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The Best Present for Nathaniel: A Future

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Christmas came a couple of weeks early to the skid row apartment of a soulful gent who goes by the name of Nathaniel Anthony Ayers.

Nathaniel got an L.A. Philharmonic T-shirt from Peter Snyder, a cellist in the orchestra, followed by a vigorous lesson focused on rhythm and pitch. He also got a package of clothes, toiletries and family photos from his sister, Jennifer, in Atlanta. Nathaniel dipped into the box and pulled out a Jazz Age black-and-white photo of a striking woman of about 40.

"That's my mother," he said with quiet reverence. The resemblance between Nathaniel and his late mother was uncanny.

The next gift was from Adam Crane, publicist for the L.A. Philharmonic. Nathaniel opened a Styrofoam box and gasped.

"Oh, my God!" he exclaimed.

It was a bust of Beethoven, and Nathaniel was stunned as always by the visage of a man who to him is very much alive.

Nathaniel still lives on the street, camping out in the 2nd Street tunnel these days. But this apartment is being held for him because his case managers at Lamp, a skid row agency for the homeless mentally ill, think that after a year of steady progress, he's close to taking the next step and coming indoors.

We all thought it might help if his room had a few personal touches, mindful of his argument that he has to be on the streets with his muse, the Beethoven statue in Pershing Square.

"Beethoven can watch over you in here now," Snyder told him.

We set up the photos and the Beethoven bust on the dresser, and they formed an appreciative audience for Nathaniel's lesson, in which he swung comfortably from Bach to Schubert to Beethoven.

"Jesus," Snyder whispered at one point, "the man feels every note."

Under different circumstances, Snyder said, Nathaniel might have been one of the world's great cellists. As it is, moments of brilliance are followed by rough spots as fractured and fragmented as his thinking.

"Nate," Snyder implored him, "you must keep your dreams."

No worry there. In fact, during a two-hour lesson, Nathaniel asked Snyder and me when we could arrange a recital. He wants to make a recording with an accompanist. It's definitely possible, Snyder told him, but he's got a lot of

practicing to do between now and then.

Nathaniel said he had worked overtime on Schubert's "Arpeggione" and Pablo Casals' "Song of the Birds" since his last lesson.

"There was no way I was going to ignore that assignment, because I want to record," he told Snyder.

I'd like so much to see Nathaniel off the streets and staying in a safe place, I sometimes have to remind myself how far he's come toward a better life this year. After years of just drifting musically, playing a wrecked violin on city streets, he now has a cello and a couple of much better violins. With treatment, who knows what he could be capable of?

Thanks to Snyder and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, he has not only gotten to hear great music, he is again studying and practicing with purpose. And for a man to whom music is more important than anything else, this is a huge step.

And then there's his life on the street. After a rocky start at Lamp, when he insisted the agency had little to offer him, going to Lamp is now part of Nathaniel's daily routine, which means he's seen regularly by people who want to help him and know how to do it.

"He's usually the first one there every morning," said Stuart Robinson, his case manager and a soft-spoken man with the patience of a saint.

Robinson said Nathaniel is in the midst of a transition that's never easy for people who have been on the streets so long with mental illness. Robinson believes Nathaniel is trying to figure out whom he can trust, and he's carefully weighing the bargain involved in a world of rules and social contracts.

As Nathaniel keeps insisting — with more than a bit of logic — he can do as he pleases in the tunnels, and it's noisy enough that nobody gives him a hard time about his hours-long practice sessions on cello and violin.

And yet when Snyder and I arrived at the apartment the other day, what was Nathaniel doing?

He was taping things on the wall, making it more homey. He'd put up a news clipping about the Broadway musical "The Color Purple" along with a map of the United States. On the windowsill, he'd put a laminated ad for Baby Magic lotion because he thinks there's actually magic in the baby's eyes, and he was putting up a photo of Neil Diamond, claiming he thinks it's a photo of me.

While Nathaniel sawed away on cello with Snyder watching closely, I read the card sent by his sister, Jennifer.

"Our mother would be so proud of all the attention you are getting because of your talent," it began. "I know Momma is smiling from heaven because she is so happy to know you have a place to lay your head."

Someone had sent Nathaniel a yearbook from Juilliard, where he was studying more than 30 years ago when his illness struck. But the book was still sealed in plastic wrap.

"I don't want to open it," Nathaniel said. "I want to imagine what it would be like to be back at my school."

Mark Ragins, a psychiatrist at the Village in Long Beach, is one of the first people I talked to for guidance after meeting Nathaniel early this year. I checked back with him last week and he said Nathaniel's progress is impressive, but he's probably got one more big hurdle to jump before agreeing to come in off the streets.

When you're at rock bottom as Nathaniel was, Ragins said — with no friends and a beat-up violin that was missing two strings — you come to appreciate the freedom of having nothing to lose.

"Once you've got something to lose," Ragins said, "it can be scary."

So scary that you try to sabotage the possibility of a better life. In a previous trip to the apartment, Nathaniel told me there was no point in getting too comfortable there, because smokers would get on his nerves, drug dealers would steal his things and incur his wrath, and he'd surely be evicted in time.

And yet here he was, looking very much like a man in his domain, playing the music he loves and glancing every now and then at his mother and Beethoven as if to make sure they were still there.

It was a scene far removed from the one in which I first glimpsed him early this year. He was just another anonymous street bum then, left to fend for himself in a society that discards the mentally ill without shame.

Nathaniel has taught me a great deal this year about the power of art, the mysteries of the mind and the instinct for survival.

I've seen him awaken on cold pavement and lean into the day with dignity, walking Los Angeles in the company of demons and dreams.

When the lesson was done, I put a hand on his shoulder, thanked him for his friendship and wished him a Merry Christmas.