

DUET, from page 10

was always gonna be Skid Row. There were several thousand people asleep on the street there in the evenings and a lot were there because of the service agencies: mental health programs, rehab and some of the shelters where people could get food or a bed for the night. It was just so much a part of the fabric of the city, and so much accepted, that I didn't give it a lot of thought.

But here was Nathaniel, living here in this place where, at night, there were thousands of folks on the street, and you would see drug dealers counting cash, prostitutes working out of port-a-pottys, people walking down the street with open wounds; sirens 24 hours a day. Y'know, I cared about Nathaniel and his welfare, so I found it unconscionable that we could have created this place, and became all the more determined to not just help him, but to shine a light on all of those issues.

But I'm as guilty as anybody else who knew it was there and looked at it and walked past it and didn't think to do anything. It took getting to know somebody who lived there and caring about him.

R.R.: *I've read that there are an estimated 60,000 homeless people in L.A., which is just an astronomical number. What were your interactions with homeless people before Nathaniel?*

S.L.: Well, it's unavoidable. When you walk out of the L.A. Times building downtown, you almost invariably come across somebody who clearly is living on the street. Occasionally you give somebody a dollar; other times you're sort of morally conflicted because you think, "OK, it looks like they've got an addiction problem. Am I just feeding the habit?" But you don't know what it is, so you kind of just avoid it. And I think that's what so many people do: you steer clear of it, you cross the street, you avoid it.

And, I think it was fair to say, I didn't give [homelessness] a lot of thought. I knew [L.A.] was a place with a huge homeless population, but part of that I just chalked up to the great climate. But there are many other factors: It's an obscene real estate market, it's a two-dimensional economy, it's haves and have-nots, rich and poor. And it's very easy in a place like Los Angeles to not be able to pay the rent, to maybe descend into despair, to maybe take a drink, to maybe develop an addiction, to maybe have a mental condition triggered: And you're on the streets. You just fall out. That's what happens in L.A.

But we've got a problem. We certainly do. It's at least 60,000 [homeless people in L.A.]; maybe closer to 70, 75 (thousand).

R.R.: *One of the things that is really striking about Nathaniel and your portrait of him is he's dealing with paranoid schizophrenia. How was it to interact with him?*

S.L.: I mean, [paranoid schizophrenia is] certainly a barrier, but we kind of connected. We're roughly the same age; we had some of the same cultural references. He was a big sports fan, which I am. And he just can be a very charming, witty, interesting guy. Who happens to have been on a stage with Yo-Yo Ma at one point.

And despite the challenges of dealing with somebody who is schizophrenic, there was often a great deal of humanity in whatever he was saying. Sometimes he'd get very aggressive and it would be a little bit ugly, but then he would say something that would sort of redeem him. It was always an adventure.

R.R.: *On "60 Minutes" you said about your relationship with Nathaniel: "It's the most meaningful friendship that I've had in my life."*

S.L.: I think the first time I realized how meaningful it was was when I spent a night on Skid Row and I felt I was really looking into his soul. The things that he said and did that night: He recited the "Hamlet" soliloquy in a Shakespearean accent; he said a prayer; he talked very poetically about

I think people realized that this could have been anybody: Schizophrenia hits one in 100 people. And here's Nathaniel, who comes out of the Cleveland public school system and makes it to Juilliard, against tremendous odds. I think that it was, for some people, a story of second chances. And I think everybody can sympathize with that.

creativity; he talked about Mozart and Beethoven creating something that lasted for centuries; he looked at people and spoke of them with such compassion and humility. That was when I realized that few people that I encountered had such a profound effect on me.

It was around then that I began to realize that he had something that few of us ever find: a passion for something that he really believed in. He'd been faithful to it through the worst part of a horrible disease. And I found great inspiration in that. Each day — it didn't matter if he was not on a stage somewhere, it didn't matter that he got hit with this unlucky break at the age of 20 or 21 — he had no regrets, no self pity.

I was thinking about getting out of the newspaper industry and envying what he had and wishing that I had that kind of a passion. Nathaniel helped me realize that the story that I had — that I was telling about him — was my passion. And I was as safe and sane when I was doing that as he was with the music. It made me realize that I tell stories: I make discoveries and share them with people. I realized I can probably have a bigger mark in the mental health field to hold onto this job and to write about what I've learned, and share it and to help humanize people.

R.R.: *Thanks to some sort of synchronicity, California was about to put Proposition 63 into action. Could you describe its importance?*

S.L.: That was a tax on the 1 percent of the highest income earners in California, and all of the money was to be dedicated to new services in the mental health area. It was long overdue because so many mental health agencies across the state were struggling and we had never built the community clinics that we promised when

the [psychiatric] hospitals shut down.

It was hard for me to imagine how we could allow that to happen in this society, say, "Well, it's OK for them to live in the street." I thought, "Can you do it if they all had pancreatic cancer?" Why is it that on Saturday mornings there's a 10K race for the cure of everything but paranoid schizophrenia? I just knew that I wanted to keep writing about it and put some pressure on City Hall. So here was Prop. 63.

So it's another way in which having met Nathaniel seemed a blessing, a gift. It all was just very nicely timed. I'm not a religious person. Maybe it's just the way things were, but I'm grateful it happened when it did.

R.R.: *You talked about readers sending you instruments for him. What do you think — if you'll excuse the pun — struck a chord with*

people?

S.L.: I think people realized that this could have been anybody: Schizophrenia hits one in 100 people. And here's Nathaniel, who comes out of the Cleveland public school system and makes it to Juilliard, against tremendous odds. I think that it was, for some people, a story of second chances. And I think everybody can sympathize with that. So they were rooting for him and rooting for me to help him. And they saw also that one person can make a difference.

R.R.: *So you've gone from columns to book to movie. How does that all sit with Nathaniel?*

S.L.: It's been a concern of mine from the beginning, whether he could handle all of this. And there have been many times where I've thought of turning back because he — [Interrupted by taxi driver, to whom he says, "No you keep it."]

[To me.] I just took a cab to the airport. The cabby's been listening to the story. He's a bit choked up, apparently. I tried to give him a tip and he's stuffing the money back into my hand. Sorry.

But that first column. It was like, "Can I really help him?" The only way I can help him is to tell this story intimately. But if I do that, what is the cost to him? And so, I — Hang on. [Becomes distracted.] I'm sorry.

I would talk to his sister, the director at Lamp and say, "Can he handle it?" The thing that kept us all moving forward was that Nathaniel seemed to — at least in part — like the attention, although he had trouble processing it at times. More importantly, we thought this story is not just about humanizing him, but lots of people like him. And how can we not advance this cause? So he is, for the most part, handling it really

well.

[Then Lopez announces that to go through airport security, he must shut off his cell phone. He promises to call back in five minutes. But when I phone him 15 minutes later, he says he's been bumped to an earlier flight. Can he call me back? Sure, I say. About 80 minutes later, the phone rings.]

R.R.: *So we were talking about Nathaniel handling all the attention. Has he seen the movie?*

S.L.: Yeah. He was at a screening and then he was at the premiere, but he doesn't look at the screen. He's got a fear of two-dimensional images: it's a symptom of the illness. It looks to him like there's ghosts up there.

R.R.: *So he hears it like he hears music.*

S.L.: Yeah. He's gonna buy the soundtrack rather than the DVD.

R.R.: *Did he give you any opinion about what he heard?*

S.L.: The first time we saw it was pretty extraordinary. He said he didn't want to see it. But a bunch of people from Lamp Community are in the movie: The director insisted on having real people instead of actors playing people with a mental illness. And they were very excited about going to see it, so he at the last minute decided to go.

He loved the music. At times he grumbled about certain depictions, and I reminded him that it was a fictional representation of a real story. So it was kind of a test for him. Part of what you need to advance your recovery is to be able to develop some insight into your own condition. I think that watching the movie at the screening and then later at the premiere helped him develop some insight into his situation.

R.R.: *So several years have gone by. Where do you and Nathaniel go from here?*

S.L.: I'll tell you where we go: right back to where we were. We hang out. We're there for each other. I have taken a couple trips to the San Francisco Bay area because of family health issues, medical emergencies. And when I'm dealing with all that Nathaniel is a great friend.

He told me he wanted me to write his sequel. [Laughs.] I said, "Well, we'll talk about it." I don't know if that's going to happen anytime soon. So it's just more of the same. All of which will be easier now that the movie is behind us.

And it's me hoping that he continues just to make more progress with his continued recovery. There's no cure. This is not going to just go away one day. But he shows — despite occasional back-pedaling — a steady arc.

It's just been amazing to see a guy who four years ago was living on the streets playing a two-string violin who now has a dozen instruments and will get into a car, which he never wanted to do when I first met him. Or go to a concert. So all of these signs of progress are very encouraging. I just hope to be there for him to help him continue to improve.

Kristina Smock Consulting

Research & Evaluation • Policy Analysis • Facilitating diverse stakeholders

www.kristinasmockconsulting.com

STREAMING ONLINE!
www.KBOO.FM
AND ON THE AIR:
PDX: 90.7 FM | CORVALLIS: 100.7 FM | HOOD RIVER: 91.9 FM

DOWNLOAD OUR LOCAL NEWS PODCASTS OF THE SIT-LIE ORDINANCE

OR TUNE IN FOR **HOLE IN THE BUCKET** - OUR SHOW ON POVERTY ISSUES EVERY 2ND WEDNESDAY

COMING IN AUGUST...
7-8AM WEEKDAYS
11AM-NOON DURING JULY
DEMOCRACY NOW!