

# 15 MINUTES

## Sitting in the sun

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Otis Redding's tune "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay," could just as easily have been written about John Wesley Myers. Last Monday morning he was sitting in the morning sun watching the day go by, much like the character in the song.

But instead of "watching the ships roll in" he was watching the traffic roll by; and unlike Redding's famous character he didn't leave his home in Georgia and go to San Francisco - but he did hitchhike from his hometown, Decatur, Ill., to Fort Myers in 1994.

Myers' back was injured working a construction site last December. Now he sits in the sun on Palm Beach Boulevard for about three hours, five days per week. He's there every day in the parking lot of Able Body Labor, a day labor service, holding their sign.

Myers is required to perform this minimal PR task for Able Body, in order to get his \$100 dollars per week from Workers' Comp. (His rent is \$85 per week, but he collects food stamps.)

"Look like nothing's gonna change," Redding sang. "Everything still remains the same. I can't do what ten people tell me to do, so I guess I'll remain the same, yes."

Myers, 38, feels much the same way. His life, to hear him tell it, has been a hard ride from a violent alcoholic father, to war, to hitchhiking adventure, to Fort Myers, where he now feels a sense of resignation. And since his injury, Myers has done little more

than play video games, and walk the three blocks from his home in East Fort Myers to Able Body, and back.

"It's about all I can do," Myers said. "I'd rather be at home playing World of Warcraft (an online roll-playing game)."

He hasn't been able to hold a job more than a few months since returning to Decatur after a military tour of duty in the Gulf War in 1991.

"It was a really stressful environment (in the Gulf)," he said, "hot."

Myers had left home about six years earlier to escape his father.

"He'd come home from work and start drinking and whatever he was mad about he took it out on me," he said. "I was his punching bag. Mom was his punching bag, too."

"I guess I was raised right, because I never struck him back. I still love my dad but, you know, he's not right."

In 1994 he left again, deciding to hitchhike to Jacksonville, where his sister lived.

"I could have gone to Salvation Army and got a free bus pass but I was in it for the sense of adventure," Myers said. "All kinds of people give you a ride - mostly truck drivers, or people with a different lifestyle than yours. You have to watch out for crazies, but me being in the military, I wasn't scared, I could take care of myself."

A friend drove him to the city limits. Then, Myers said, "I started thumbin' it, and walkin' as I went."

He wore mostly his military fatigues on that trip. Sometimes he slept under highway overpasses; police in a small Georgia town put him



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

John Wesley Myers sitting in the morning sun watching the day go by.

up at a cheap hotel one night. His longest ride was with a trucker, from southern Illinois, he said, all the way to Memphis, Tenn.

"On the way we talked about who we are, where we're from, what I do for a living - it's small talk, you know?" Myers said. "When people give you a ride from state to state you have to talk about something, or turn on the radio and listen to music."

It was 9 p.m. when he was finally dropped off in Jacksonville; Myers doesn't know how many days later. He hadn't spoken with his sister in three years.

"I didn't wanna call her up at night and say 'Hey, sis, how ya doin'?" he said. "I asked somebody where the nearest shelter was and stayed there for the night."

Six months later he came to Fort Myers, where a few more adventures ensued. In 1991 he joined the National Guard, but left soon after on a medical discharge.

"I went out and got drunk, fell down and tore my rotator cuff," he said.

As a result, he lost his job in construction, home and car. "I don't drink any more because of that."

He stayed at the Salvation Army for five months, and kept a job for the longest time since before 1991 - seven months with the Hurricane Shutter Company.

A few years ago, he was arrested while protesting hiring illegal immigrants, by standing with a cardboard sign near Palm Beach and Interstate 75.

"I was just upset," Myers said. "I just want somebody to see what's going on in the world. How would you feel if someone took your job?"

Last Monday at 11 a.m., he had only a few more hours to sit in the sun. It was hot and windy for the small group of workers standing outside the door of Able Body. For a while, Myers didn't say anything. A cloud passed in front of the sun.

Otis Redding must have been whistling in his grave. ■

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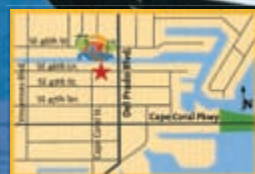
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