

# Los Angeles Times

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To the judges,

In 2018, Los Angeles Times staff writer Thomas Curwen received a phone call from a mother whose son had disappeared. She introduced herself as Mary Liciaga, and her son's name was Anthony. She believed he was living on the streets of Compton. He was 26 and schizophrenic, and she was desperate.

At the time Anthony was a statistic, belonging to the estimated 40% of those living unsheltered in Los Angeles County with a severe mental illness, a substance abuse disorder or both. His fate – to die of an overdose or disappear in jail – seemed preordained, but Liciaga was intent upon saving him.

Curwen, who had written extensively about homelessness and mental illness, contacted an outreach worker, who met Anthony. He promptly waved off any help. Two weeks later, Anthony was picked by sheriff's deputies and taken to Harbor UCLA Medical Center. Doctors placed him on an involuntary psychiatric hold and contacted Liciaga.

With the crisis of mental illness among the state's homeless population growing more acute, Curwen knew he had to tell this story. Since Anthony first experienced the symptoms of schizophrenia 10 years ago, he has cycled through a mental health system that has been unable to provide him with consistent, meaningful treatment. Today he is living in a locked residential facility, and Liciaga, who is his conservator, wonders how safe he actually is.

Over the course of nine months, Curwen met with Anthony and Liciaga to create an intimate portrait of schizophrenia through childhood memories, visual and auditory hallucinations and behavior. Curwen also worked closely with Liciaga to secure copies of Anthony's medical records, scattered among public and private agencies throughout Southern California.

But "A World Gone Mad" is more than just a story about Anthony's experience with schizophrenia and its treatment. Curwen has brought in voices of experts in the field of mental illness – psychiatrists, sociologists, public health officials – and structured two distinct narratives in alternating chapters. Each builds upon the other to create a compelling narrative of this slowly evolving public health emergency.

The result is an indictment of public and private agencies that have failed to understand the complicated nature of mental illness and substance abuse. Hospitalized, medicated and released, Anthony continually fell prey to drugs and his recurring psychoses with no consideration of long-term treatment, housing and care.

“I could spend my whole career trying to fix what’s wrong ... and still not succeed,” the former director of mental health for Los Angeles County told Curwen.

Two sidebars broadened the compass of the story. One examines the history of Anthony’s current residence, one of the oldest institutions of its kind in Los Angeles whose history underscores the city’s ambivalence toward treating mental illness. The second shares how the story was reported and provides a personal look at schizophrenia.

“Dispense with the label, and we all fall on a spectrum measuring degrees of mental illness and mental health,” Curwen writes. “Some of us just need more help navigating a world that is scary, complicated and overwhelming.”

Readers responded enthusiastically to the story. Many shared their experiences with family members with mental illness: “I have a brother who is very similar, and it made me feel less alone in the frustration of being his caretaker.” Others were grateful for its compassion. “Lovely, dead-on, moving and so human. Thank you for this story – badly needed to correct our woeful, deeply misinformed beliefs about those with mental illness.”

We are proud to submit “A World Gone Mad” for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kevin E. Merida". The signature is written in a cursive style with a light blue rectangular highlight behind it.