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derful Again!

# Aussie takes up homeless cause



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**T**he sun was just setting over Uptown one night last week when a tall, lanky Australian with more enthusiasm than just one continent could handle threw himself into the business of helping homeless Chicagoans.

Tony Clark, 39, is co-designer of what he calls the backpack bed, a lightweight backpack that rolls out into a fancy sleeping bag.

For nearly two hours Wednesday night, Clark handed out free backpack beds to homeless men who had shown up at the corner of Hazel and Wilson for their weekly visit from the Night Ministry bus.

Combining the patter of an infomercial pitchman with the fervor of a missionary, Clark gave each recipient a demonstration of how to turn the backpack into a bed while touting its various features.

Staff from the Night Ministry helped Clark identify those individuals who typically sleep outdoors — either in the park or on the street, including some of the regulars from the Wilson Avenue viaduct.

I'm not sure the homeless guys knew quite what to make of their new Aussie friend at first, but they were very thankful for the gift and seemed eager to try it out.

"You're actually going to be the first in the U.S. to get one," Clark told a somewhat startled Steve Arthurs, who was at the head of the line but otherwise clearly unaccustomed to trend-setting.

"Wow," said Arthurs (note lack of exclamation mark), who has lived on the street off-and-on for 15 years and sleeps under the viaduct when it rains but otherwise stays at a location he'd rather not broadcast.

"Let me show you how it works . . . fire retardant . . . resistant to mildew . . . built-in insulated mattress . . . mosquito netting," Clark told Arthurs, talking faster than I write.

"That's almost like military grade, right?" Arthurs observed.

Assured that it was, Arthurs then voiced the same concern I had.

"Show me one time how to put that back in there?" he said, referring to turning the bed back into a backpack.

That turned out to be much easier than

either of us expected. It's truly quite handy.

Clark said he and his wife developed the backpack bed for use by homeless people in Australia after he got the idea while sitting in church one day.

"I thought if I was homeless what would I want," said Clark, formerly an IT guy.

They did a good enough job of designing it — despite having no previous experience with homeless individuals — that the backpack bed was a finalist for the 2013 Edison Awards, held this past week at Navy Pier to honor innovative products and services.

The awards ceremony brought Clark to the U.S., and as long as he was going to be here, he thought he should hand out some of his backpack beds to Chicago's homeless.

As you might gather, Clark has a gift for promotion — self and otherwise — and being a smart promoter, he invited me along.

How could I refuse a chance to reconnect with some of my homeless friends, especially in an activity that could antagonize a certain alderman who doesn't approve of this sort of thing? Obviously, I couldn't.

It was also not lost on Clark that we were handing out his invention just yards from where another homeless man, Jack King, recently died on the street. You may recall I wrote a couple of columns about that.

Clark mentioned King as he was giving backpack beds to Robert Zachowski and Gregory Guest, not realizing Guest was King's best buddy on the street.

When Guest told him, Clark choked up a little.

Guest and Zachowski, who was there in his trademark Sox cap, have returned to living under the viaduct since the city tried to run them off in March.

Clark, who resides in suburban Melbourne, would not strike you as street smart, but his friendly manner helped put the homeless guys at ease.

"Thank you, Lord, for these nice people," Zachowski said.

Clark's non-profit charity is called Swags for Homeless. "Swagman" is an old Australian term for a transient drifter, and a "swag" was his bedroll. For obvious reasons, Clark is trying to stick with the name "backpack beds" in the U.S.

The backpack bed ended up taking second place at the Edison awards in the social impact category, losing out to a new baby incubator. We kidded Clark the night before he didn't stand a chance against the incubator.

Catholic Charities is going to help him hand out more of his backpack beds on Monday.

"We've got to keep people alive while they're waiting for shelter," Clark said.

Jack King might have appreciated the thought.