

Chapter 1



Wolf, Kevin, Ski, Jeff and Debbie display the signs they "fly" at busy intersections around Syracuse. On this day, they gathered at a camp under a downtown bridge where they occasionally spend the night. Ski, a 47-year-old Army veteran, is the unofficial leader of one group of flyers.

THE FLYERS

You've seen them around Syracuse, standing at intersections and off-ramps, holding crude cardboard signs that say "Homeless and Hungry. Please Help!" or a similar message.

They call it "flying."

Most drivers ignore them, some help them out with a dollar or some food, others hurl insults at them. "Get a job!" is the most common, although some people spit, throw pennies or toss hot coffee at them from their cars.

Who are these people, and where do they come from? Why are they here?

What you really want to know, of course, is this: Are they truly homeless and needy, or are they just drunken bums working a good scam?

The truth is in that vast gray area in between.

Introduce yourself to Jersey, Jeff, Henry, Ski & Debbie, Kid, Roger, Wolf, Kevin, Haz, John, Six-Pack, Hillbilly, Low Down and a few others and you will glimpse a world you'd rather not live in.

It's a life of uncertainty, of not knowing how many times you'll eat each day or whether you'll sleep indoors or under a bridge each night, of not knowing whether others will try to help you or hurt you.

Many of them shun public assistance and shelters — too much hassle, too many rules. They survive by "flying," as in flying a flag — in this case, a cardboard sign. Flying is legal, as long as the signholder doesn't obstruct traffic or do anything aggressive, like grabbing passersby.

Loose-knit crews of flyers work busy intersections and off-ramps in downtown Syracuse, near Carousel Center and other



Sometimes the police chase flyers off street corners, sometimes they don't. This deputy waited for the light to turn green, and didn't give Jersey — AKA Jersey Joe — a second look.

well-traveled areas. They wait for "hits," sympathetic drivers who roll down their windows as they wait at a red light.

Each hit is usually a dollar or two, but occasionally a flyer scores a \$5 or a \$10 bill. Flying, as you might expect, does not bring a steady income. A half-hour shift can bring in \$30, or absolutely nothing.

A lot of drivers don't even make eye contact; a few lock their doors. Black drivers are the most generous, one flyer says. Another says rich people never give anything.

The weather can be a factor — the worse it is, the better the take, usually. The tag-team approach works well. Jersey or Ski will fly, and Debbie will sit a few yards away amid a pile of their belongings. A homeless woman in ragged clothes is harder to ignore.

Legitimate flyers don't just ask for money, says Ski, a homeless 47-year-old Army veteran. They will accept work, if

that's what their sign says, and if they're capable of it — masonry, landscaping, cleaning, whatever.

But you want to know what these flyers do with their money. You think: "Why should I give him a dollar if he's just going to get drunk with it?"

This is the gray area.

Some flyers drink, others don't. Some try to save enough money to rent a room before winter, or, like Roger, enough to go south. Roger doesn't drink, and gets occasional day work doing masonry. He's a simple man with little schooling, and is proud of his massive "working man's" hands. He stays at the Oxford Inn, a men's shelter, and says he can survive on \$10 a week.

Other flyers aren't so thrifty. After fast-food meals and coffee, a lot of their take goes to cigarettes and alcohol.

Yet there are rules in this subculture. You score a \$10 hit, you get off the corner and let someone else fly there. In Ski's

crew, you don't fly if you've been drinking. Afterward, it's a different story. The beer flows as the flyers sit around a campfire in a "hobo circle," when everyone chips in for food, cigarettes and 40-ounce bottles of beer.

They tell jokes, play TV trivia and bar games, make plans for tomorrow, for the winter.

Some nights, especially the cold ones, flyers have an extra \$5 expense — a friend who lives on Syracuse's west side lets them crash in his apartment for "a nickel a man." He'll take a 12-pack of beer instead, if that's all you've got.

Some flyers sleep in an abandoned trailer off Hiawatha Boulevard, others stay under downtown bridges. Ski & Debbie have set up camp under one bridge, a filthy crevice that used to be a crack den.

They got married last month, and this is where they're spending their honeymoon.

BY JIM MCKEEVER  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DENNIS NETT

Wednesday:  
Ski & Debbie

Little kicks remind mom where extra pounds go

Little, from page C1  
tion to my diet. I wanted to make sure I was getting enough protein and enough food in general.

I stopped worrying about calories and fat grams. I hoped I would gain weight.

I pulled out my own tape measure and for a while I was checking every other day to see if my stomach was getting bigger.

It was.  
Last week, at 27 weeks, I measured 27 centimeters.  
It showed up on the scale, too.

Luckily, at the place I go for prenatal visits, the office gives patients the small, but much appreciated, privilege of weighing themselves.

No nurse zips the counterweight down the scale, before you even have a chance to kick off your shoes. As the latest, higher-than-ever number comes into view, no one is standing by, clucking and making comments.

Especially when you're pregnant — doing the opposite version of the main character in the Stephen King thriller, "Thinner" — it's nice to be

able to experience the latest shock in private.

One of the things that's so disconcerting about pregnancy weight gain is how fast it happens. I didn't gain much at all during the first trimester.

At the beginning of July, I weighed about 131. Four weeks later, just a half pound more.

A few more pounds in August, a couple more in September and an extra seven just in the last four weeks.

I'm up to 148 pounds. I figure

that's a gain of 18 to 20 pounds so far.

That's fine, says the midwife. I know some people who have gained 40 to 50 pounds during a pregnancy and I'm certainly not anxious to join their ranks.

By this point in my pregnancy, however, I don't envy the figures of swimsuit models or stick-thin teenage girls.

I don't recognize the body of the person in the mirror, but I've gotten used to the fact that I'm pregnant and that people can guess that without any hints from me.

It helps that, now that I've hit the third semester, I feel the baby move throughout the day. Not only does it entertain me in dull meetings, but it's a constant reminder that there's a good reason for turning into a blimp.

.....  
Rebecca James, 32, a reporter in the Cortland County bureau of The Syracuse Newspapers, is expecting her first child Jan. 19. Her column chronicles her personal observations on the physical, emotional and logistical changes that come with a first-time pregnancy.