

Con Artists Coming Your Way

By Craig McGuire

Summer in Brooklyn is the season for street fairs, days at the beach, and sticky weather. Unfortunately, it is also the season to beware of scam artists, especially if you are a senior.

According to Detective Charlie Meier of the 63rd Precinct, con artists are stepping up their activity in the Flatlands area, often targeting older residents.

"The con men and scam artists are out there," said Meier, "and they are predominantly preying on the elderly."

One elderly Flatlands resident is all too familiar with the dangers of dealing with a con artist.

"Recently, an 80-year-old woman was walking down Marine Parkway and Quentin Road when she came across two men who had found a large pocketbook with what seemed like a large sum of money," Meier related. "One of the men told her that his conscience would not allow him keep the money, approximately \$20,000 he told her. But, if she gave him \$5,000, he would let her keep the entire sum."

"She gave him the money, and I don't think I have to tell you what happened," said Meier. "She was not physically harmed, but extremely shaken, and out the \$5,000."

The "found money" scam described by Meier is a favorite of con artists, and is pulled off regularly in Brooklyn.

According to Meier, there is no standard description of a con artist.

"While the two suspects in this case happened to be

two black males in their 30s," informed Meier, "these criminals come in all shapes, sizes, ages, and sexes."

"Perhaps the best thing to remember is that nobody is going to give you money in this area," he advised, "unless you earn it."

There are other scams that residents should watch out for.

A common con involves the scammers pretending to be repairmen or meter readers in order to gain access to a victim's home. Residents are advised to ask for photo identification and check for a company vehicle, especially when the visitor is not expected.

Suspicious persons -- who are often friendly and well-dressed upon meeting their victim -- should be reported immediately.

During the warmer weather, people spend more time outdoors, frequently without coat pockets to hide their money, and often drive with their car windows rolled down. Careless behavior provides con artists with opportunity.

Many have heard of some variation on the mustard-splashing scam where a thief "accidentally" spills mustard on a victim's shirt to divert his attention while an accomplice picks the target's wallet.

Here are a number of new variations on this scam, and some ways to avoid being ripped off.

* Someone may ask you for a handout, while an accomplice picks your wallet or checkbook from your purse. If you decide to give a handout, walk a few paces ahead, so as not to flash the contents of your

purse or wallet.

* You may be asked to help an elderly or handicapped person cross the street, and while you do, an accomplice will grab your bag. When helping anyone cross the street, keep your bag between you and the person you are assisting.

* Someone may pretend to hold a door for you, and then bar your path as a partner grabs your bag. Keep your bag in front of you during tight situations.

Protect Yourself Before Property

"Your best preventive measure is to be aware of what is going on around you," said Meier. "And if you are faced by a potentially violent or threatening situation, cooperate. Nothing is as important or valuable as your life."

Scams at automated teller machines are also a danger residents should be aware of.

Helpful tips in protecting yourself in these situations are to withdraw less than \$50 cash at a time, and count your money before you turn away.

Avoid frequenting ATMs at night, and be aware of who is behind you. If the situation is suspicious, get off the line.

"Talk to your seniors, whether they are relatives or neighbors," Meier added. "Inform them of the characters that are out there."

Meier urged anyone who is a victim of a fraud to report it immediately.

"In order to address a problem and allocate the proper resources," explained Meier, "we have to be aware that it exists. That is why it is so important to report it."

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Contents

Action	
Bklyn Style.....	19
S.....	1-44C
.....	20,22,23
cter.....	12
aws.....	19
Lifestyles	
sure.....	2-4
isure.....	17
ople.....	10
Dark.....	5,6
f Events.....	11
Happenings.....	21
.....	7
iew.....	18
.....	7
le.....	9
s.....	7
uide.....	22-24