

Inhumanity Has Found a Home on Skid Row

Steve Lopez

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Columnist Steve Lopez joined the staff of The Times in May 2001, after four years at Time Inc. where he wrote for Time, Sports Illustrated, Life and Entertainment Weekly as editor-at-large.

While at Time, he helped establish the Bonus Section, a series of narrative news features. His first story in the series, about the French capture of Philadelphia hippie guru and suspected murderer Ira Einhorn, won a Society of Professional Journalists Award for national magazines.



He also was the author of Time magazine's "Campaign diary," a road journal filed during the 2000-01 presidential campaign; and of the weekly, "American Scene" column, for which he traveled the United States.

Prior to joining Time Inc., Lopez was a columnist at The Philadelphia Inquirer, where he won the H.L. Mencken Writing Award, the Ernie Pyle Award for human interest writing and a National Headliner Award for column writing. During his 12 years at the Inquirer, he filed dispatches from Iraq, Bosnia, Colombia and the Soviet Union.

His earlier newspaper jobs were at the San Jose Mercury News, the Oakland Tribune and three other daily newspapers in Northern California.

He is the author of three novels, "Third and Indiana," "The Sunday Macaroni Club," and "In the Clear." A collection of his columns is published in the book "Land of Giants: Where No Good Deed Goes Unpunished."

Lopez is married and has two sons.

The case was so inhuman, the outrage was understandable. A couple of 19-year-old Neanderthals watched a bum-bashing video and then trolled skid row with baseball bats early Tuesday morning, attacking homeless people as they lay sleeping.

At 9th and Wall streets they teed off on Gerald McHenry, who got away with just contusions. Then they went to 3rd and Flower streets and savagely beat Ernest Adams, who ended up in critical condition with head wounds.

Vicious and cowardly, said Los Angeles Police Chief William J. Bratton, who spoke at a news conference with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa after the arrest of the suspected bashers - William Orantes and Justin Brumfield - on charges of attempted murder.

"This happened to one of our most helpless communities because they're not only homeless but often mentally ill," the chief said. "These dehumanizing crimes will not be tolerated."

What is tolerated, however, isn't much prettier.

Downtown Los Angeles' skid row is a spectacle that practically defies description. Police and paramedics can barely keep up with the nightly violence and medical emergencies, and the fire station is not just the busiest in Los Angeles but last year was the busiest in the entire nation, according to Fire Capt. Bill Wells.

The attackers knew just where to go for a night of fun. While skid row is home to dangerous predators and cons, it's also home to thousands of sick and helpless people who make easy targets.

As I've said before, I often worry about the safety of the schizophrenic musician I've been writing about this year, especially after spending a night on skid row with Nathaniel Anthony Ayers. Menacing glances follow you everywhere at night, and the man in critical condition after Tuesday's assault was attacked very near one of Nathaniel's haunts.

"We had a murder down here in June in which a guy gets stabbed in the chest and dies four hours later in the hospital," said LAPD Capt. Andrew Smith of the Central Bureau. "The stabber lives in Azusa. He's a gang member who came here because he likes to hang out and party in this part of town because of the proliferation of drugs and prostitution. It's 24 hours a day, and they call it 'The Show.'"

"The Show" is one unforgettable scene after another.

"I've called [for medical care] hundreds of times, for someone I came across in my travels," Smith said. "You'll see someone with a leg so

swollen the skin is bursting at the seams, the kidneys have shut down. Or you'll see someone who's got an infection with worms or maggots growing out of it. The mentally ill will sometimes wait until it gets so bad that someone flags us down.

"Hey, my friend's got worms coming out of him."

Firefighter Tim Toledo, 25, said skid row's Station 9 averages more than 60 runs a day, so there's barely time to catch your breath between calls.

"[Wednesday] night we went out on a young lady who gave birth right on the sidewalk. It's unreal. We get there and the mother's holding the baby in her arms with the umbilical cord still attached, lying in a tent with dirty clothes," Toledo said.

People by the dozens scoot around in wheelchairs, sometimes with colostomy bags that look like they haven't been changed in far too long, Toledo said. Wheelchairs don't fit inside the rescue vehicles, Toledo said, and Station 9 deals with so many of them, a private company was signed up to pick up and store the wheelchairs.

When patients are released from the hospital, they call for their wheelchairs and are back in business on skid row until the next trip to the hospital.

"You get stabbings, not a lot of shootings, but people swinging pipes or bats at each other. A lot of times it's sticks or sharp objects. The other day we were driving up 5th Street and right in front of us, a fight was in progress, one guy whaling on another guy with a pipe," Toledo said.

"The guy taking the beating was pretty badly banged up, with a pretty good hole in his head. We bandaged him up, but the blood kept coming through the bandages. We couldn't even keep them on."

As LAPD Capt. Smith noted, shelter beds go empty at night because some people refuse to come in off the street.

They refuse because they're too ill or drug-addicted to think rationally or because they fear being harassed or attacked in close quarters. This is not an easy crowd to deal with or an easy problem to solve, but neither of those is an acceptable excuse for the existence of skid row, where between one-third and one-half of the residents are mentally ill.

Proposition 63, California's 1% tax on million-dollar incomes, kicks in next year and will boost mental health services statewide, thereby thinning skid row populations. If that doesn't happen, something is wrong.

California emptied mental hospitals three decades ago and never built the community clinics and other treatment and intervention programs that were promised. Society came to accept the reality of people with mental illness walking the streets caked in their own filth and sleeping in gutters at night, but only if they were conveniently out of sight.

That might not be as dehumanizing as attacks with baseball bats, but it's close.

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