



Parik Singh is an 180-year member of the Portland Police bureau. He received the Medal of Valor and the Police Star for his service in March 2011.

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Even the sad stories can have true heroes

*How an officer's gift of the boots off his own feet
helped turn a homeless man's life around*

By John Canzano | The Oregonian
Thursday, December 25, 2014

Parik Singh arrived alone, and on foot. No back-up. I'd invited the Portland Police officer for a sit down on Monday, corner of SW 5th Ave. and Jefferson.

I wanted to thank him.

"It's my job," he said. "You really don't need to do this."

I told him I did.

Let's back up.

Because in March 2011, Singh responded to a 911 call in the Brooklyn neighborhood along with other officers. When the officers arrived they found a suicidal 62-year old man armed with a hunting rifle. As Singh reached to raise his service weapon Ralph Clyde Turner fired.

At Turner's trial, Singh would testify, "Getting shot is ... almost like holding a jackhammer against your whole body?"

The bullet pierced Singh's abdomen. It tore into his colon and one of his kidneys. The bullet left a 3- to 4-inch hole in his back. Singh had a seven-year old son at the time, and I can't imagine what he must have been thinking as he dragged himself behind a tree for cover amid the continuing gunfire.

None of that incident came up in any depth at our meeting. But it's important stuff. Because if any police officer in this city should be leery of a mentally ill man, it should be Parik Singh.

"There's a lot of sad stories out there," he said.

My friend, Fred, is one of them.

Fred is an extended family member on my wife's side. He's not blood related, but years ago he's the man who took my wife to her Little League softball games in Parkrose, watching every pitch but waiting until their walk home to give her constructive criticism.

It was Fred who watched and listened to Trail Blazers games with my then-12-year old wife. They rooted for Clyde Drexler, Buck Williams, Jerome Kersey, Kevin Duckworth and Terry Porter. It was Fred who would talk to her about elementary school work, and sing country-music tunes, and ultimately, make her giggle.

Fred was a copy-machine repairman. For 30 years, he serviced fax machines and replaced toner cartridges. He was never late to work. He never called in sick unless he really was. He was neat and meticulous with an amazing sense of humor, and in that way, Fred was exactly the kind of guy you'd invite to your home for Christmas dinner.

Right up until he lost it.

Six years ago, Fred decided to stop drinking. He cut out alcohol. Also, he'd developed a daily marijuana habit and decided to eliminate that, too. At his 60th birthday party, just about everyone who knew Fred supported him and wished him well.

I'm no medical expert, but Fred was probably self-medicating some form of mental illness all those years. When he stopped medicating, he began acting odd, eccentric, started hoarding, and went on rambling diatribes. He eventually said he heard voices.

I visited the duplex he lived in a few months after his sobriety started and walked past piles of garbage into a kitchen where he'd stacked open containers of rotting food. He barely had enough room to move about. And he babbled about money and sports. My wife and I looked at each other and felt helpless.

A few months later, Fred lost his job. No surprise. He'd blurted out inappropriate things to some of the customers he used to serve so politely. Soon after, because of the piles of garbage, he was evicted from his duplex. And despite passionate attempts by multiple family members to get Fred a psychiatric evaluation, Fred didn't think anything was wrong.

He disappeared not long after that.

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SPORTS

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Prep basketball: Quality of the field for the Nike Interstate Shootout attracts top college coaches **Page B2**
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Even the sad stories can have true heroes

How an officer's gift of the boots off his own feet helped turn a homeless man's life around

By Mike Richman
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The Blazers
Next: Philadelphia at Portland, 7 p.m. Friday (TV on KGW; radio on KPQ) 620, KRZ 102.3)

OKLAHOMA CITY — It was impossible not to let your mind immediately go there. When Trail Blazers point guard Damian Lillard hit a game-tying three late in regulation against the Oklahoma City Thunder on Tuesday, the comparison was obvious. The shot, the spot, the play itself harkened back to Lillard's series-ending triple in Game 6 of the first round of last season's playoffs that eliminated the Houston Rockets.

"It was similar," Blazers coach Terry Stotts said when asked if the play on Wednesday was the same one he used back in May. "Different guys in there, but basically it looked the same." **See Blazers, B7**



By Tim Reynolds and Tom Withers
Associated Press

Thursday's games

- Washington at New York, 9 a.m. (ESPN)
- Oklahoma City at San Antonio, 11:30 a.m. (ABC)
- Cleveland at Miami, 2 p.m. (ABC)
- L.A. Lakers at Chicago, 5 p.m. (TNT)
- Golden State at L.A. Clippers, 7:30 p.m. (TNT)

MIAMI — LeBron James doesn't have any apprehension for this homecoming. There's nothing to fear, no real worries about his safety, unlike what awaited him the last time he had one of these return games. Then again, this might not even classify as a homecoming — because, it turns out, Miami was never truly his home, just a place he called home for four years while playing with the Heat. He came. He won. He left. On Thursday, James returns to face the Heat, the team that turned him from a superstar into a two-time NBA champion superstar. And as he and the Cleveland Cavaliers prepare for an emotional Christmas visit, James expects to be **See NBA, B7**

JOHN CANZANO

Parik Singh arrived alone, and on foot. No backup. I'd invited the Portland police officer for a sit-down Monday, on the corner of Southwest 5th Avenue and Jefferson. I wanted to thank him. "It's my job," he said. "You really don't need to do this." I told him I did. Let's back up. Because in March 2011, Singh responded to a 911 call in the Brooklyn neighborhood along with other officers. When the officers arrived they found a suicidal 62-year-old man armed with a hunting rifle. As Singh reached to raise his service weapon, Ralph Clyde Turner fired. At Turner's trial, Singh would testify, "Getting shot is ... almost like holding a jackhammer against your whole body." The bullet pierced Singh's abdomen. It tore into his colon and one of his kidneys. The bullet left a 3- to 4-inch hole in his back. Singh had a 7-year-old son at the time, and I can't imagine what he must have been thinking as he dragged himself behind a tree for cover amid the continuing gunfire. None of that incident came up in any depth at our meeting. But it's important stuff. Because if any police officer in this city should be leery of a mentally ill man, it should be Parik Singh. "There's a lot of sad stories out there," he said. My friend, Fred, is one of them. Fred is an extended family member on my wife's side. He's not blood related, but years ago he's the man who took my wife to her Little League softball games in Parkrose, watching every pitch but waiting until their walk home to give her constructive criticism. It was Fred who watched and listened to Trail Blazers games with my then-12-year-old wife. They rooted for Clyde Drexler, Buck Williams, Jerome Kersey, Kevin Duckworth and Terry Porter. It was Fred who would talk to her about elementary school work, and sing country-music tunes, and ultimately, make her giggle. **See Canzano, B5**



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Portland police Officer Parik Singh received the Medal of Valor and the Police Star after being shot in 2011.

One winter he called, freezing cold, crying, and asking for a blanket. We never heard back from him. Fred started collecting social security at 62. He had two pensions from the jobs he'd held. But he was homeless and we were helpless.

During a cold snap a couple of years ago the manager of a highway motel in Troutdale telephoned, explaining that she'd have no choice but to kick Fred out unless someone paid his weekly motel charge. He'd passed along our number. My wife and I drove to Troutdale, wondering if we were doing the right thing, plunked down \$185 as Fred assured us he'd make an appointment with a mental-health center.

He never did.

He never took me up on the offer to get him a part-time job, either.

Much later, we learned, Fred lost his driver's license. Unable to cash his social security and pension checks, he was officially adrift.

Fred -- slowly, painfully, agonizingly -- melted into the crowd of homeless people who live on our streets. When I passed homeless people the last few years, sleeping on the streets or panhandling, I sometimes looked at their faces, hoping to see Fred looking back. Worse, my wife braced for the telephone call in the middle of the night from the police informing us that Fred was dead.

A week ago, word came.

A woman who calls herself "Barbie Bible" befriended Fred on the streets. She said he was living in the parking lot of the Albertson's grocery store on NE 181st and Glisan. She sent photographs, and my wife burst into tears as she looked at a picture of a sullen man with no teeth, face chapped by the cold, eyes sunken.

It was Fred, less the 90 pounds he's lost in the last few years.

Days later, I drove to that parking lot. I wondered if Fred would be hostile. I wondered if he'd even remember me. I wondered if time, cruelty and mental illness could harden a person's spirit. I've seen what prison does to people, but what of the streets?

I found Fred sitting in a laundromat in that Albertson's strip mall. He was wearing two pairs of jeans, three shirts, and a beanie cap. He was filthy. He smelled like urine. His hands were infected, swollen and black in spots. When he saw me, he hugged me, sobbing into my shoulder.

"Can we go get a cheeseburger and onion rings?" he asked.

Fred is in a mental-health facility today. He's being medicated, and getting therapy, but remains very sick. I'm hopeful that he'll respond to treatment, stay healthy and maybe one day be able to sit with my wife and root for the Blazers again.

He'll spend Christmas Eve in that facility. They'll bake cookies, he reports. They'll eat three meals. On Christmas, the residents there will open presents.

But the gift that Fred can't stop talking about brings us back to that police officer, the one who had every right to initially view any person with mental illness as a imminent threat.

When I found Fred he told me how degraded he felt sleeping on the streets. He explained that when he was freezing, lying on the pavement of the parking lot, he urinated on himself to keep warm. He told me about being robbed. Someone stole his Bible, even.

He told me about the cruelty of strangers, who said awful things to him. He told me about riding the MAX train for five straight hours in the early morning, Hillsboro to Gresham, just to stay warm. But ultimately, it was feet Fred wanted to talk about.

On them, Fred wore a pair of beautiful black Danner boots.

"Officer Parik Singh gave me his boots," Fred said.

Singh told me the rest of the story on Monday. He'd encountered Fred in front of the Federal Courthouse. Singh observed Fred walking, shoeless, socks soaking wet and his pants falling down. Singh said Fred was funny, polite and talked about having places he needed to be.

“We wear the same size -- 11,” Singh said. “He was cold. I offered him a ride, but he wouldn’t accept it.”

This is how a homeless man with no teeth and no hope ended up wearing the \$140 boots of a 41-year old police officer last week. This is how Officer Singh, a man who grew up in Pendleton, ended up sitting with a sports columnist, talking about the epidemic of people in this city sleeping in doorways and under bridges. We spoke, too, about the mistrust nationally of law enforcement officers.

“I’ve been doing this for 18 years,” he said. “How we do police work has changed so much over the years. It’s not even the same job.”

Singh received the Medal of Valor and the Police Star after being shot in 2011. He got back on the job and now works 7 a.m. - 5 p.m. He serves and protects. Also, as an officer of the Central Precinct he plays the role of law enforcement officer and social worker to the droves of homeless. At the end of his shift, he drives home to his now 10-year old son.

“But I think about those people all the time,” he said. “A lot of them can’t go home. There are other officers who go to the store on their shift, buy food out of their pockets and feed people.”

Christmas feels like the right time to take a moment to thank Officer Parik Singh. Also, a thank you to all of the good men and women who serve this city (and others) not only with their skill and expertise, but with kindness and decency.

We grow up being told that you can trust police officers. We teach our children, “If you ever get lost, find a police officer.” And if they do, it’s men like Singh we hope they encounter.

I told Singh that I suspected this wasn’t the first time he’s given away his boots.

His reply: “It felt the compassionate thing to do.”

We visited Fred on Tuesday night at the mental-health facility. He’s surrounded by some of the best psychiatrists, therapists and social workers in the state. It’s a long road back but he’s on it.

Fred is focused on getting better. His hands are healing. His brain is still a long way off. But when I told Fred I met up with Parik Singh this week and thanked him, his eyes grew glassy.

“My boots,” Fred said. “I love my boots.”

Then, he said something else.

“You know... he gave me his socks, too.”