



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/JOHN BLANDING

TOM OF THE MGH STOP
A panhandler who sits inside the bridge to the Charles Street Station, he dispenses vital help, say the passersby who have become his friends. **Page 8**

Where you'd least expect it, someone who listens

By Grace Rubenstein
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Everyone who commutes to Massachusetts General Hospital on the Red Line knows him. He is the elderly man with a long white beard and knitted black beanie who stands in the corner of the pedestrian overpass on weekday mornings, leaning on his crutches and holding a change cup and a sign that reads, "Please — I am not hopeless."

But to many commuters, Tom K. is much more than a familiar face. He is a friend.

"I told him I was going to have a baby," says Julie Errico, who works in human resources. She introduced her husband to Tom on their way to get an ultrasound, and on his way back to the T, her husband stopped again to show off the ultrasound

'There's a little sense of anticipation when you get up to the corner, and I'll look past people's shoulders and see if he's there.'

BOB THRELKELD, MGH
worker, of his friend
Tom K.

pictures. Tom tells them he has figured out the sex of the baby, but he won't tell because they want to be surprised.

Many others seek him out for advice, a smile, or a simple exchange of ideas.

They've been doing

so for the past five years or so, ever since Tom took up his spot in the chilly corridor of the T station.

As long as he feels well enough, 70-year-old Tom comes to the T stop four mornings each week. On Tuesdays, he stays home to cook a meal for the 40 other residents of the Anna Bissonnette House, the South End apartment building operated by the Committee to End Elder Homelessness, where he has lived for 3½ years. Like the other residents, Tom pays 30 percent of his monthly income as rent. He panhandles, he explains, because the remainder of his Social Security check is not enough to live on, especially since a bout with cancer three years ago sent his medical expenses through the roof.

"You can exist on Social Security if you live on bread and bologna" and never leave the house, he says in frustration.

Tom, who withholds his last name to avoid embarrassing his seven grown children, does not accost passersby for donations. "I want people to feel comfortable when they walk towards me," he explains.

Valerie Charat, a research assistant in the eating disorders program, exchanged only simple greetings with Tom for the first few months of her MGH job.

"Once he stopped me and he said I looked sad, and he was right, I was sad," she recalls. They spoke for about 40 minutes, and by talking to her about his own experiences, she says he opened her eyes.

"He's such an optimistic person," she marvels.

Tom has not always been poor. A native of the South End, he describes much of his adulthood — from military service to marriage to a steady job — as financially comfortable. Money got tight in 1976, when a job injury forced him out of work and left him with the partial paralysis that still keeps him on crutches. Eleven years ago, domestic strife landed him on the street, he says.

Despite the grief, peril, and freezing winters that come with eight years of

homelessness, Tom says the experience refocused his life. He began reading scriptures from various religions and writing his own philosophy, and his appetite for learning accelerated. Now that he has bookshelves, they are filled with everything from Sanskrit verses to biology textbooks. Most importantly, he says, he saw how preoccupied he had been with material pursuits, and "it made me realize what I missed in life — people."

When Errico, or any other acquaintance of his, steps off the train and climbs the stairs onto the pedestrian overpass,

she cannot see whether Tom is standing in his corner that morning. The walkway curves in the middle, and only as she rounds the bend can she look down the long corridor to Tom's post.

"There's a little sense of anticipation when you get up to the corner, and I'll look past people's shoulders and see if he's there," Bob Threlkeld, a hospital information specialist, says.

Tom has a simple explanation for his flourishing T stop friendships: "It's because I listen to them."



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/JOHN BLANDING

Valerie Charat, an MGH worker, stopping to chat with her friend Tom K., 70, as he panhandles at the Charles/MGH T station.