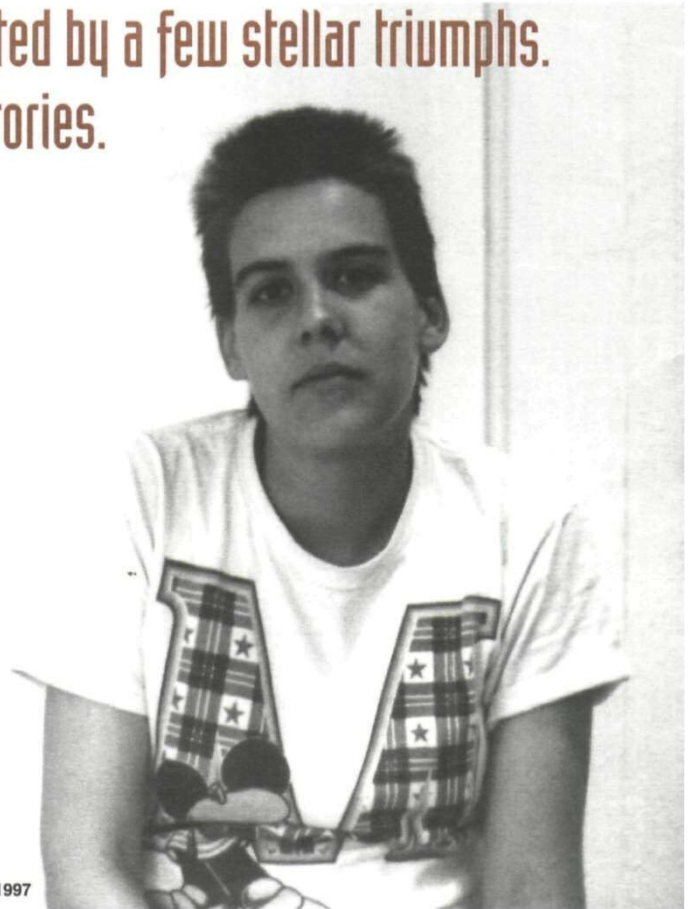


The faces of the mentally ill

'A nightmare in broad

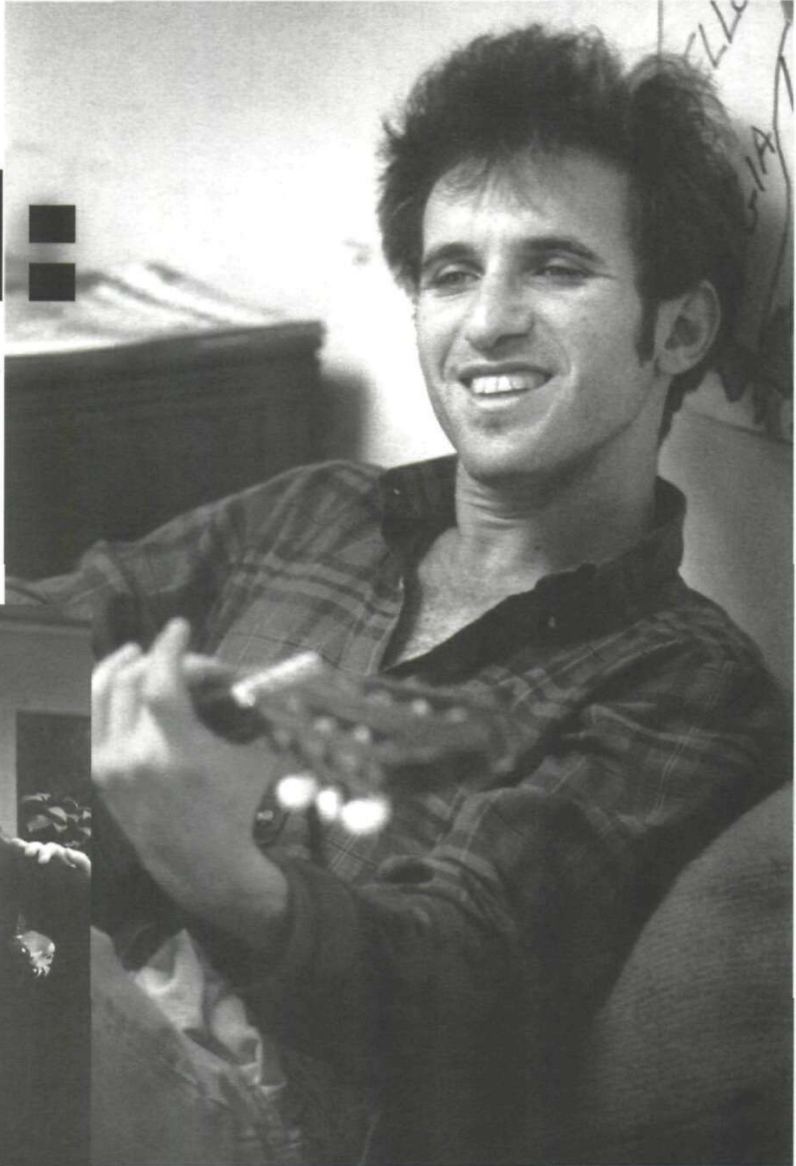
In the chronicles of California's treatment of the mentally ill, there are many stories, too many of them horrific and sad, punctuated by a few stellar triumphs. Here are three of those stories.

By Sigrid Bathen



Melanie, 1997

f lly ill: daylight'



David Weisburd, 1989 (Photo courtesy of Los Angeles Times)



Marc Kiefer (left) with father Frank, 1991

Melanie

It has been nine years since then-14-year-old Melanie started showing signs of mental illness. "It was difficult to tell, really, what was going on with her," recalls her mother, Susan Miller, a registered nurse who has battled the mental health system, and sometimes her daughter, to get Melanie the help she needed. It was a battle that continued even when, like many mentally ill people, Melanie refused to accept help, refused to take the medication that calmed her wild mood swings, disappeared on the streets for months on end.

During one of the terrifying manic periods that are

characteristic of Melanie's severe bipolar disorder (manic-depression), she assaulted her mother in Miller's San Francisco apartment, beating her severely. "She was 19 or 20 then, living in Sacramento by herself," says Miller. "I'd sent her money to take a bus to come and see me in San Francisco. She was talking to herself and had been progressively getting sicker.

"We were cooking dinner, and she asked me if I wanted to put any seasoning in the stir-fry. I suggested she put the seasoning on the table. She pulled out a bottle of curry and dumped about half the bottle in the stir-fry. Then she went



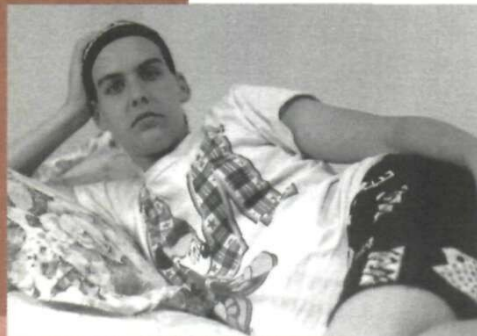
upstairs and packed her backpack. I knew she was on the edge. As she started to walk out the front door, she started kicking me in the stomach, punching me over and over again. Finally, I was able to shove her out the door. I looked out the kitchen window, and I could see her talking to herself in the parking lot. The next day she called me and said, 'Mom, I can't believe I did that.'"

Melanie's history is not uncommon: Repeated, generally involuntary, hospitalizations in a dizzying assortment of mental health facilities in Sacramento and San Francisco but never, in the view of her longtime physician and her mother, long enough to stabilize her condition and establish her on medication. "The last time she was discharged, she was homeless on the streets of Sacramento," says Miller. "I started calling homeless shelters and asking if there was anybody there named Melanie, and they'd say they couldn't tell me. I remember it was raining, and here I was at the Red Lion Hotel, and my daughter was on the streets in the rain."

Melanie's behavior, and the episodes of her life, paint a disturbing picture: picked up by Sacramento police as she tried to open a can by endlessly rapping it on the sidewalk on the K Street Mall near the seedy downtown Sacramento hotel where she lived; dismantling a sink in her apartment because she felt it looked better in a closet; using a felt pen to write scripture from the Bible over every inch of her room; hearing voices; insisting she was engaged first to actor

Johnny Depp, then to singer Eddie Veder; ranting and raving incoherently; disappearing for months on end; two days in the Sacramento County Jail for auto theft. The theft charge was dismissed after her mother wrote the court about the severity of her daughter's illness. "I wonder what happens to people who don't have families to advocate for them," says Miller.

left: Melanie, circa 1992
middle: Melanie,
September 1997
bottom: Melanie, age 3,
with her sister
Leann, age 8 (left)



When Melanie was a teenager, living in Sacramento with her family, she took the path of many mentally ill — using street drugs to make her "feel better." She withdrew from the family — her parents are divorced, and she has an older sister, who graduated with honors from the University of California, Berkeley — and developed a circle of friends her mother "was not comfortable with." It would be more than three years before Melanie's illness was fully diagnosed, and during that time she became heavily involved with methamphetamine.

She dropped out of high school at 16. After one of the longer disappearances, she turned up in the Sacramento Mental Health Treatment Center. "I couldn't believe how skinny she was, how awful she looked," her mother recalls. Doctors decided her major problem at that time was drug use — a common, though incomplete, diagnosis that would have disastrous implications for her future mental health treatment. "I brought her home with me," says



Miller. "Toxicology tests showed she was clean of [street] drugs, but the symptoms persisted, and got worse. She set up a shrine in her bedroom, became violent, withdrew from everyone, would not go out of the house."

In 1993, Miller took then-19-year-old Melanie to see Dr. Jerome Lackner (see previous story), who diagnosed her as severely bipolar (manic-depressive), delusional and psychotic. By the time Lackner saw her, Melanie's behavior had become increasingly bizarre. Concerned that her numerous hospitalizations had yielded no complete diagnosis, consistent treatment plan or follow-up, Lackner recommended she be immediately hospitalized at the Langley Porter Psychiatric Institute of the University of California Medical School in San Francisco, where she was placed on medication to calm her wild mood swings.

Lackner said she was improved upon release, and he ordered the requisite lab tests to determine her reaction to the medication. She didn't return to see him for five months, when she advised him she had her own apartment in Sacramento, was having regular contact with her father and stepmother, both registered nurses in Sacramento, as well as with her mother. Her behavior continued to be bizarre, and Lackner questioned whether her lithium dosage was sufficient but bemoaned her lack of cooperation in getting the necessary lab tests.

By December of 1993, Melanie was refusing to take any medication and was "clearly hostile" in a visit with Lackner. She missed her next two appointments, surfacing again in the spring of 1994, Lackner said, "in a rather florid state of mania." She then missed three more appointments, dropping in unannounced in the fall of 1994. Around the same time, her behavior caused her to be evicted from her apartment. Lackner last saw her in January 1997. She had been cut off by the Social Security Administration and Medi-Cal because she didn't show up for the medical and psychiatric evaluations.

Her mother has since been able to get her Medi-Cal reinstated, but the SSI that provides her only support has been more difficult to reinstate; Lackner says because of a seriously backlogged and flawed system which denies benefits to seriously mentally ill patients who also have a history of drug abuse. "Instead of punishing the system that cannot cope with our sickest patients, we will just punish the patient and let her go without benefits," Lackner wrote in a heated May 1997 letter protesting the continued denial of her SSI benefits.

In August 1997, Susan Miller moved back to Sacramento, commuting from her San Francisco nursing job until she finds work in Sacramento. Meanwhile, her 23-year-old daughter is living in a decrepit, roach-infested downtown Sacramento hotel. And she is pregnant by a mentally ill young man whom she met in the hotel, and who disappeared after he learned of the pregnancy.

Oddly enough, Lackner says, pregnancy sometimes has a calming effect on severely disturbed women, and that seems to be the case with Melanie, who has scrounged second-hand baby clothes and recently accompanied her mother to look for a house. "She's obviously still having problems, but she is more conversant," says her mother. "She looks very strange, and behaves strangely, and of course nobody would rent to me when they saw her. So I told them she had a brain tumor. They seemed to accept that."

Melanie's baby — a girl — is due this month.

Marc

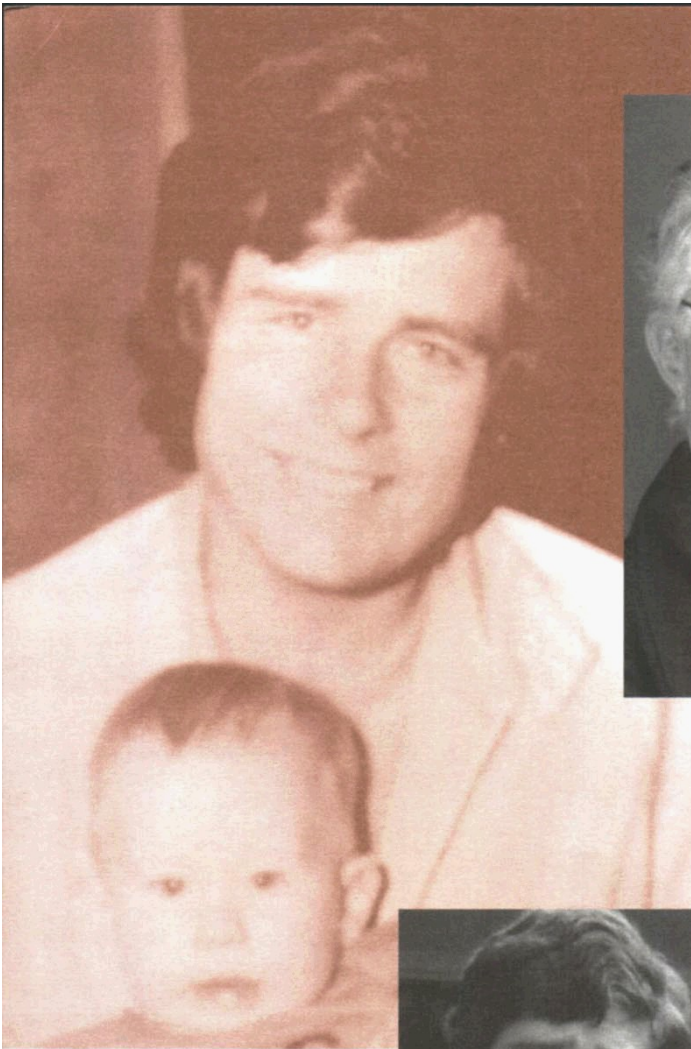
Marc Kiefer suffered from schizophrenia, that most devastating of mental illnesses that strikes an estimated 1 percent of the population. Often, its victims are unusually creative and intelligent. In high school, Marc excelled in sports, and was a freshman at the University of California, Berkeley, when his first schizophrenic break occurred. But he graduated in 1980, and in 1992 earned a teaching credential at California State University, Hayward.

On February 3, 1993, at age 38, having lived with his illness for two decades, he died after 18 hours in "seclusion and restraints" at a Richmond psychiatric hospital with a history of complaints about poor patient care. Investigators concluded he died as a result of an overdose of psychiatric medication — which had been suspected by his family from the start of his hospitalization — as well as the "inappropriate" use of seclusion and restraints. He had severe bruises and welts at the sites of the leather straps and "restraint cuffs." Rigor mortis had already set in, an indication that he had not been checked for hours, although hospital records indicate he was checked every 15 minutes.

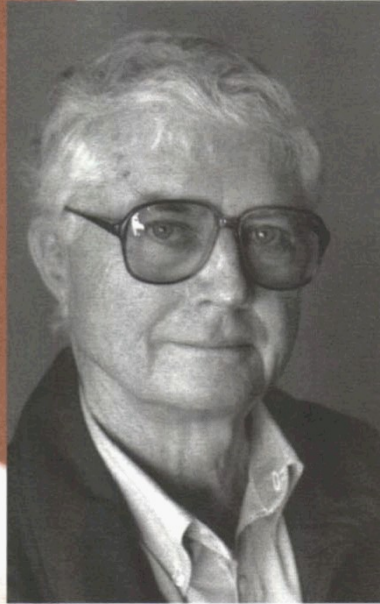
In a wrenching article about his son's death in the *THE JOURNAL*, a publication of the California Alliance for the Mentally Ill, Frank Kiefer, a retired journalist and legislative and congressional staffer, wrote about the progression of his son's illness — how the smart and talented young man bounced from job to job, janitor to substitute teacher and finally to sportswriter for a small newspaper. "He had no trouble getting jobs, but invariably lost them when stress and fear and anger and anxiety and hallucinatory voices overwhelmed him, and his troubles became apparent to his colleagues," his father wrote. At the last newspaper where he worked, he had leveled with the sports editor about his illness — unlike his previous jobs — and the editor proved to be an understanding man. Marc was attending a day treatment program in Oakland, living on his own, and seemed to be stabilized on medication when, on February 1, 1993, he began to behave strangely. He seemed disoriented and acted confused and giddy. His parents suspected he had taken too much of a prescription medication — a common problem for schizophrenics, for whom truly effective medications were only recently developed. They took him to his day treatment program, where his disorientation became more pronounced, and staff there recommended he be taken to a psychiatric facility for an emergency evaluation.

Unlike many schizophrenics, Marc Kiefer had never been hospitalized in a locked inpatient psychiatric facility. He had been seeing the same psychiatrist for 20 years, was well-groomed, cooperative and very close to his family. The psychiatric evaluator for East Bay Hospital, an 87-bed, for-profit psychiatric facility in Richmond which served primarily Medi-Cal patients, recommended a voluntary commitment, to which Marc quickly agreed.

Two days later, he was dead, having died alone in a "seclusion" room, strapped to a table for 18 hours. His parents, who had already lost one mentally ill son to suicide in 1992, were devastated. "The end came during the graveyard shift, midnight to 7:30 a.m.," his father wrote. "The attendant on duty failed to check Marc's circulation for over seven hours, although he indicated that he had done so every 15 minutes. Marc had been dead for several hours while the



above left: Marc Kiefer with nephew, circa 1982
upper right: Frank Kiefer
right: Marc, 1991.



attendant allegedly 'checked' his circulation and observed him 'sleeping.' The parents and Marc's longtime psychiatrist had repeatedly called the facility, but were "invariably shunted about, given misinformation, promised return calls that never materialized, lectured on confidentiality, even hung up on." The doctor on duty did call them on the morning of February 3 — to tell them their son was dead.

A subsequent investigation and report, issued in February 1994 by a federally funded, non-profit organization for the disabled called Protection and Advocacy Inc. (PAI), concluded that Marc Kiefer died as a result of grossly inferior care that violated all variety of medical standards — from East Bay's failure to conduct an adequate physical exam to inadequate monitoring of the patient, to failure to "identify and respond to a life-threatening medical condition." Ultimately, PAI concluded, the facility "chose exactly the wrong course of treatment," failing to conduct thorough blood screening and even prescribing the wrong medications.

"Seclusion and restraint can cause serious physical and

emotional harm," the PAI investigation into Marc Kiefer's death concluded, "especially when used for long periods of time, for inappropriate reasons or without adequate monitoring and care, as was the situation with Kiefer. Risks include dehydration, exhaustion, cardiac arrest or respiratory collapse, fractures, muscle and kidney damage, self-mutilation as a result of being alone and isolated. The emotional impact of seclusion can be severe."

The Kiefer case and other complaints about East Bay ultimately resulted in the facility's closure earlier this year after local authorities stopped referring patients there. The family sued the hospital and received a \$125,000 settlement.

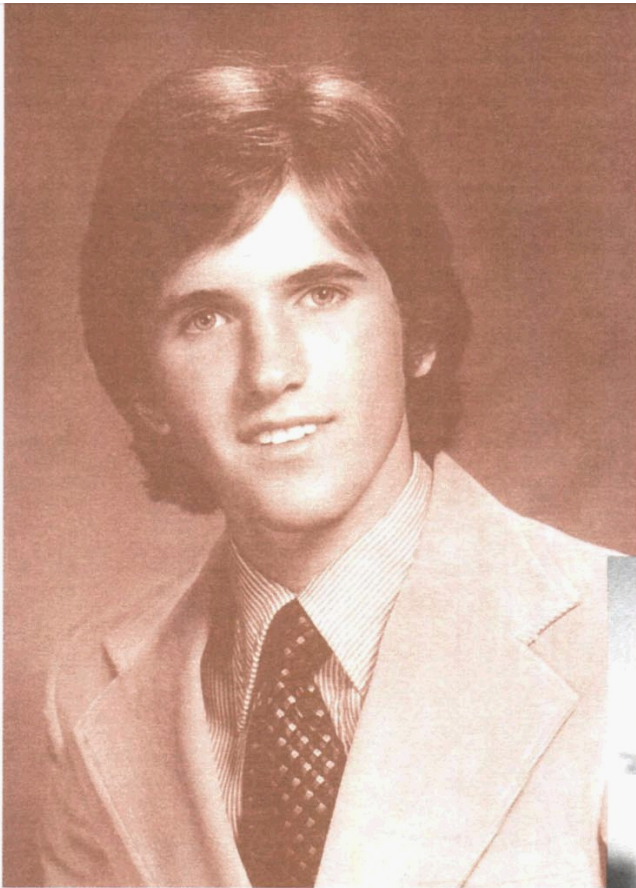
David

When David Weisburd was a senior at North Hollywood High School in 1978, he earned a near-perfect score on the Scholastic Aptitude Test — 1575 out of 1600. A prodigy in math and science, he had been taking college classes since he was in junior high. He was a long-distance runner and tennis player in high school, leading the Andover summer session tennis team to victory over Exeter. His summer philosophy teacher, who taught at Harvard, wrote his father that David was the best student he had ever had.

Recruited by Harvard, he was a sophomore there in 1980 when his father got the phone call that changed their lives forever. "I remember hearing a hospital PA system in the background," recalls Dan Weisburd, an award-winning film producer, director and screenwriter who has devoted the years since the onset of David's illness to producing documentaries and writing about the mentally ill. "David said, 'Don't worry, Dad, I can handle it. I've checked myself into the hospital. You won't believe this, but last night the entire football team, in the nude, chased me across Harvard Square and threw a grand piano at me. Now all the radio stations in the world are beaming their signals into my brain, saying the world wants me dead.'"

Then his doctor got on the phone, urging Dan Weisburd to come and get his son as soon as possible and have him admitted to a psychiatric facility closer to home. "Two things were implied in what the doctor said," the elder Weisburd wrote in an article in the *THE JOURNAL*, which he edits and founded in 1989. "We were in for a long siege, and there was little or nothing that Harvard knew to do for this now less-than-perfect being whom they had so fervently courted only two years previously."

Financially secure, Dan Weisburd and his wife, Elaine, who have two other children, started draining savings accounts, determined to find treatment for David's schizophrenia. "David was refractory [resistant] to all antipsychotic



above: David Weisburd, in 1978
right: David, 1989



medications," his father wrote. "He was zombied ... and, at times, incontinent. He was disruptive in day-treatment programs, a fire hazard in various residential settings, argumentative, even violent, and regularly kicked out of place after place, supposedly to preserve the 'milieu' for others whose behavior was more 'appropriate.' The easy ones got the service; the sickest got the streets.

"On the outside, David was jailed, robbed, lost in the Sierra foothills and in the Tenderloin of San Francisco, victim of an attempted rape. In and out of private, county, state and university hospitals. ... He was a failure as a patient, obdurate. Doctor after doctor said 'sorry' as David [declined] 'til soon, he had been seen by dozens of psychiatrists, not to mention legions of internists and residents. But always the care that followed seemed to lead nowhere. It was a nightmare in broad daylight."

Living at home with the family, which included two younger siblings, David was loud, disruptive, sometimes dangerous, once attacking his younger brother, who was devastated by this horrific change in the beloved sibling he had called his "hero."

Late one night, the family was forced to call the police when David brandished a butcher knife, believing someone was trying to kill him. Eight police officers in several squad cars descended on the Weisburd home, but what could have become a tragic confrontation was defused by officers who put down their guns and talked him out of the knife. His grateful father subsequently produced training films for law enforcement officers on how to deal humanely with the mentally ill. Underwritten by the state Department of Mental

Health, the training films are widely used by law enforcement agencies around the country.

When it became clear he could not live at home, David was placed in various care facilities, and has lived for nearly two years in a small group home connected with The Village Integrated Service Agency in Long Beach, a rehabilitation treatment program — one of two pilot programs legislatively created out of a state task force chaired by his father. Today, at age 36, he is doing well, taking two of the recently developed medications to control the delusions and hallucinations of schizophrenia, playing the guitar and keyboard, working a few hours a day preparing school lunches. He has appeared with his family on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" for a segment on "Living with Schizophrenia," and has been featured

in several television documentaries, including the prize-winning 1988 ABC-TV documentary, "They Have Souls, Too." He was a consultant on a 1996 episode of "ER," based on his life as a homeless man with schizophrenia, and he has written two articles for the *THE JOURNAL*, including one in December 1996, in which he recounted his terror at attending a large

awards presentation at the Sheraton Universal Hotel by the Sisters of Providence, who operate St. Joseph's Hospital in Burbank.

His father was receiving an award that night for his work in behalf of the mentally ill, and David was very nervous about appearing in such a large public setting. "I knew it meant dressing up," he wrote. "I hadn't done that for years. Schizophrenia kind of changes your social life, big time." He even consulted his "voices" about the wisdom of going. "My voices gave me all kinds of reasons, pro and con. They do little to clarify things for me and a lot to further my confusion. They also know me better than most people do." He decided to go — "my 'yes' came from a small reservoir of pride I've held on to, a still clear memory of the self I once was."

During his acceptance remarks, Dan Weisburd motioned to David and praised his courage in his battle with schizophrenia — and asked David to stand. "I did," wrote David, "and 750 people came to their feet. I couldn't believe it. ... I think about that when I'm on the job... It's my first real job in 16 years, and I've begun to enjoy it and the companionship of my co-workers. There are no ovations for me there, or in the music class that I've enrolled in, but I'm overcoming a lot of obstacles, like getting places on time, and keeping my thoughts focused, and I know I'm learning some new licks on the keyboard. . .

"After 16 years as a labeled mental patient, I really begin to sense a slight but honest degree of hope. The meds are getting better. . . I'm calm and even optimistic." 🏠