

From ‘Taxi Tales’ to Seaside’s wonders

I’ve never worked as a taxi driver, but I’ve taken plenty of taxis. It’s sort of like a blind date every time. You don’t know who’s in the front seat at the wheel. But before you panic, remember the guy in front doesn’t know who you are either.

Lou Solitske understands this dynamic. The former taxi driver in Sacramento, California, took the art of taxi driving to a new high: transforming it into a masterful collection of personal essays that present the world of taxi driving as not only one of getting from here to there, but of making momentary but meaningful human connections.

It doesn’t hurt that he has a heart of gold: “One of the things I do is get stranded people home, regardless of their ability to pay,” he writes in his memoir “Taxi Tales.” “All they have to do is let me know what’s going on from the very beginning of the ride and not treat me like a chump.”

Don’t worry — not too many people took Solitske as a chump.

“I have been a night driver for Sacramento Yellow Cab since 1987,” he writes. “Right off the bat I found myself in bizarre, humor, sad, thought-provoking and scary situations.”

Solitske describes himself as standing 6-feet-2-inches and weighing 275 pounds. “I wear black boots, black pants, a black shirt, a black leather vest, black fingerless gloves and a black fedora. All in all, not a pretty sight. My attire and demeanor are designed to project the image that I would be more trouble than I’m worth.”

Frequenters of the Seaside Coffee shop know him. He’s been spotted walking along Broadway and U.S. Highway 101 with a camera and long lens. And the signature black outfit.

Taxi driver

Originally from Chicago, his family moved to the San Fernando Valley in 1950.

Solitske considers himself lucky in life “from the get-go.”

“When I was born they told my parents not to get attached to me because I wasn’t going to last too long.”

Solitske was born with six holes in his ventricular septum, the wall separating the lower chamber of the heart.

“I had open heart surgery in 1963, when I was 15, with a 75 percent mortality rate,” he said. “I knew what the odds were, but I made it. Ever since then I’ve felt compelled to give back.

SEEN FROM SEASIDE

R.J. MARX



He “escaped” in 1965 and never came back.

With a degree in economics from San Jose State, he went from economics to selling pharmaceuticals and later as a manager’s representative at the San Francisco Merchandise Mart selling computers to doctors.

He hated it — despite being the company’s No. 1 salesman.

“They had me training new people,” Solitske recalled. “This one trainee said ‘I oozed sincerity and dripped credibility.’ I was selling my soul.”

He transitioned from sales, driving cabs at night on a part-time basis. During those rides, he regaled passengers with words of wisdom, arias from famous operas and recitations of the works of Longfellow, Yeats and Poe — and Solitske.

Despite his affinity for arts and letters, Solitske stepped into the good-guys-wear-black wardrobe as a precaution in dicey neighborhoods where customers were as likely to pull a knife as they were a \$5 bill.

“Looking like Guido the Hit Man helped me keep alive a little bit,” he recalled. “It was, ‘Hey, man, don’t tread on me.’ I had six robbery attempts. I was stabbed seven times.”

Driving a taxi was an opportunity for Solitske to make money, have fun and help people,” he said.

At the instigation of friends and passengers, he started writing his memories down — soon finding enough materials to fill a book. The project took 15 years, with the book’s release in 2001. It continues to sell.

Solitske’s memoirs are a little bit Robert De Niro, a little bit Judd Hirsch, with a lot of heart thrown in. How many other taxi drivers would carry a wounded owl to a veterinary hospital? Kick bigots out of the backseat? Offer a free ride on Christmas? And recite poetry too?

On to Seaside

After his memoir was published, Solitske continued driving, selling copies of “Taxi Tales” to his customers.

“I had a captive audience,” he smiled.

But his taxi driving days were coming to an end as he and Jacqui moved to Half Moon Bay, California,



Lou Solitske relaxes at the Seaside Coffee House.



Local artist Blue Bond posted a portrait of Lou Solitske at the Blue Bond Gallery in Seaside.

on the coast about two hours from Sacramento.

“We loved Half Moon Bay, but she hated our home,” he said.

She also hated the heat.

They considered Portland and Astoria before a Realtor sent them a listing from Seaside.

“We bought it sight unseen. The Realtor was a nervous wreck — but it was perfect.”

They relocated in May 2015.

Tragically, Jacqui died of ALS shortly after their move.

“I took care of her,” he said. “To watch this capable, confident woman

melt away was probably the hardest thing I’d ever done.”

Lens on life

Today he can be seen walking the streets of Seaside with a long lens. “I’m an omnivore, I’ll gobble up anything that gets in front of my camera.”

Solitske describes Seaside as “a varied and target-rich environment for a photographer.”

Plus each camera weighs about 22 pounds. “I hump between six and eight miles on a typical day — my lazy day I do 10 to 15 miles. If I don’t get my shots, I still get my exercise.”

At 71, Solitske said, “If I don’t use it, I’ll lose it and go right downhill.”

But nothing he has ever done to allow him to help more people in desperate situations than driving his cab.

“It’s in the middle of the night, I’ll have a parent call with a sick child, or a woman is battered and I’ve got to get her out of the situation before he kills her or she kills him,” Solitske said. “In situations like that money is not important.”

Solitske said he considered himself the luckiest driver in Sacramento. “I just got these trips out of nowhere — and I do believe it was a result of my deposits in the karma bank.”

“Taxi Tales” is available at Seaside Coffee House, 5 N. Holladay and available on Amazon and Kindle.

Never turn your back to the ocean

When we first moved to the Oregon Coast, I was bewildered by what seemed to me a vacation-land attitude of “Enjoy at your own risk.” Seaside has a vast beach, but not many lifeguard stands. Warnings are minimal regarding ability levels on the hiking trails. Tide table charts are sold in gas stations and gift shops, but if you just pulled in from Oklahoma, the words “tide table,” never mind “rogue wave” or “sneaker wave” don’t hold much meaning for you. A friend who volunteered for years with the Haystack Rock Awareness Program told me she couldn’t get over how many people with young children playing in the highly changeable tide pools were clueless of their risk for being swept out.

I grew up on the New Jersey shore where there was no end of warnings and supervision. During the high season, when tourists flooded the town, water temps and wind conditions were posted daily. Lifeguard stands dotted the beach every couple of hundred yards. Signage everywhere prohibited the use of fireworks, legal or illegal; along steep slopes and potentially treacherous foot traffic areas, there was guard railing. At certain times of the year when the dune cliffs were at risk of collapsing, a surfeit of caution tape was all around. The attitude towards any kind of outdoor recreation, whether it be swimming, boating, hiking, cycling, fishing, clamming, even bird watching, you might say, was overly protectionist.

Oregon is a much wilder and freer place than my native south Jersey. I’m

VIEW FROM THE PORCH

EVE MARX



pretty sure if you polled most Oregonians, they’d say the last thing they want is more protecting. Yet people are killed or injured on this coast every year, some of them deaths and injuries that, with more warnings, might have been avoided.

Last January, KOIN news reported a 46-year-old man visiting Lincoln City killed by a sneaker wave. Large sneaker waves have killed more than two dozen people along the Oregon coast since 1990. This year, so far, there have been a few hair-raising incidents. In January, the Coast Guard rescued a man stranded at high tide at Hug Point. Also in January, a kayaker from Tualatin, last seen near the estuary, tipped over and drowned. On July 3, a hiker reported killed on Hug Point was dramatically rescued. In February, in two separate incidents, clam diggers who unwittingly turned their backs to the sea were swept out.

Signage at the Cove warns people to beware rip currents, sneaker waves, incoming tides, and to stay off the logs. Prohibited activities in the Cove include no fire building near the driftwood. You’re not allowed to feed the wildlife or disturb marine animals. I think that might be better spelled out to let people know that includes sand dollars. A sign



Beach warning signs in Seaside.

says fireworks are prohibited but anyone living near the beach during the summer months, this rule is violated nightly. Once in awhile a “shark sighting” sign appears. In Gearhart, there are signs warning of elk.

Maybe as far as safety warnings go, this is enough.

Yet I can’t shake the feeling more care could be taken to protect visitors who think a day at the beach is pretty harmless. Meanwhile, stay safe, don’t undertake water or waterside adventures without a tide table, and whatever you do, never, ever, turn your back to the mighty ocean.

MEETINGS

MONDAY, July 23

Seaside City Council, 7 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

TUESDAY, July 24

Seaside Airport Advisory Committee, 6 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

WEDNESDAY, Aug. 1

Seaside Improvement Commission, 6 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

THURSDAY, Aug. 2

Seaside Parks Advisory Committee, 7 p.m., City Hall, 163 E. Gower St.

TUESDAY, Aug. 7

Seaside Community Center Commission, 10 a.m., Bob Chisholm Community Center, 1225 Avenue A.

Seaside Library Board, 4:30 p.m., Seaside Library, 1131 Broadway.

Seaside Planning Commission, 7 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

THURSDAY, Aug. 9

Gearhart Planning Commission, 6 p.m., 698 Pacific Way, Gearhart.

MONDAY, Aug. 13

Seaside City Council, 7 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

TUESDAY, Aug. 14

Seaside School District Board of Directors, 6 p.m., 1801 S. Franklin.

WEDNESDAY, Aug. 15

Seaside Tourism Advisory Committee, 3 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

THURSDAY, Aug. 16

Seaside Tree Board, 4 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

Seaside Transportation Advisory Commission, 6 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

TUESDAY, Aug. 21

Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District, Bob Chisholm Community Center, 5:15 p.m., 1225 Avenue A, Seaside.

Seaside Planning Commission, work session, 7 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

MONDAY, Aug. 27

Seaside City Council, 7 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

TUESDAY, Sept. 4

Seaside Community Center Commission, 10 a.m., Bob Chisholm Community Center, 1225 Avenue A.

Seaside Library Board, 4:30 p.m., Seaside Library, 1131 Broadway.