she said.

"Unfortunately the merchant is caught in the middle of this in a community that genuinely cares about its downtown area," said Beck.

For now, Gilbert and Hall say they hope to encourage more public debate about 'Make a Change,' by passing out more posters and engaging people on their campaign's Web site at www.friendsofthetourists.tripod.com.

The city's panhandlers, they say, should go wherever they like and residents should decide

USE YOUR CHANGE TO
**MAKE A
CHANGE**



**Say YES to Make a Real Difference
for Business People in Need**

When you give money to a business on Main Street, your purchase may not be helping to pay store rent, put a shop owner's child through college, or provide basic needs. Your donation actually may be supporting a business person's substance abuse, gambling, or destructive lifestyle.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

- ◆ Business owners are paying \$600 a week for a stepped up police presence on Main Street. The money would be better spent by business people giving the money directly to themselves, at a city ceremony. Call the Chamber of Commerce (584-1900 or, if you're in Connecticut, 1-800-A-FUN-TOWN) and tell them you think it demonstrates "poor life skills" to spend money on more police for no reason.
- ◆ Jon McGee, operations manager at Thorne's, said, "People no longer like to walk up and down this side of (Main) street. In the last two years, the number of people asking for money has gone off the scale." Call Jon at 584-5582 tell him that, actually, you like walking down Main Street, but you won't patronize Thorne's because shop owners keep asking you for money and it makes you uncomfortable.

RECOMMENDED RESPONSES TO A SHOPPING REQUEST

- ◆ Talk to downtown merchants. Buy them a sandwich. Make them feel welcome. Share your heart. Give money if you want to. Stop America's war on small business owners.
- ◆ Stop stereotyping! Some business owners are substance abusers, but not all of them.
- ◆ Being "uncomfortable" sometimes depends on the color of a business person's skin. Report threatening colors to the police immediately.
- ◆ Acknowledge business owners with a smile and a nod. If seeing business owners makes you uncomfortable, make eye contact with a mirror and politely say "Not today."

THANK YOU FOR MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Sponsored by Mayor Grinch, Northampton Department of Street Hygiene, and Friends of the Tourists.

Enjoy the holiday season! Email us at friendsofthetourists@hotmail.com or see <http://friendsofthetourists.tripod.com/>

how they want to donate their money.

"If people were feeling uncomfortable because of panhandlers, that's because they should. This is tragic. They should feel compelled to do something about it," Gilbert said.

"(Panhandlers) are human beings. We should see them as the victims of fate and circumstance and not just nuisance."

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