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A Whole Latte Coffee Karma

Good Joes Rush to the Rescue In a Little Test on a Grande Scale

By Peter Carlson
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Kenny Fried is cruising down K Street in his black Camry while drivers honk their horns at him and pedestrians wave their arms frantically, yelling, "You got a coffee cup on your car!"

Fried ignores them. He's more interested in the guy with the cigar in his mouth and the Bluetooth doodad in his ear, who's just staring blankly at him, saying nothing.

"Look at that guy!" Fried says, amazed. "He totally ignored us!"

His partner, Carter Bentzel, rolls down her window to talk to a lady who's pointing at the coffee cup that's stuck to the roof of the car with a magnet, saying, "You left your coffee on your roof!"

"Actually, it's not real," Bentzel explains. "But thanks for being a good Samaritan."

She hands the Samaritan a \$5 coupon for coffee at Starbucks. And the Camry with the coffee cup stuck on top moves on to more excitement down the road.

There are two ways to look at this whole wacky coffee-cup-on-the-car-roof thing. You could think of it simply as a clever promotion for Starbucks, the coffee company that seems bent on conquering the known world one street corner at a time. Or you could see it as a study of human nature, a test of whether the modern urban human will pause to help a stranger who left a coffee cup on his roof.

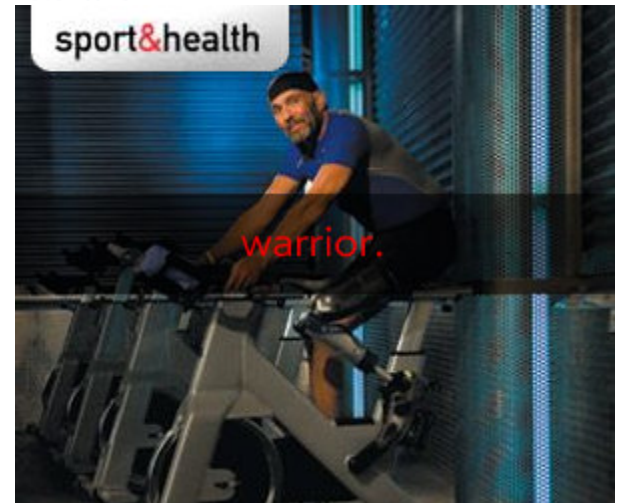
In other words, it's an inquiry into the cosmic question: Is the coffee cup of human kindness half full or half empty?

Bentzel, 35, a perky blond marketing manager for Starbucks, is a cup-half-full kind of gal. "It's so much fun to see people's responses," she says, "their concern for other people."

Fried, 48, a balding local PR man working on the Starbucks account, is more of a cup-half-empty kind of guy. He's amazed at the people who *don't* respond. "This guy's definitely got the look," he says, watching a sour-faced man. "He's thinking, 'I just don't have the time.'"

This coffee cup ruse is part of Starbucks's "surprise and delight" program, Bentzel says. It was first tried last year in New York, then it moved to Los Angeles and now it has arrived in Washington.

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Yesterday morning was a perfect time to study how Washingtonians would respond. It was rainy and nasty, and people trudged through the downtown streets huddling under umbrellas, heads down, shoulders hunched, looking miserable. How would they respond to a car with a coffee cup on the roof?

"Your coffee's on the roof!" hollered Alan Lichter, a chiropractor.

"Oh, my God, you left your coffee on your car!" Anne McCormick yelled, running toward the Camry, waving.

Veronica Pecnik paused on her way to a job interview and tried to rescue the cup from the roof while the Camry was stopped at a light.

They all got Starbucks coupons. So did a bicycle messenger who zoomed through a red light to inform Bentzel about the cup. And the driver of a Filene's Basement truck, who climbed out of the cab to get his coupon. And Pam Artiss, a stay-at-home mom from Landover, who had a simple explanation for why she stopped to help: "My husband does this kind of thing all the time."

Of course, not everybody was a good Samaritan. Some people just stared silently and went on their way.

"Look at the look on *this* guy!" says Fried. "He's thinking, 'Should I say something?'"

By now, Fried had circled downtown Washington a half-dozen times. He'd passed the Starbucks at 15th and K, and the Starbucks at 16th and K, and the Starbucks at 19th and K, and the Starbucks at 15th and I, and the Starbucks at 18 and I, and the Starbucks at 17th and L, and the Starbucks at . . . Hmmmm, at this point, a question pops to mind: Could it be true? Is Starbucks really trying to take over the world?

"No," says Bentzel, "we are are not trying to take over the world. I promise you that."

Oops! Looks like we buried the scoop:

"We are not trying to take over the world," a Starbucks spokeswoman said yesterday, as she drove around the nation's capital with a fake coffee cup stuck on the roof of the car.

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