

The Frisbee King throws to the future

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Getting old requires adapting to changed circumstances. I dislike this as much as anyone, both the getting and the adapting.

In our late 60s, we have more time, but less money, energy and strength. Parts that were once just fine now hurt. Some need to be repaired or replaced. Some things can't be fixed.

Our horizon narrows with age.

Retirement redefines what we do and how we see ourselves. It's tough when it's forced on you.

I spent a few days last week in Key West, Fla., where three high-school classmates visited a fourth who has lived in the Conch Republic for 42 years.

Key West is a community that is upscaling itself by its own sunglasses.

Real-estate prices are high and rising. Buyers are paying cash. Swank hotels have been built. Tourists and cruise-ship passengers are welcomed on Duval Street for what they drop into the local economy. Everything is expensive, except the bait T-shirts that go four for \$10. (I hope they are stout enough to survive at least one wash in American waters.)

Key West is still small enough that most everyone knows most everyone. It's still a little slow, like most islands. It's still home to some folks who fit better there than in other places. Streaks of flamboyancy and libertarian do-what-you-want can still be found. But it's not the scruffy, sleep-on-the-beach, free-play zone that it was years ago.

Our classmate, known locally as The Frisbee King of Key West, witnessed this transition. He now sleeps in a homeless shelter and takes his evening meal at a soup kitchen.

I saw no homeless people in the commercial district except at 6 a.m., when a few pedaled by in the dark on their old bikes like ghosts looking for a day roost.

Homelessness does not fit the new Key West. The homeless have no redeeming commercial value. Their presence imposes a discount on retail trade. The old laid-back vibe has been rounded off and polished up to make

it kitschy and quaint. But homelessness can't be tricked out to be either one. You can't make a dollar on homelessness.

Were I the owner of a fancy store, I, too, would not want a half-dozen, out-of-hope castoffs loafing in front of my entrance.

I can understand why a luxury shopper would feel uncomfortable after spending \$4,900 for a Chanel quilted handbag only to pass a bag lady out front panhandling for a buck.

If you're homeless, Key West must feel like you're in a "police state," one of my out-of-town classmates said. You are pushed farther and farther to the margins and preferably behind something so that you can't be readily seen.

I was told this story by a local businessperson.

Last Thanksgiving morning, it appears that a vacationer, Charles Eimers -- a white, 61-year-old retired Michigan autoworker and father of four -- was mistakenly profiled as "...obviously another homeless bum living out of his car..." by one of the police officers who arrested him on his first day in Key West.

Eimers was stopped for a minor traffic concern and, then for unknown reasons, casually drove his PT Cruiser to South Beach at the end of Duval Street. There, he immediately complied without resistance with the instructions of at least three officers to lie on his belly with his hands behind his back.

In this position of handcuffed "prone restraint," Eimers suffocated to unconsciousness within six minutes and died a week later after hospital life-support was removed. It's reported that at least one police officer knelt on his back as he lay face down in the sand trying to breathe.

The preliminary autopsy report showed 10 fractured ribs and brain neurons red from lack of oxygen. The autopsy was performed a week after Eimers' death, not immediately. The local hospital destroyed all of his blood and tissue samples taken on admission. The Citizen Review Board and other agencies are investigating. The Eimers family has retained local counsel. (www.thebluepaper.com/tag/charles-eimers/ for stories and video. Full disclosure—I'm married to my county's Commonwealth Attorney.)

Police in my experience follow policies set by their chief and community political leaders. For more than 20 years, Key West's policy has been to push the homeless out of sight and sound of vacationers, tourists and customers—all of whom never see the policy they're not supposed to know about.

Some would say The Frisbee King is a bum, a dirt bag who's living off society's generosity, a guy who deserves nothing above what little he's earned. You make your choices, and you live with their consequences. The Frisbee King himself has such moments.

But I think you have to look in the book as well as at the cover before you judge.

Sociologist Erving Goffman popularized the idea of "life as theater" in his 1959 book, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. What is the self? Goffman asked.

It is, he argued, the sense of identity one takes from the everyday scene each of us plays at that moment. Self is performance. Goffman analyzes the context of human behavior rather than what might be causing it.

The Frisbee King has been a dedicated amateur athlete for more than four decades. He's trained for hours almost daily for more years than any professional or Olympic athlete I can name. He's spent his life giving away his art. His identity, his self, is performing Frisbee.

Homelessness is also part of his performance, but far the lesser of the two roles. If you define him as a failure because of his circumstances, because he's not "normal," I think we miss what an extraordinary show he's put on every day for free. His devotion to his sport was total, despite his inability to monetize it.

There's an innocent, singular purity about this kind of commitment.

Of course, you can also call it crazy...if you want to dismiss it out of hand.

The Frisbee King at 68 finds himself facing a transition. The life he's dedicated to the disc is physically hard to sustain. He, like his classmates, is slowly giving out.

An arm injury this winter forced him to abandon Frisbee. Friends in Key West ask why they haven't seen him practicing. He's ambivalent about retiring for good. He feels an obligation to put on his show, his art.

Like others our age, he looked retirement in the eye...and didn't like what wasn't there. So he allowed a classmate to provision him with new flying saucers. Athletes have a hard time quitting the sport that has given them self.

What do you do if you can't do what you've always done? Who are you if you're no longer able to be who you always were? How do you spend your day as someone different? What do you say when the play changes and you're standing in front of the audience with the wrong lines?

The Frisbee King has survived this long in homelessness, because Frisbee provided a purpose he believed in and a structure he could live with. It forced him to stay fit...consistent with cheap smokes.

Most of those who sleep in the shelter and eat at the soup kitchen faced this void in their 30s, 40s or 50s. Unending unemployment led many into homeless retirement. Some seem to be waiting for their last clock to run out, slightly comforted -- or at least numbed -- by whatever booze or dope they can scrounge.

The Frisbee King fears that age and retirement will turn him into a zombie who does nothing, has nothing to do and can't figure out his character in the new play. The same thing scares me, too.

On his brave days, he's willing to consider a new role, a new identity, a new purpose. He thinks he'll find it in collaborating with a writer on a book or screenplay about his life and times.

How, then, might this actually happen?

Writers like to eat at venues other than soup kitchens. This requires cash. This will surprise certain publishers and blog impresarios.

My idea is to find a writer, work up a project narrative, crowd-fund start-up money through www.kickstarter.com and then approach foundations with an interest in homelessness.

I'm guessing that \$3,000-\$5,000 could produce sufficient background research, interviews and either a credible book proposal or film treatment. Additional money would finish the book or screenplay.

And maybe that work would lead to an indie film. Maybe Sundance. Maybe HBO. You never know about maybes.

I admit this idea reeks of quixotic optimism.

It's arguable that it would be better to use \$3,000 for his rent and food.

But legacy, I think, is what The Frisbee King is about right now.

A book or a film would make his day, and...maybe his future.

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