



THE

# BANK ROBBER

AND THE

# FOOTBALL STAR

ANTONIO CARRION WAS HEADED FOR THE NFL WHEN THE VOICES STARTED AND HE DRIFTED AWAY. THEN HIS ESTRANGED MOTHER FINISHED HER TIME FOR ROBBERY AND SAVED HIS LIFE

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**W**HEN SHE FINALLY FOUND HIM, AFTER MONTHS OF searching the streets, she barely recognized him. It was a baking-hot August afternoon in 2016. Antonio lay slumped against the front wall of Our Lady Queen of Angels cathedral near Olvera Street, shirtless, pants torn, hair greasy and wild, chin on his chest, eyes closed.

Stephanie Nieves stared for a minute then composed herself. She walked up to him, quietly so as not to scare him. "Tonio?" she whispered. He opened his eyes slowly, making an effort to focus. He muttered the name of his cousin: "Sharon?"

"No, Tonio," said Stephanie. "It's me. It's your mom."

Antonio squinted at her. "You're my mother?" he asked.

"Yes, Tonio."

"If you're my mother, you'll sit right here next to me."

He was eyeing her suspiciously, and he smelled like rotting meat, but, of course, she sank down next to him on the tiled walkway. She forced herself not to cry. Who knew how he might react? She hadn't seen him in months. She was sure he'd been off his medications for at least that long.

The important thing was that she had found him. After all those days and nights of hunting for him, all those calls to hospitals, jails, and the morgue, she finally knew where he was. Even with everything they'd been through, the past that weighed them down, she felt sure this would be a turning point, the beginning of a better future. At last she could help her son.

But it wasn't that simple.

**RISING SON** Antonio Carrion (opposite) in a photo taken for his *Sports Illustrated* profile while still in high school; with sister, Danyell (at right). When this photo was taken, their mother, Stephanie Nieves, was injecting heroin-cocaine "speedballs." In 1982 Stephanie began robbing banks, often posing as a customer, across Southern California

In fall 1992 Antonio Carrion was the hottest athlete at Crenshaw's Susan Miller Dorsey High School. The 5-foot-9, 165-pound senior was a star on the Dons football team—a wide receiver so gifted he had already been featured on ESPN and in *Sports Illustrated*. Under the mentorship of the legendary coach Paul Knox, Antonio had helped lead the team to a citywide championship the previous year. Girls swooned over him and his gleaming smile and the long, flowing hair he'd inherited from his Puerto Rican father and Louisiana Creole mother.

Things were a lot rougher off the field, though. The crack epidemic was raging, along with the murderous gang wars that gave the area then known as South-Central a reputation for mayhem that it is still trying to shake. One of Antonio's games was shut down after a shooting in the parking lot. The year he graduated, a 15-year-old boy waiting to register for classes was shot and critically injured. The year after that at least three Dorsey students were killed.

Growing up in his grandmother's sprawling house on 10th Avenue, along with his little sister and an ever-shifting cast of cousins and miscellaneous relatives, Antonio wasn't immune to the call of the streets. But for the most part he stayed out of the gang life. Coach Knox didn't allow street drama on his football field. Even Antonio's gang-involved friends told him to stick to sports. This kid, everyone said, was going to escape the hood and make it to the NFL. By the end of his senior year, Antonio was well on his way. USC, Notre Dame, and Michigan State were courting him. "Receiver Regarded as Best Catch in the City" declared a *Los Angeles Times* article about the prized prospect.

No one was prouder than his mom. But Stephanie never came to his games, never cheered in the bleachers with other parents. In fact, she saw Antonio play only once. It was on a TV in the federal prison in Lexington, Kentucky, where she was locked up for bank robbery.

Stephanie was raised in the same house that her son would grow up in. She played sidewalk hopscotch in "a community of small manicured lawns and good neighbors," as she recalled. Her parents worked for an aerospace company. They were comfortable enough to provide everything Stephanie and her siblings needed, including regular trips to Disneyland. "She came from a wonderful home," said Tanya Knox, a childhood friend. Stephanie was an intelligent kid, adventurous, and strong-willed. "When she made up her mind to do something, she'd do it," said Knox. "She was fearless."

But by the time Stephanie sidled into her teenage years, it was the late 1960s, and the neighborhood had begun to slide. Her parents managed to get her into Paul Revere Middle School in Brentwood, figuring she would get a better education there than at the local junior high. Stephanie was just about the only black girl on campus, but she made friends



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY STEPHANIE NIEVES



easily because she liked the same hard rock music the white kids did—Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix. Stephanie earned good grades, but she soon got into less wholesome pursuits as well. She started smoking weed at 13 and moved up the drug ladder from there. Resplendent in bell-bottom jeans, fringed vests, and floppy hats, she would skip school, hitchhike to Topanga Canyon, and drop acid and mescaline with guitar-playing hippies. She graduated from Inglewood High School at 17. She was heavily into cocaine—and the mother of a baby boy, Antonio. She married Antonio's junkie father and soon picked up his heroin habit.

Stephanie's parents helped the young couple rent a house in the neighborhood, right next door to her pal Knox, who also had a child at 17. "Our houses were the party houses," says Knox, "3, 4, 5 in the morning—it was on and popping."

When Antonio was four, Stephanie gave birth to a daughter, Danyell. By then she had moved on to injecting heroin-cocaine "speed-balls." "It was like a roller coaster. One minute you're up here," she told me recently, raising her hand above her head, "and the next you're like, OK, time to relax."

Her husband was in and out of jail, and soon out of her life. Stephanie, always fearless, decided to start making money—by forging checks. It was a simple enough scam, until one day in 1982 a suspicious teller at a Bank of America in Hermosa Beach said he needed his manager's approval to cash her phony check. Panic shot through Stephanie. She lunged over the counter and grabbed the teller's necktie, wrapping it around her fist. "You just turned this into a bank robbery," she hissed into his startled face. She ran out minutes later with a bag full of cash.

Once she saw how easy it was, Stephanie launched a one-woman crime spree, hitting bank after bank across Southern California. She'd get in line like a regular customer, looking nice in a pantsuit or skirt. Sometimes she'd have a .22 pistol hidden in her boot, but she generally worked without weapons. She'd walk up to a teller and quietly say the bank was being robbed. "Keep your right hand on the counter so I know you're not pushing any alarm button and use your left to hand me big bills, with no trackers or dye packs," she'd say, copying details she'd learned from TV shows. She'd order tellers

to fill her Coach purse with cash—usually not more than two thousand dollars—and warn them that her (nonexistent) partners outside would kill them if there was any trouble. Then she'd walk out, get in her Buick Skylark, and drive off at a law-abiding speed, being careful not to attract attention.

Her method worked fine, until December 7, 1983, when two customers in a Huntington Park bank noticed Stephanie intimidating a teller and followed her outside. She jumped into her car and took off. Within minutes a motorcycle cop was right behind her. Stephanie slammed on the brakes, and the cop crashed into the Skylark's trunk and was knocked off his bike. She floored the gas. Next thing she knew a police helicopter was overhead, and a couple of squad cars were blocking the street in front of her. As she skidded to a stop, the motorcycle cop, disheveled and furious, pulled up and pointed his pistol at her.

In short order Stephanie found herself in federal prison. That wasn't the end of

her criminal career, though. She found a lucrative gig as an inmate drug dealer. She specialized in cocaine, heroin, and meth—weed was too bulky. She'd get friends to mail her little doses of heroin, ironed flat and hidden under the postage stamp on an envelope. Or she'd have a visitor come in with a balloon full of powder stashed in their mouth and transfer it to Stephanie via a long, wet kiss. She'd swallow the package and then vomit it up later in the privacy of her cell.

"She was well established," says Helen Wadhams, a Los Angeles woman who was also locked up for bank robbery at that time. "She had the gold necklace, real underwear, perfume, you name it." Stephanie was raking in so much that she sent her mother money to buy Antonio a car for his 16th birthday.

**A**s his high school graduation drew near, Antonio was still untouchable on the field, but in his personal life he was blindsided by a series of blunt-force traumas. His grandfather and beloved aunt died. His own life was in danger. A *Sports Illustrated* article featuring him had referred to him as a Crip gang member—which wasn't true but was nonetheless a potential death sentence at his Blood-dominated school. Antonio was threatened and once even shot at while in the car Stephanie had bought him.

And then Danyell, his 14-year-old sister, started complaining of paralyzing pain in her chest and back. She turned out to have a rare form of cancer. Danyell was put through a torturous regimen of chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery—but within months she was dead. Antonio held her as she choked on her fluids. Her last breaths escaped in muculent bursts.

That would be enough to knock anyone off balance. And Antonio's mind was already unstable. As he and Stephanie learned many years later, he was bipolar and suffered from paranoid schizophrenia, a condition that often does not manifest until around age 18.

Nobody knew that at the time, though. All his friends and relatives knew was that Antonio started acting very strangely. He would wander around the backyard of his grandmother's home, talking on a broken cell phone to nobody. His uncle found him curled up on the

floor of the boy's bedroom once, crying and muttering to himself. Sometimes Antonio told people shadowy enemies were stalking him. He was afraid to leave the house. He quit playing football. He gave up sports altogether. The college scholarship offers evaporated.

Years slipped by.

In 2002, Stephanie walked out of the women's federal prison in Dublin, California. She had earned a degree in child psychology and was determined to create a new life for herself. There was no single epiphany—rather, an eventual reaction to a steady accumulation of regret over the years. She hadn't been there for her father, her sister, or her daughter when they were dying. And she knew her son was in bad shape and getting worse.

"I wanted to kill myself when Danyell died," Stephanie said. "But I kept saying to myself, 'You can't kill yourself. You have a son that's going to need you.'"

She remarried. She joined Narcotics Anonymous. She found a job with Stop the Violence-Increase the Peace Foundation, an Inglewood organization that helps former prisoners as well as youths caught up in the criminal justice system. "She came to us for services, but she ended up working for me because her skills were off the chain, and she just wanted to do something to help," says Khalid Shah, the group's executive director. "She's an amazing human being."

The pay wasn't much, though. Stephanie still volunteers there, but she has moved through several jobs. Her current gig is as L.A. as it gets. She works at Vanderpump Dogs—the glitzy West Hollywood canine-rescue operation of Lisa Vanderpump, a Real Housewife of Beverly Hills and star of her own show. Stephanie helps pamper the pooches, sells jewel-encrusted collars and artisanal dog biscuits, and greets the occasional Kardashian.

You might think a 62-year-old woman with nearly two decades of prison behind her would be a poor fit in such a place. But Stephanie loves the glamour of it and rises to the role. She is slender, fit, smooth-skinned, always well-dressed, and possessed of a gleaming smile. She switches easily between profane street patter and a clearly enunciated, formal way of speaking that must have worked well in her many years of dealing with authority figures. "Everyone calls her 'Glam-ma,'" said John Sessa, Vanderpump Dogs' executive director.

Antonio, however, was only getting worse. Stephanie got a house



**TRAGEDY** Stephanie Nieves and daughter, Danyell. During Danyell's cancer treatment, her mother was incarcerated. Danyell's death devastated Antonio and exacerbated his mental illness. "I wanted to kill myself when Danyell died," Stephanie said. "But I kept saying to myself, 'You can't kill yourself. You have a son that's going to need you.'"

for the two of them and coaxed him into seeing a psychiatrist. The diagnosis was severe: paranoid schizophrenia. The psychiatrist sent Antonio home with a handful of medications to control his delusions and hallucinations. But like many mentally ill people, Antonio didn't like the side effects and eventually stopped taking them. He instead developed a fondness for street drugs, which messed up his head even worse. He'd wander the city, sometimes wearing three layers of clothes, and yell at the voices in his head.

"He's a very sweet guy, but he could be scary when he was off his meds and doing drugs," said Wadham, who by coincidence moved to Antonio's neighborhood after she got out of prison. "He'd be walking down the street, raging and waving his arms around. He was filthy, filthy, filthy. Sometimes he'd see me sitting on the front porch and scream, 'You're the devil!' Then the next day he wouldn't remember that, and he'd be like, 'Hey, mama, how you doing?'"

Antonio got wilder, screaming and punching holes in walls. Several times Stephanie, frightened for her safety as well as his, called the LAPD's Psychiatric Emergency Team. They'd strap him to a gurney and haul him away while he seethed at Stephanie: "Help me, Mama! Why are you doing this to me? This is all your fault. You keep telling these people that something's wrong with me!"

In California, however, it's almost impossible, to commit someone to a mental institution for more than a few days against their will. So Antonio would soon be back home. Then one day he left the house and never came back.

He wound up drifting around the tent cities downtown, just another one among L.A.'s legions of mentally ill homeless people. Acting out against the phantoms in his mind, he was arrested dozens of times, usually for petty offenses like disturbing the peace or vagrancy that were more symptoms of his illness than crimes. After a night or two in jail, he'd be back on the streets.

Then one day in March 2012, Antonio walked into a McDonald's on Slauson Avenue. He ambled up to the counter and said, "I have a gun. Give me the money."

The cashier was stunned speechless. Then Antonio said, "Give me a McChicken."

Pulling himself together, the cashier mumbled, "OK, just wait here a minute." Left alone at the counter, Antonio wandered out to the parking lot. After a few minutes he came back in and quietly got in line behind a few other people waiting to order food.

By the time it was his turn at the counter, the police had arrived. They searched Antonio and found he didn't have a gun, but he did have a hammer tucked in his waistband. He was charged with and convicted of armed robbery and sent to state prison for 16 months.

The fact that someone as obviously disordered as Antonio would be sent to prison rather than a hospital is shocking but also tragically common. Across America there are far more mentally ill people in prisons and jails than in psychiatric hospitals—tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of them.

That's largely because of a push that began in the 1960s to "de-institutionalize" mental patients. The idea was to move them out of hospitals and into community-based care. The first part worked: Between 1950 and 2000, the number of people with serious mental illness housed in psychiatric institutions plummeted from almost a half million to about 50,000, according to journalist Alisa Roth's *Insane: America's Criminal Treatment of Mental Illness*.

But the second part never came together as the necessary number of community care facilities were never adequately funded. "We have



**HAPPY TOGETHER** Antonio Carrion drifted in and out of prison for petty crimes and an armed robbery conviction before his mother, Stephanie, convinced a judge to put him in a mental health facility in Pomona, where he lives today. Antonio's multiple arrests and detentions are typical of the L.A. County prison system, which holds more mentally ill people than any psychiatric facility in the United States

25 counties in California that have no mental health beds at all," says Mark Gale, criminal justice chair with the L.A. chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

The result: People too disabled to cope with life on their own wind up on the streets. Many of them turn to drugs as a form of self-medication. When they get into trouble, jails and prisons are the only places that will take them. But correctional facilities are not set up to serve as mental health treatment centers. Many mentally ill inmates come out worse than when they went in.

All of which means not only terrible human costs for mentally ill offenders but also fiscal and public safety costs for everyone. L.A. County inmates typically cost about \$150 a day to house, but mentally ill ones cost as much as four times that amount. Even worse, mentally ill convicts released with symptoms aggravated by their confinement can be dangerous to themselves and people around them.

Nowhere is this crisis more severe than in L.A. County, whose jail system holds more mentally ill people than any psychiatric facility in the nation. The network of lockups is anchored by downtown's hulking Twin Towers, the world's biggest jail. That facility does include dedicated mental health units. But as I saw on a recent visit, those units have about as much in common with a hospital as a refugee camp does with a luxury hotel.

The walls echo with the clamor of inmates yelling and heavy doors slamming. Through the plexiglass of their cell doors, I saw one man waving in a frenzy at no one, another standing absolutely still while staring at nothing, and a few who had peeled their clothes off. Some prisoners masturbate in front of guards, smear feces on cell walls, and try so vigorously to hurt themselves that they are put in "suicide smocks"—featureless blue bodysuits that have no strings, buttons, or any other detachable pieces that might be used to cause harm. In a concrete-floored common area, inmates spend the hour or two they get outside their cells chained by their wrists to steel tables.

County District Attorney Jackie Lacey has made this crisis one of her signature issues. "The jailing of inmates who have a mental illness is inefficient, inhumane, and ineffective," she says. Antonio's case, which she learned about from a KCET *SoCal Connected* episode I coproduced, is a perfect example of why we need a new approach to mentally ill offenders, she said.

"His journey is classic," Lacey said. "Technically, walking into a McDonald's and saying 'Gimme money' is robbery. But you need to look at the gravamen of the offense. No one was hurt. He's not really a dangerous and violent felon. He's a mentally ill person who committed a felony. He needs treatment."

She is spearheading a push to boost programs to divert mentally ill people from jail into treatment and to better train law enforcement officers to deal with mentally ill suspects. In the last couple of years, she said, the county has diverted about 3,000 mentally ill offenders into treatment.

Nonetheless, the number of disordered inmates in county jails is growing; about one-third of the nearly 16,000 prisoners are considered mentally ill, up from one-quarter a few years ago. "The problem is getting worse," Lacey said.

**A**ntonio was released in 2013. Stephanie picked him up at the gate of the California Institution for Men in Chino and brought him back to her Venice apartment. Just a few hours later, for no apparent reason, Antonio dumped a can of soda on a five-year-old girl who lived next door and then threw the can at her father. Stephanie had to call the LAPD's PET team to take him away. So much for his first day back.

Antonio was held for a few days until he stabilized and then moved to a residential treatment facility for people with both mental illness and substance abuse problems. "The first few months he did very well," says Norka Regalado, the sunny woman who runs the facility. "But once he stopped taking his meds and the schizophrenia kicked in, he became a totally different person." The facility was not locked. Eventually Antonio decided he'd had enough and disappeared.

That was the beginning of a new nightmare for Stephanie. Night after night after she got off work, she would drive around and search the worst parts of Los Angeles for her son. "She didn't eat; she lost weight," said Knox. "She'd be up at 3 a.m. in the car looking for him. I'd say, 'He doesn't want help. You need to take care of yourself.' She'd say, 'He's my only child. I can't leave him out there to die.'"

Finally, a friend of Stephanie's spotted Antonio at a Chevron station on Main Street. Stephanie raced there and found him in front of the cathedral—wild-haired, half-naked, and barely coherent.

Stephanie sat silently next to him. Then she asked if she could get him something to drink. She made him promise to stay put and then ran down the block to a convenience store. She returned with a sandwich, a bag of potato chips, and a bottle of Gatorade. After he had eaten, she asked him, "Why don't you come home with me? We'll get you some fresh clothes and a shower and a good home-cooked meal."

"I'm not getting in no car with you," he replied.

"Why not? Why would you refuse to get in the car with your mother?" she asked.

"Because I don't know where you'll take me," he said. "You're not taking me nowhere." He got up, thanked her for the food and drink, and walked away.

Stephanie went home and collapsed in her husband's arms. The next day she went back. She didn't find Antonio that day, but she did the day after that. He accepted a Subway sandwich from her.

Stephanie adapted. She'd put together care packages—bread, bologna, cheese, baby wipes, toilet paper, coupons for Subway, cigarettes—then go look for him. If she found him, they'd sit on a sidewalk or in a parking lot and share a cigarette or two. "I don't even smoke, but I'd smoke just to get him to stay longer," she said. "It was like talking to a stranger. Most of the time I couldn't understand what he was saying." Once the smoking was over, **(CONTINUED ON PAGE 122)**



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Antonio would shuffle off, glancing back to make sure she wasn't following him.

Between their irregular meetings, Stephanie was working every angle she could think of to get him off the streets. She knew he needed to be in a locked facility; his parole officers had sent him to many outpatient clinics and even back to Regalado's facility, but he wouldn't stay. She lobbied his parole officers and public defenders and joined the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. She bought a pair of fake sunglasses tricked out with a concealed camera and secretly recorded him during their street meetings, hoping the videos might help persuade a judge to have him committed. But the waiting list for a bed in California's handful of mental hospitals was 1,400 people long.

One night in January 2018, Antonio was on a downtown sidewalk yelling incoherently and waving a cane. He took a swing at a couple of passersby, who called the cops. Antonio was slapped with his most serious charge yet: assault with a deadly weapon. With the armed robbery already on his record, he was facing the possibility of many years in prison.

What saved him, ironically, was the very illness that had gotten him into trouble. When he appeared in court, Antonio was so obviously impaired that the judge deemed him incompetent to stand trial. That didn't mean he went free; he was locked up in the Twin Towers until he could be restored to competence, at which point he would face trial. It's a legal limbo that many inmates end up in for years. But for Stephanie it was the opportunity she'd been praying for: a shot at getting Antonio placed in a secure mental hospital.

Antonio's incarceration turned out to help in another way. In the Twin Towers he was put back on injections of the antipsychotic drug Haldol that kept his worst symptoms at bay. His mind stabilized enough for him to grasp his predicament. For the first time he

asked his mother to get him into a hospital.

On the morning of April 30, 2018, Stephanie strode into the courtroom of Judge Roberto Longoria on the sixth floor of the Metropolitan Courthouse, an imposing concrete building in a bedraggled section of downtown just south of the Santa Monica Freeway. Longoria was presiding over a series of mental health cases that morning. He would decide if Antonio would be sent to prison or a hospital.

The courtroom was small, with scuffed faux wood paneling on the wall, linoleum tile on the floor, and a few rows of mostly empty plastic chairs for the public. One after another, defendants were brought in and placed in a phone-booth-size cage made of steel and heavily reinforced glass. Their voices could be heard through a mesh-covered opening. Longoria and a handful of public defenders and prosecutors made their way quickly through case after case.

Antonio wasn't there in person. When his turn came, his wary face appeared on a video monitor next to Longoria's desk. He greeted the judge and then lowered his face so that only the top of his head was visible.

His public defender, Jonathan Petrak, presented the case, summarizing Antonio's long well-documented history of mental health problems. It was a solid presentation, but when Petrak sat down, Longoria did not look moved or even particularly interested.

In her front-row seat, Stephanie hesitated, then rose to her feet. "Your honor," she said, "may I speak?" Longoria looked at her for a moment; nothing like this had happened in the earlier cases that day. The judge nodded.

Keeping her voice measured and polite and her eyes on Longoria, Stephanie poured her heart out. She told the judge how she had been a drug addict and a prisoner herself but was now proud to say she worked for a TV celebrity; she talked about Antonio's football glory days and his descent into schizophrenia; she shared how she had spent years trying to get him help. "I am begging you, your honor," she concluded. "My son does not need to go to prison. Please let him go to a hospital so he can get the help that he needs."

"Thank you, Ms. Carrion," said Longoria, plainly surprised. He turned to the prosecutor and asked if she wanted to add anything. She did not.

There was some conferring among the judge and the lawyers, including discussions about bed availability and waiting times at different programs. Then Longoria declared that he agreed with Petrak and Stephanie. Antonio, he ordered, would be sent to a mental health facility.

Stephanie flung her hands wide, then brought them together under her chin, and closed her eyes for a moment. Her voice choking, she thanked the judge. She kept her composure until she was outside the courtroom. Then she broke down and wept.

**T**he Olive Vista Behavioral Health Center is a low-slung complex tucked away in a residential area in Pomona.

It took several months for Antonio to end up there after Longoria's ruling. The gears of the criminal justice system grind slowly and sometimes slip into reverse. Antonio was kept in the Twin Towers for months and shuffled briefly to a jail near San Bernardino before finally arriving in November 2018.

Olive Vista is the only locked forensic facility in L.A. County—55 beds for an area with a population of 10 million. "I'd like to have ten times as many," Lacey has said. "Getting in there is like winning the lottery."

I met Antonio at the facility recently, the two of us sitting at a plastic table in the cafeteria. Now in a stable environment and on medication, he was in better shape than at any time since high school. He was wearing a gray sweatshirt and basketball shorts as well as a black NFL cap, backward. It was hard to keep him focused at times—he tended to ramble. But he was friendly, almost boyish.

"I know I had schizophrenia, hearing voices," he said. "But that shouldn't take away the person you are."

As of this writing, Antonio is slated to move to an unlocked treatment facility soon. His goal is to get his own apartment. Maybe he'll visit New York, his dad's hometown, someday. He said that he has a handle now on his past "odd behavior." "You can trust me; that stuff won't happen again," he said. "I got my coping skills."

Stephanie calls daily and visits him at least once a week. She's hoping for the best, but she knows there are no guarantees. "Hopefully Olive Vista has taught him that without his medication, he's not going to be the person he is now," she said. If he manages to get his own place, she's planning to start a fundraising drive to hire a live-in caregiver to help him for the first few months. In the meantime she's still getting used to Antonio's new reality. "Every time we start talking, I'm like, 'He's back,'" she said. "He's back." ■

*Parts of this story were originally presented on KCET's SoCal Connected.*