

# Los Angeles Times

## Mr. Ayers drives toward a mulligan

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*Of all our many adventures, the trip to the golf course in Griffith Park might be the most memorable.*

Mr. Nathaniel Anthony Ayers likes an outing, and although the musician in him is partial to concerts at Disney Hall, he likes variety too. Batting cages, bowling alleys, Dodger games, trips to the beach: He's up for anything. But his recent request to visit a driving range took me by surprise.

"Have you played golf before?" I asked.

"No," he replied, but he wanted to try something different.

A golf course is a rather proper place, with customs and fashions peculiar to the sport, and so my friend kind of stood out, you might say. He was in military fatigues, with combat boots, a flower lei, ball cap with sunglasses fixed atop it, and a fluorescent vest on which he had scrawled, in a display of neighborhood pride, "SKID ROW."

Eyes followed us into the clubhouse shop, where I bought a 6-iron, and out to the range, where I bought a bucket of balls. I chose a cubicle far from other golfers, but they crept closer to us, indulging their curiosity.

"I'm no expert," I told Mr. Ayers, "but you need to keep your head down, watch the ball, and take a smooth, easy swing. Don't overdo it."

"OK, Mr. Lopez," said my friend, who ordinarily wields a violin, cello or trumpet rather than a golf club.

Determination drawn tight across his face, Mr. Ayers waggled the club, shifting his weight for the right balance. Not once. Not twice. But forever. I felt like Jackie Gleason in "The Honeymooners," waiting for Norton to get going. I looked at my watch, looked at the large bucket of balls and suggested Mr. Ayers make his move.

He did.

Ignoring all my advice, he wound up as if he were trying to kill a rattlesnake and swung from his heels, practically falling over. The tip of the club caught the ball, sending it rocketing into the bucket. Balls exploded as if from a popcorn machine, and Mr. Ayers dashed onto the range in his combat gear to retrieve them.

"Mr. Ayers, come back!" I yelled, fearing he'd be struck by a line drive off another golfer's club. He made it back from his mission in one piece, got the hang of golf, more or less, and launched some impressive drives into the soft blue heavens.

When people ask how Mr. Ayers is doing, two years after being coaxed off the streets of skid row and into the apartment where he still lives, I'm more inclined to tell them stories like this one.

But there are dark days too, when shadows fill his face and storms gather. On those days, I wonder about the bargain we've struck, and whether his outbursts have something to do with the strange experience of having his story shared with the world.

Last week, my book about our three-year relationship was published, and there was a wrap party for the movie based on the book and columns. Mr. Ayers attended the party, and he has also read the book. His first reaction was negative, and he told me so in no uncertain terms.

I was not surprised. The story of Mr. Ayers' spirit and courage would have no resonance without intimate details of the daily challenge he has faced for 35 years, when voices and visions crowded his mind and he was forced to leave Juilliard in the midst of a promising career. I was relieved when he later called to say that with a full reading of the book, he saw things differently.

"Parts of it were difficult to read," he said. "But I felt like I needed to."

I explained to him once again that I saw "The Soloist" -- both the book and the movie -- the way I've seen these columns, as a tribute to him and our friendship. My intent, as well, was to humanize Mr. Ayers -- and in the process, thousands like him -- and to help destigmatize mental illness.

At the wrap party, it was a sight to see both staffers and clients from Lamp Community, the mental health agency that is home to Mr. Ayers, hit the dance floor and join the fun, with movie producer Gary Foster working up a sweat as he tripped the light with his new friends.

Casey Horan, the Lamp director, said the use of Lamp members and other skid row residents in the movie has been a success in two ways. Countless members of the cast and crew have told her their lives have been transformed by the privilege of getting to know so many inspirational people. And many of those people have appreciated being heard, embraced and treated with dignity.

The movie folks have been demanding at times, but Horan tells me they've also been generous at a critical time -- 700 Lamp members, who now live in shelters and on the street, are on a waiting list for housing.

I don't know exactly what to expect as the story reaches a broader audience, or how Mr. Ayers will react to the attention, and I worry about it every day.

But I also know he appreciates being recognized as a man defined by something other than an illness, and maybe one day he will clear the hurdles and painful memories that so far have prevented him from considering treatment and medication.

In some ways, it's as if the career he never had is happening now, and nothing means more to him -- or has been as helpful in his gradual recovery -- than the way he has been accepted back into the fraternity of musicians by his many friends in the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Cellists Peter Snyder and Ben Hong, violinist Robert Gupta, pianist Joanne Pearce Martin and publicist Adam Crane all clear time from busy schedules to hang out with him, knowing that music is his medicine and Disney Hall is his hospital. I just wish Pearce Martin hadn't told him about her sky diving experiences, because that's now next on Mr. Ayers' list of things to do -- just when he was beginning to get his golf stroke down.

Last week, after we watched a matinee concert at Disney Hall, Mr. Ayers went across the street and began playing the violin, one of several instruments he's tried to learn since giving up the string bass because it was too big for a shopping cart. His friends from the orchestra trooped over to join him, and Gupta, a 20-year-old phenom who joined the orchestra at 19, got out his own violin and played along with Mr. Ayers.

My friend has a long way to go, in more ways than one. But he is patient and steadfast, and the music that afternoon was a balm, filled as usual with passion, promise and hope.