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A Homeless Man Needs Pushy Friends

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Points West

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They camp at the western ends of two downtown Los Angeles tunnels. Nathaniel on 2nd, Ernest on 3rd, and occasionally their paths cross.

This week, each man's story took a turn.

I'll start with Ernest Adams, who has been living at the spot where he was nearly beaten to death last August by two animals inspired by a bum-bashing video. Adams didn't want to go to a scheduled doctor appointment Monday morning, but his pal Brady Westwater was trying to talk him into it.

"Feel free to step in here at any time," Westwater, president of the Downtown Neighborhood Council, said to me.

I told Adams it would be a snap; we'd have him to the doctor and back in no time. He wasn't happy about it, but he said OK, and we hit the Harbor Freeway south, headed for Rancho Los Amigos in Downey.

Last time I wrote about the homeless Adams – who wants to be a real estate agent – I got a complaint from the Rancho doctor who had treated him for the brain injury. The doctor didn't appreciate my suggestion that Rancho could have done better than to put Adams on a bus back to the very spot where he was beaten, with no plan for follow-up treatment, other than an eye exam.

Adams had refused placement in a nursing facility, the doctor reminded me, and the hospital was legally required to respect his rights to do as he pleased. It happens all the time, she said, and she didn't appreciate being accused of human dumping.

Fine, I said, but here's where the law works against the interests of a patient. Westwater and other friends of Adams were left in the dark about his condition and were understandably frustrated about not being able to help a man with mental problems who had just had his brain bashed in.

Was Adams missing doctor visits? The friends who look after him had no way of knowing and no right to find out. But Westwater thought Adams' health was slipping, and so he called me. I then called his doctor at Rancho, and she made an appointment for him on Monday.

You can just imagine, by the way, what happens to people on the streets who need help but don't have access to a newspaper columnist and a pain-in-the-neck activist like Westwater, who wears a wrestling T-shirt with a bucking bronco on it and calls himself a cowboy.

When we got to Rancho, Adams said it felt creepy to be back at the rehab center. He doesn't like hospitals, which will forever bring back memories of the horrible injury that scarred his head, left him blind in one eye and slowed his speech.

But there was more on the agenda than making sure Adams was physically fine. Westwater has been knocking himself out trying to get him off the streets and into housing, and it would be much easier if a doctor wrote a letter saying Adams was disabled so his rent could be covered by a Social Security disability check.

Adams was examined by a physician and psychologist for more than two hours and declared reasonably fit. But when the psychologist said there didn't appear to be any delusions or mental health issues, Westwater and I gave each other the eye. We knew otherwise and were worried about his losing out on a check.

Over the next few minutes, we established with Adams' agreement that he recently won a \$74-million lottery but had the money stolen, and that his enemies – some of whom are invisible – were ordering him to renounce Christ. I think it's fair to say the psychologist reconsidered her position.

But it didn't matter in the end. A social worker said Adams already had been approved for Social Security when he was hospitalized. Adams had no idea and therefore no reason to contact the Social Security office to make arrangements to receive his checks.

Obviously, it isn't easy to get a check to a guy who lives on the street. But it's another example of a breakdown between agencies. Is it too much to ask that a social worker make one visit to a man recovering from a brain injury and see if he needs help managing his affairs?

"The system is a mess," the psychologist agreed. She said she moved to California from Alabama, which had a much better network of services. A social worker definitely would have followed up in Alabama, she said.

Thank you, Alabama, for showing us the way.

Westwater argued that you can't clean up skid row, among other areas, with this lack of communication among agencies. He thinks there ought to be some kind of umbrella organization that oversees services and keeps a database on clients.

Makes sense to me, and to Ernest Adams as well.

"I'm really glad I did this," he said as we sorted things out for him at Rancho and Westwater began making calls to get him a place to live.

Adams told us he's tired of the streets after eight hard years and he's ready to come inside.

"Oh, my," he said as he considered the beating and the rest of his ordeal. "Whew! Oh, my."

I've learned to take nothing for granted in these matters, but it certainly appears as though Adams might be gone soon from the west side of the 3rd Street tunnel.

As for the gentleman at the 2nd Street tunnel, I've been a little concerned of late, and Adams did nothing to put me at ease.

He said he had seen Nathaniel get into a nasty argument with a cyclist, and the cyclist claimed to be armed and ready to shut Nathaniel up permanently. I, too, had seen Nathaniel taunt a passerby recently. And he was still resisting the idea of moving into the apartment being held for him by Lamp, the skid row agency trying to lure him off the streets.

Spooked by all of this, I drove over to the west side of the 2nd Street tunnel just after midnight to check on Nathaniel.

He was gone. No shopping cart, no violins or cellos. Nothing.

I feared the worst, naturally. Until Tuesday morning, when one phone call found him well, and in a most surprising location.

More in my Sunday column.