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Rewarding Mr. Ayers' Courage

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They had every kind of trophy you could imagine at House of Trophies in Boyle Heights. Soccer, basketball, baseball, football, even fishing. They had trophies 6 inches tall and 6 feet tall, plaques and desk ornaments too, for retiring cops and transit workers and for great teachers.

But nothing for musicians.

I told a clerk I needed a trophy with something a little different on it, like maybe a string player.

It was an unusual request, I could tell, but he went to his computer and came back with a printed image of a conductor and a musical symbol.

"We could do something like this," he said.

I decided to put my faith in House of Trophies and began making plans for the awards ceremony. The plan was to honor a friend I'm constantly asked about by readers and also to recognize two of my buddy's pals.

Since I began writing about Nathaniel Anthony Ayers, a street musician I met almost four years ago in downtown Los Angeles, I've been asked to speak at mental health symposiums, skid row fundraisers, universities and high schools and all kinds of award banquets.

I usually walk away with a plaque and a bad case of guilt. All those groups really should be honoring Mr. Ayers, not me. He's the one who's had to muster the courage to face each day. He's the one who has given a face to the anonymous thousands in the same fight. And he's the one whose story, I hope, is helping de-stigmatize mental illness.

I usually pass along the awards I get to Mr. Ayers, but I thought he should have his very own, which is how I ended up at House of Trophies.

Mr. Ayers had been telling me for months that he wanted to celebrate Beethoven's birthday on Dec. 16. I don't know a lot of people who walk around with Beethoven's date of birth in their heads, but nothing about Mr. Ayers is typical.

Ever since he stumbled upon the Beethoven statue in Pershing Square several years ago, he has conducted himself as if Ludwig were god of the universe and everything beyond.

Mr. Ayers had told me he'd like to perform at Beethoven's birthday party with some of his friends from the Los Angeles Philharmonic. But as the date approached, he feared he wouldn't be sharp enough to play with the pros. He said if he really worked at it, he'd be in good shape by Beethoven's birthday next year. But he wondered if we could

still have a party.

Among the few dozen guests were violinist Robert Gupta, pianist Joanne Pearce Martin and cellist Ben Hong, all friends of Mr. Ayers and all members of the L.A. Phil.

Also attending was Adam Crane, the former L.A. Phil publicist who made Mr. Ayers welcome at Disney Hall concerts and became one of his closest friends. Mr. Ayers has had a tough adjustment since Crane moved on to the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, occasionally strolling up to Disney Hall to see if Crane has decided to come back. Crane was coming to town anyway in December and adjusted his schedule to get here in time for Mr. Ayers' Beethoven party.

As the party approached, I began worrying that the man of the hour might not attend. Mr. Ayers has had a painful, chronic stomach problem for which he was refusing treatment, no matter how bad the agony. Doctors and meds, he says, are not for him. Not yet, anyway, because he recalls too vividly the days of restraints, shock therapy and Thorazine. He is still tough to be around at times and a challenge for the staff at Lamp Community, which handles hard-core, chronic cases of mental illness.

A book I wrote about Mr. Ayers came out last year, and I had been nervous about how he would react to it and to a movie based on the book that will be out in April. He once told me he preferred experiencing life to seeing it reflected in a mirror. Developing insight into one's own illness is difficult for many people. After reading the book, though, he thanked me. He said it wasn't easy to read, but he felt that he needed to. As for the movie, he said he had no desire to see it, in part because the very thought of two-dimensional images on a screen is spooky to him.

So I was shocked when, at the last minute, he decided to see a screening for cast and crew. Many of his friends at Lamp play themselves in the movie because director Joe Wright insisted on not using actors. They were excited about seeing themselves on the screen, and Nathaniel wanted to be with them, rather than miss what in effect was his own party.

We sat together at the Arclight. I'd seen the movie, but still I was anxious, and so was Mr. Ayers. He kept his eyes closed through the entire film, but he experienced it -- felt it, really -- in his own way. He loved the music, grumbled at certain depictions, laughed at funny lines and joined in the shout-outs when his friends saw themselves up on the screen.

I was humbled by him, proud of him, worried for him. What he's got doesn't go away. Every day's a challenge.

The first award at the Beethoven party was presented in absentia to Peter Snyder, an L.A. Phil cellist who retired last week after nearly 40 years with the orchestra.

Snyder has already moved up to the Central Coast and couldn't make the party. He was the musician who volunteered to give lessons to Mr. Ayers in a vacant skid row apartment three years ago, hoping it would make Mr. Ayers comfortable enough to move in off the streets of skid row.

Those lessons were the key, I think, even though Mr. Ayers resisted moving indoors, saying that he couldn't leave Beethoven alone on the streets of downtown L.A. Crane got him past that by going to the Disney Hall gift shop and getting a bust of Beethoven to place in the apartment. Mr. Ayers has lived in that apartment ever since.

At the Beethoven party, held in a basement music room at the L.A. Times, Crane's plaque was inscribed "Mensch of the Century."

Mr. Ayers was not just the man of the hour but the life of the party. He warmed nicely to the crowd, had a smile on his face most of the evening and was in his glory when Gupta and Martin offered a rousing rendition of the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto.

He also did pretty well in his own performance despite the lack of any rehearsal, playing cello to Martin's piano on

the Bloch Prayer and a bit of the Schubert Arpeggione Sonata.

Standing tall on the piano throughout the performance was Mr. Ayers' new trophy, a gaudy 2-foot-tall beauty with metallic red and the best fake gold available. It was inscribed:

"Disciples of Beethoven Award

"For a half century of devotion to music. For a talent that knows no bounds. And for a story of courage and perseverance that speaks to thousands."

(After this column was written on Friday, Mr. Ayers' stomach pain became so intense that he agreed to go to the hospital, and he took his violin with him. He was diagnosed with gastritis and was discharged Saturday morning, but not before serenading staff and patients.)