Jimmy was sitting on the sidewalk at the corner of Chestnut and 15th Street. He had sun-baked skin, matted hair, and wore a tattered shirt and jeans. He is holding a cardboard sign with a plastic Taco Bell cup nearby, making eye contact with each person walking in his direction. He proceeds to ask for spare change, although only a few acknowledge the man. He has grown accustomed to being ignored, although remains cordial with each passerby. Jimmy is not homeless, but prefers this alternative lifestyle because it is what he knows. He has held off-and-on jobs that paid under the table over the years, but he prefers panhandling because it is “simple”.

A man of few resources, his sole possession was a weathered cell phone that he kept tightly guarded at all times. He was very proud of his phone and was not keen to my curiosity. He was hesitant, but agreed to let me visually examine the phone. It was a well-worn LG flip phone with a cracked screen, barely recognizable touchpad and a taped battery cover. The phone was functional, partially charged and appeared to have cell phone reception. It was a basic phone without any of the bells and whistles available on standard phones today, but it served a purpose for Jimmy. His ownership of a phone was a right of passage, a social status per se.

Without being prompted, Jimmy was quick to proclaim that the phone was not stolen. He proudly purchased the prepaid phone with his earnings several years ago at a convenience store within the city. He did not have a monthly service plan, nor did the phone have text or web capabilities. Instead, he purchased minutes via a phone card. Although Jimmy could not recall how much he paid for the phone, he knew he had exactly 11 minutes available to use. These minutes are valuable to him and he had no plans to use them in the near future. He acknowledged that the most frustrating part of owning the phone were there repeated attempts of theft and requests by his friends to use the phone. He admitted that he rarely concedes to their request, which has resulted in several altercations.