

Tenderloin roots for single dad, son

▶ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Byers spends his days doing errands, going to medical appointments — he sees four doctors — walking around the TL or plopping down to watch old movies. He's a John Wayne fan. Jason worries that if his dad's not careful he'll become isolated. Byers is personable, but doesn't have close friends. His overriding priority as an inveterate "go-getter" is making his and his son's life work.

Having once worked in a grocery, Byers is a good shopper who knows deals. He'll take a bus to Lee's Meats on Haight Street because of the specials and he regularly shops at Foods Co. He was there recently, pushing his wire shopping cart after paying for his groceries, when the voices told him to leave everything and go outside, so he did. Suddenly, he snapped out of it and hurried back inside only to find his cart gone.

"That was \$50 (lost) right there," he says. "They (voices) are always there. It's freaky. But you have to ignore it."

Despite being at the federal poverty level and skimping with his limited funds, Byers shuns the weekly food bank supplies in the Curran Community Room. "I don't need it," he says. "I leave to others."

As socially polite as he and Jason are, they haven't yet built neighborly relationships in the building. Byers admits he wants "companionship," and adds, "Maybe I should join something." He hasn't forged a network like his son has as a senior at Mission High School.

"To be honest, I don't know a half a dozen people here," Jason says, as he sits in the lobby one weekend. But he acknowledges with a timid smile he's noticed the good-looking teenage girls who live here. "The neighbors leave you alone here," he says, "But every time you see them they say hello."

Jason is 6 feet tall, 129 pounds, pale, and wears the de rigueur backward baseball cap over stringy brown hair that falls below his shoulders. His peaceful face and modest smile make him appear shy but he's always forthcoming. At Mission High, he's making making A's and B's with one C in economics. He turns 19 this month and will graduate in May. This interlude is a soaring blip on his screen of life.

BAND THE LOVE OF JASON'S LIFE

"School is great," he says, having apparently won his tussle with attention deficit disorder. Beginning band is the love of his life and practicing music with his friends. He cherishes blues, rock, heavy metal, Black Sabbath, the Grateful Dead, and has an urge to write songs. "Did you know Carlos Santana went to Mission?" Jason played "Stand By Me" on his bass guitar in a school concert and says he's more than ready for advanced band. But with graduation looming, he's eager to study music at City College. "It's not that expensive."

His English class is reading "Siddhartha," "about a man trying to find the meaning of life." Not Jason. "For me, right now, it's about music. And being with my friends. That's everything to me."

Before San Francisco, the peripatetic travels of Jason and his dad landed the youngster in schools in Kentucky, Florida, Texas, Ohio, Tennessee and, finally in 2011, California.

"When I first came here (as a freshman) I was an outsider," Jason recalls. "I made friends with the ones who didn't have friends. That's how we get the connection. Music and skateboarding came into it."

Skateboarding has allowed him "to learn the city," from Sunnydale to Forest Hill Station to the ocean, preferring cruising to doing tricks at the skateboard park on Division Street, but never solo, always with a buddy or two.

"Back East it was just black people and white people. But here it's different. My best friends are black, Mexican and Filipino, skaters or musicians I met at school. You learn a lot of different things.

"I'm just glad we've settled now."

The first entry of the father-son tale is when Byers went off to work after high school in a Corbin, Ky., chain saw factory. He had no money for college. At work, a box of metal parts fell and "rearranged the seven vertebrae in my neck." His settlement went as fast as a young man could spend it. But nerve damage has worsened over the years. Now he has tremors in his right arm and leg.

The company folded and he joined the Navy. After a year, another piece of bad luck. He fell down a flight of metal stairs on a ship and shattered his left knee. An operation didn't fix it right. The Navy discharged him anyway — with no compensation. Byers' father filed the disability request for him, but the Navy denied it. The leg hurts constantly, worse in bad weather, but Byers won't touch either the cane or the walker he's been given. "It makes me feel old," he says.

He went back to Corbin, got a job pumping gas at a truck stop and fell in love with the clerk at the convenience store. They married. Their child was still-born and soon after his wife left him for another man. Deeply depressed, he pushed on and got an office job with IBM.

GOES WHERE GRASS IS GREENER

Next, he went off to Cincinnati where he heard there was work. It was to be his pattern. When job security was tentative, and fellow workers talked about ripe jobs in other states, he went after them. Sometimes it was a bum steer and he was worse off for the effort.

In Cincinnati he went homeless, the first of four times. He calls it "Cincinnati." Then, word was there was work back in Kentucky. He returned and married again in 1996. Jason was born in 1997. But he says his wife told him she married him "to get out of an apartment living with her mother." They divorced in 1998, after she left for another man. Jason never sees his mother.

"She never tried to contact us," Byers says. "Her loss, my gain."

It's Jason's loss, too. "Yes, I missed having a mother, another weird topic," Jason says sitting in the lobby. "Oh yeah, I can joke about it. Why isn't she in the picture, too? I know where she lives — somewhere in Florida." Sometimes he wonders what she'd think of him playing music, having lots of friends, and graduating.

Byers and Jason traipsed around Ohio, Kentucky, Florida and Texas, following job leads and looking for decent child support programs. In 2001 they left Kentucky for Florida where Byers heard child support was better. It wasn't. His job there at a McDonald's paid \$5.15 an hour.

They went back to Cincinnati, hoping to find a winning combination.

"Very challenging, carrying all the bags and keeping track of a young child," Byers says.

In Cincinnati he wed for the third time, a woman he met at church. She already had a son a little younger than Jason. Then Byers' daughter, Grace, was born. This marriage lasted eight years, until the wife left him for "a state trooper." Byers says the divorce decree accused him of "abandonment" and banned him from seeing his daughter. He carries a charming picture of her in his wallet.

All this finally became too much. So father and son headed to San Diego, a familiar place to Byers. "I knew the weather from the Navy." Yet, in another of his grabs at hearsay, they pushed on to San Francisco.

"You always hear about the freedom



PHOTO: UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

Meme of the past: a prophecy about fatherhood rendered in a Victorian era anti-suffrage postcard.

The big picture

RON BYERS is part of "The Rise of Single Dad," as Atlantic magazine characterized the trend in 2014: 8% of American families in 2011 were headed by a single father with minor children compared with 1% in 1960.

There's a "growing acceptance of fathers as primary caregivers," the article says.

Well, yes and no. Acceptance is spotty, as Byers found on his travels. Such stereotyping dates at least to the opposition to the long campaign for women's suffrage when the opposition sometimes comically depicted a win as an emasculating role reversal for men.

A popular 1909 cartoon card showed a bewildered, at-home dad in an apron as Suffragette Madonna, feeding a baby.

The deadbeat dad image haunts the horizon, too. Fathers owe \$111 billion in unpaid child support, according to the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement, as quoted in the Atlantic.

Moreover, they've often racked up "tens of thousands of dollars in debt," but then most make less than \$10,000 a year and can't pay.

Byers, who never had a custody battle for his son, seems exceptional in the national picture as a poverty-level dad. He cleared up his debts and satisfied all requirements to get permanent housing.

— Tom Carter

here," Byers says, "and I wanted better medical treatment. I didn't ever try to find housing, though. I was so broke up after the divorce." They stayed in shelters and Jason started at Mission High School, his life a confusing pattern about to be jolted again.

"I had to go back to Cincinnati for a hearing on my disability," Byers says. "The judge wouldn't accept a video conference." Byers' brother, a retired truck driver, loaned bus fare for him and Jason, who was taken out of school because there was no place for him to stay.

"It hurt his (high school) credit," Byers says. "It's been hard on him. He's probably been to 20 schools. We've been all over the place."

At the hearing, the disability board offered him two jobs: a movie ticket usher, the other watching a security monitor. But it turned out those jobs weren't available, and he couldn't pass the physical for others. The trip was a bust.

Nearly penniless, they turned around and set off for California — hitchhiking.

"I figure we went 2,500 miles and walked 400 of it," Byers says. But something good came out of the experience: "We bonded."

Hitchhiking is illegal in many states, though police generally look the other way if you keep moving. Father and son stood at freeway onramps and, seeing a youngster, families picked them up, as did single men and truckers. But they could get stuck someplace for a week or more. On the road and homeless, they slept roadside, panhandled and asked for rides.

In Terre Haute, Ind., somebody gave them both heavy London Fog coats, "a lifesaver." But in Kansas City, Mo., a place "right out of the Stone Age," Byers was hassled by the cops because someone reported "a man molesting a child by the highway." "They say it's the Show Me state, well, it's the show-me-how-to-get-out-of-here state."

NO HELP FOR SINGLE DADS

In Columbia, Mo., he was at a McDonald's asking for a ride when a woman gave him \$20 and told him to see a priest across town.

"My health was deteriorating then, but we walked the 6 miles to see him, and he said they only accepted women with children. He offered nothing else. It was pretty much get-out-of-town with him. We had to walk 6 miles back to the highway.

"So many doors have been slammed

in my face. I'm a man. And child support, ha, that's another story.

"We walked through every city in Colorado," Byers says. "We crossed creeks and saw wild animals and snakes and slept near the road about every night from mid-August to the end of October." Occasionally, someone treated them to a night at a motel where they could luxuriate taking a shower and get a good night's sleep stretched out in a bed.

It snowed on them in Colorado. To get out of it, they went to a truck stop convenience store. The lady clerk gave them hot dogs and hot chocolate and said they could spend the night inside. In the morning it stopped snowing, and they left.

Salvation Armys along the way were no help. "Battered single moms were the only ones they'd help," Byers says. But Franciscans were always helpful with food, and once got them "a fine motel for a couple of nights."

Outside Denver they got a golden ride, straight to Los Angeles. They got a little help from a church in Burbank, then hitched up to San Francisco, making a beeline for Providence Church on Third Street where they had stayed in 2011.



In retrospect, father and son put a positive spin on their odyssey.

"On the road, we had a blast," Byers says. "In Kansas City, people were amazed we were doing this. I've always taken care of my son. We really became best friends. He's very open with me."

The gutsy trip could become a sort of badge of courage for Jason, or at least tale-telling esoterica.

"It's been an adventure," he says. "But homelessness sucks, in a way. It's over now. But I could do it again, if necessary."

It comes up at times with his friends. "You hitchhiked out here?" he says they ask. "Not many of my friends have done anything like that. And I learned a lot of skills, like how to sleep on the side of the road with two blankets, don't leave your food outside — the animals get it."

S.F. DIDN'T DISSAPPOINT

San Francisco proved to be everything Byers cracked it up to be when he and Jason arrived Oct. 30, 2014: "A beautiful place, kinder, freer, easier access to medical and, if you go hungry in this town, it's your own fault."

They were at the church briefly before going to Hamilton Emergency Shelter on Golden Gate Avenue where there's a 60-day maximum stay. Byers got on a waitlist for Compass Family Services and soon he and Jason were placed in its shelter for 22 families at 626 Polk St. as a homeless dad with disabilities.

It was mandatory then to clear up any issues that could prevent him from being permanently housed, such as outstanding

Top left: Jason Byers skateboards all over town with his buddies, and occasionally works out at the skateboard park (center) built under the Central Freeway. **Top right:** Ron Byers, 18-year-old Jason's father, shops at Lee's Meats on Haight Street, buying ground beef on sale. **Above:** Jason, a student at Mission High who is enrolled in beginning band, practices his bass guitar at home in the Byers' apartment in Curran House, TNDC's family housing in the heart of the Tenderloin.

utility debts and evictions.

Compass social worker Bertie Mandelbaum first met with them Dec. 20, 2014. Byers was compliant, agreeable, a pleasure to work with, she says. And he soon paved the way to permanent housing by passing all the tests, including paying off a small past debt in the Midwest.

"This is a man who is motivated," Mandelbaum says, with permission from Byers to speak to The Extra. "Easygoing, personable and very natural. Humble. And he does not give up. We connected. I met with him 98 times."

That's at least twice more than with any of other clients in her 35 years with Compass, formerly called Travelers Aid. She's seen "five to 10" single fathers and sons in her career. "Often they were successful," she says.

Byers never missed an appointment. "Sometimes he didn't feel all that well, either. At times, he couldn't get his medications because they weren't available. Occasionally he was depressed. He did have therapy," Mandelbaum says.

She worked with him on housing, VA disability, SSDI application and his mandatory budget. She got Jason a job at Mission High in animal care for a special program. "But he got an Urban Forest job on his

own" where Jason made \$70 a day and loved the work with trees.

Byers' connection at VA Hospital, where he now sees two doctors, "was the best thing that could have happened to him," Mandelbaum says. He and a counselor filled out a new disability application that was accepted, reversing a 30-year-old rejection and bringing him \$117 a month.

NEW HOME, NEW BEGINNING

Getting three references for the TNDC requirement so he could settle into Curran House was tricky because he had moved around so much. But that, too, was accomplished and he and Jason moved in Feb. 20, 2015.

"He's a man who made a new beginning and succeeded," Mandelbaum says. When Jason turns 19 he goes off Calworks assistance, and a full-time college student, which he intends to be, can't be enrolled in General Assistance.

But Mandelbaum will be in their corner. Compass just created a new aftercare program. Once housed, needs persist for such things as clothing and transportation to, say, Veterans Hospital. Mandelbaum was put in charge of the new program. "And Ron," she says, "is my first client." ■