

Steve Lopez

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.

PART FIVE
STEVE LOPEZ / POINTS WEST
Urban Renaissance Meets the Middle Ages
Steve Lopez
Points West

October 20, 2005

They're yours for the taking: Luxury lofts in downtown Los Angeles, with rooftop pools, swanky cabanas, and views of Porta Potti brothels on skid row.

Evelyn, Eduardo and Thomas live within two blocks of each other, caught in the middle of this head-on collision between economic growth and social disintegration. One is on the street, one in recovery, one in a grandly appointed loft overlooking the place he calls Dante's Inferno.

"I wanted to be a part of the downtown renaissance," says Thomas Reid, an RN who moved out of West Hollywood and into his skid-row-adjacent apartment six weeks ago and was immediately "blown away" by the depth of despair at his doorstep. His windows offer "front-row seats to Skid Row Theater," with a soundtrack of screams and sirens.

The renaissance he's talking about has brought an influx of people like Reid, thousands of them. In his building, they're paying up to \$6,000 a month, which buys them neighbors who sleep on the pavement in rags.

"I sit in my loft with the haves and look out at the have-nots - the bottom of the bottom - and I have to rationalize it," says Reid, whose conscience gets to him when he sips a glass of fine wine while watching someone on the street yell for help. "Am I pushing out the homeless?"

Evelyn, who lives two blocks away, is homeless, depending on your definition.

On San Julian Street one night, I notice her makeshift tent because she's given lots of attention to detail, making walls by stretching blankets between two carts. It's a far cry from Thomas Reid's urban contemporary furnishings, but Evelyn's got the lighting perfect and warm, just enough candlelight to let her read James Patterson's "Pop Goes the Weasel."

At night, before laying her head down and saying the rosary, she lays out cardboard, Styrofoam, sheets, blankets, and pillows with pillowcases.

"Even though I'm on the street, it makes me feel like I'm inside," she says of the place she calls her hookup.

When I ask the East Palo Alto native how long she's been here, she thinks about it a second.

"Ten years," she says.

Ten years in this one spot?

"I started out at the other end of the street," she says.

Evelyn, who says she's epileptic, is a different person when I see her later in the week. The sweet woman with the kind manner and cozy hookup is sprawled on her back, eyes rolling around in her head, zapped by the marijuana she confesses to or maybe the harder stuff she claims to be "backin' off of."

She's gone, not even clear-headed enough to weep as she did the other night, when she told me she's 48 and just not ready to move on. When she's 50, she says, she'll have it together. But not yet, 10 years and counting on San Julian Street.

You see some people out here who just caught a bad break or two, got priced out of the ridiculous real estate market and ended up in the land of soup lines and cardboard condos. But the majority are in a prison with higher walls, trapped by mental illness or devoured by drugs in a place where there isn't enough help for either.

Evelyn lives on the street where Nathaniel, my violinist friend, talks to himself.

It's the street where I watched paramedics pick up a young woman with needle tracks and only a few breaths left in her.

The stories are so depressing that, after days on skid row, I began looking for some glimmer of hope. I made arrangements to speak to someone in the recovery program at the Midnight Mission.

I'm met there by a man in a suit, his tie removed. I ask if he can take me to the gentleman in recovery.

You're looking at him, he says.

Eduardo Castro is his name. He leads me to a quiet place and tells his story.

It begins in 1992, when Castro was living in Guatemala. He had been trained in the United States as a dental technician and had a happy home and family in Guatemala. One day, on a visit to a farm owned by his in-laws, a relative lost sight of his daughter Laura, who was 2 years, 8 months old.

She drowned in a pond and Castro was beyond grief. He couldn't talk about it, couldn't begin to deal with it. Four years later, working for a touring company, he was on an impoverished island in Guatemala when a family asked him for help. Their daughter was desperately ill, and the parents wondered if Castro, with his modest amount of medical training from dental school, could check her.

"The little girl died in my arms," he says. She was roughly the same age as his daughter.

A stricken Castro decided that in his daughter's name, he would set up a nonprofit clinic on the island where the other girl died. His mission brought him to Los Angeles, where he worked in a dental lab to raise money for his dream. But he was gripped by depression and turned to the bottle, which got the best of him.

"There's a state of addiction where you think you can handle it," Castro says.

But he couldn't.

He started coming downtown from his Hollywood apartment and ended up on the streets, buying marijuana and cocaine. For four years he was on the skids, too ashamed to ask his family for help or return to Guatemala empty-handed. He slept in shelters and cardboard boxes, dodging muggers but not demons.

"I bought drugs on that street," he says, pointing to San Julian.

The street where Evelyn lives.

Castro bottomed out just after Christmas last year, when he landed in jail for the second time, at the age of 55, and promised himself he was done. He had known addicts who checked into rehab at the Midnight Mission and walked down the street as if they were new, so that's where Castro went.

"I've been sober over 9 months," he says.

As part of his recovery, he took a job in public affairs at the Midnight. He gives tours and works with Spanish-language media.

Castro takes me upstairs at the mission, where roughly 250 men reside for up to a year and a half, trying to shake the ghost and beat the odds that say only 17% of them will succeed.

We walk into Castro's dorm, and the lights are low. The men are bedded down for the night, in this fight together, dreaming of grace and forgiveness. Up on the roof is the big Midnight Mission sign that Thomas Reid can see from his apartment.

"This is the original mosaic tile and marble," Reid says on a tour of the Pacific Electric Lofts at 6th and Main, once the hub of the Red Car line and a center of downtown culture.

The tour takes us to the rotunda library and rooftop pool. New condos are going in next door, and next to that is the Cecil Hotel, where the clients sometimes leave on their backs.

"The coroner's van was there the other day."

Friends thought Reid, 35, was out of his mind, trading a rent-controlled apartment in West Hollywood for the hazards and hassles of skid row. But he was captivated by downtown as a boy.

His folks would bring him up from Irvine to visit Chinatown or a museum, and the mysteries of the city dazzled and seduced him.

"This is an exciting time for downtown Los Angeles," he says, and he wanted to be a part of it.

The excitement includes never-ending action at Station 9, the firehouse that was the busiest in the nation in 2003 with almost 21,000 calls. Reid can see the firehouse from his sixth-floor apartment, and the sirens echo off the walls of his high-ceilinged pad, which has concrete floors.

"You wake up to screams and gunshots," he says. He can look out the window, onto Los Angeles Street beneath, and see territorial squabbles among prostitutes. He says he sat in the window while watching the video of the first part in this skid row series and "started to tear up," realizing that a woman had died after being picked up a short Frisbee toss away from his loft.

"It's a parade of misery and death all night," he says. "It's like 'Blade Runner.'"

None of this came entirely as a shock. Reid knew he was moving to a work in progress, and he was an emergency room nurse for five years, a job where you see a little of everything.

But he's a realist too. For now, when he leaves his apartment, he doesn't head east. Not on foot, anyway. East is too depressing, with all the encampments, and too dangerous.

We go outside to walk Amor, Reid's poodle, and cover only the block of Main Street he lives on. North to 6th, across to the west side of the street, down to 7th and back.

On our one lap we pass a woman lying on the sidewalk, two people asking for money, a mentally ill woman, a dive bar, the always-busy doorway of the Cecil, and what appears to be a gathering of drug dealers and customers.

I consider suggesting that Reid get a bigger dog.

"It's very disturbing," he says of the landscape outside his door, but he's not running back to West Hollywood. Not yet, anyway.

"Most people don't want to see this ... but how can you effect change if you don't do anything?" he asks.

Yuppie lofters like him aren't the problem, he insists after wrestling with his own doubts about their impact. They're part of the solution, so long as a revitalized downtown includes adequate housing and services, and safer streets for merchants and residents of all income levels.

"We shouldn't tolerate drugs and prostitution," he says, least of all the way we tolerate it now, with cavalier indifference.

Nor should we tolerate the reality that every night, by the thousands, some of the sickest and most helpless human beings among us sleep on our streets. Ragged, anonymous, conveniently invisible to most of us.