

Out Of The Debris, A Survival Story



The Washington
Post

Oct. 14, 2009

Danny Glass holds a photo Michael took of him four months ago, just days into our cross-country road trip. Photo by Michael Williamson/The Washington Post

When we first met Danny Glass, he was sitting in a tent, half-naked, too weak to put on pants.

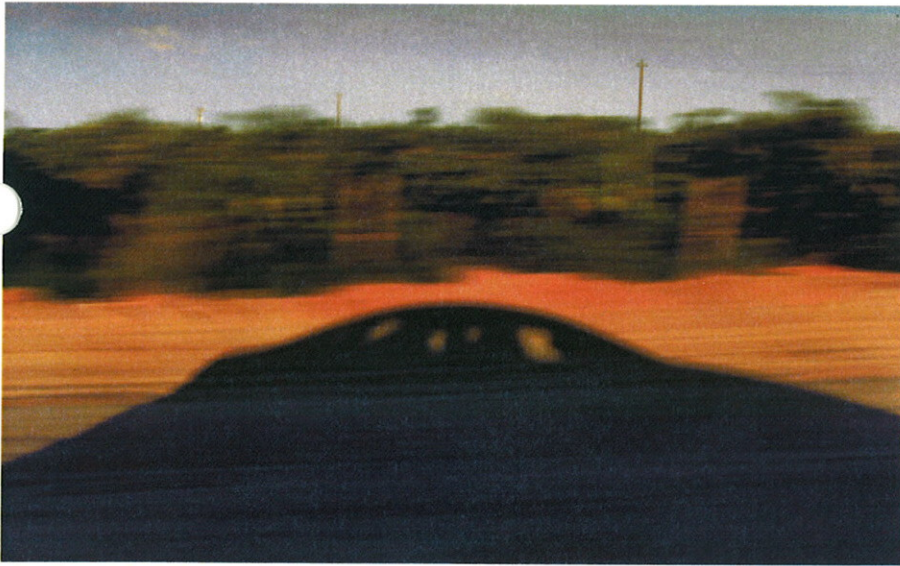
He knew he was dying.

"Can I ask a favor?" he said to Michael Williamson, the Washington Post photographer with whom I traveled across the country this summer. "Can I use one of those photos for my obituary?"

That was in June. Flash forward to a couple of weeks ago: Michael and I stand in that same tangle of woods behind a motor vehicles office in Woodbridge, but we see no Danny, just the rain-soaked remnants of his belongings: a stained couch cushion he used as a mattress. A plastic water bowl for a dog he surrendered to a better home. A hospital wristband with his name on one side and the words "fall risk" on the other.

Michael and I don't know whether to feel relief or sadness. We don't know whether Danny is dead or in the clean bed he hadn't had in a long while.

About four months had passed since we began a road trip across the country and into the lives of hundreds of Americans affected by the recession. We would drive more than 20,000 miles, down highways and through back roads, talking to everyone from an Elvis impersonator in Memphis to an asphalt paver in Las Vegas.



Along the road in California's Central Valley. Photo by Michael Williamson/The Washington Post

On our lowest days, we pulled ticks from our hair and cried in a darkened car, weighed down by what we'd just witnessed. On our best, we laughed with a couple we picked up on the side of the road and marveled at the resiliency of those who had lost everything except hope.

We would pass through 30 states without getting a ticket, stay in more cheap motels than Tom Bodett -- including one with barbed wire outside the door -- and find stories of hardship wherever we stopped.

In Tennessee, we'd meet a young couple unable to afford a \$186 engagement ring from Wal-Mart. In Florida, we'd find a recently laid-off UPS worker on a bed of concrete outside a church, writing a letter to his mother. And in Colorado, we'd spend an evening with a 36-year-old industrial designer who'd lost her job, two homes and a sense of who she was.

But that would all come later.

When Michael and I met Danny we had no idea what was ahead of us.

We didn't know whether we'd find a country dinged by the financial crisis or crippled by it. All we knew was that for the newly homeless -- men and women forced by foreclosures and unemployment to seek out borrowed couches, crowded shelters and unfamiliar streets -- Danny was an example of life at its lowest. If there was a bottom to hit, he was there, sitting inches from a mountain of empty Thunderbird bottles, the contents of which had eaten away at his liver.

How many people would the recession push to that point? How many people would be sitting in the woods a decade from now because of what happened to them this year?

That Danny was smart and charming was clear even at his weakest. He kissed my hand when I reached to shake his. "Sometimes," he told me, "when you don't appear to be anything, that's when you're someone." His blue eyes were haunting, if only because they hinted at a man much younger than he looked.

Michael and I promised to come back at the end of our trip to check on him.

That's why we were standing at the tent on a recent weekday and that's why, when we found it vacant, we started digging through a pile of

garbage a foot high. We found only hints that no one had been there for a while: old prescription pill bottles, newspapers from June.



Michael and I spent a recent afternoon looking through the remains of Danny's camp. Photo by Michael Williamson/The Washington Post

Danny wasn't at the local hospital. An employee there who knew him suggested I try the morgue. But that wasn't necessary.

Danny was an extreme example of what we had seen all along the road: men and women determined to survive despite their circumstances. The couple with the ring on layaway decided not to wait for better days and got married with a \$50 ring instead. The UPS man wrote not only about his laments, but his hopes. "I'm lost," his letter read. "There got to be a job out there some where." And the industrial designer who once cried every day discovered a middle ground between fierce autonomy and forced dependence.

As for Danny, no one forced help on him. He asked for it. Just weeks after we met him, he called Gayle Sanders, director of the Hilda M. Barg Homeless Prevention Center in Woodbridge, which is operated by Volunteers of America.

"I don't want to die alone and have somebody find me in two weeks," Sanders said Danny told her. She and her husband picked him up. In his first weeks at the shelter, he could not walk and could barely talk. The nursing assistant at the hospice told Sanders that Danny had just weeks to live.

Danny remembers none of this. All he knows is he woke up in a bed, not knowing how he had gotten there.

"There's certain points of my life that are lost forever in my memory bank," he said. "And it's probably best I don't remember."

He now lives in a nursing home where he has a bed with clean sheets and a table topped with cards from relatives he hadn't talked to in decades.

Until we visited Danny there, he hadn't seen the photo Michael had taken of him in the woods. It showed a bearded, gaunt-faced old man with large bags under his eyes.