

**Dean's Executive Leadership Series - Pepperdine University / DELS
2007-2008**

**Transcript of Presentation by Steve Lopez, *L.A. Times* columnist –
Part 2**

About DELS: The Dean's Executive Leadership Series at the [Graziadio School of Business and Management](#) features in-depth audio or video interviews with today's top business practitioners and thought leaders. [Listen](#) or [subscribe](#) to the podcast to hear their views and insight on the current challenges and opportunities facing the business community.

Start

<music plays>

Announcer: The Graziadio School of Business and Management at Pepperdine University proudly presents the Dean's Executive Leadership Series. This podcast invites top business practitioners and thought leaders to share their view on the real world of business.

Linda Livingstone: I just got just one or two opening questions and then I want to open it up because I'm sure many of you have lots of questions that you would like to ask Steve. But I only talked a little bit about this on the podcast that we did earlier. But it's such a moving story and it's so interesting to hear you talk about the way in which your experience in life has changed because of that. But many of the people in the audience are business people and have been successful in that way, worked for successful organizations.

Talk a little bit about-- I mean these kinds of issues, homelessness, mental health issues, you put a lot of focus on the things that you write on, a lot of these sort of intractable social issues. What do you see as kind of the role or ways in which the business community or people even outside of the business

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graziadio School of Business and Management

community, can have a greater impact than we're having now on some of these really significant social issues?

Steve Lopez: Well, it's really important to think in those terms right now because-- I've talked to several people tonight, including John here. We're talking about the Venice Free Clinic and about all of the challenges they've got. They've got an eight percent layoff, which means 22 people. And so, all of these agencies that are trying to do good things for people in need are in crunch time. And it's no time to look for government solutions, I think, or at least to begin exploring more effective partnerships between business and government. And downtown on Skid Row what's frustrating-- and people ask all the time, "Well, have things gotten better since you started writing about this," and that's another one of the many gifts that Nathaniel has delivered to me, is the ability to shine a spotlight on these issues.

And people don't want to read about public policy in the paper but they'll read about a human drama when they've got a rooting interest in somebody. And so, he's the one who's allowed me to delve into those issues. The frustrating thing on Skid Row is that it's changed some. It's gotten a little bit better. But the city and the county have done what, for the most part, is the easiest thing to do, which is to have more cops out there. And cops cannot be expected to solve the problem. It is important for the cops to get rid of the major crime out there. And Nathaniel will be the first guy backing that because every day he's got to walk past drug dealers. And it works him into a frenzy every day. But there is not enough of what has been proven to work in San Francisco, in Denver, in New York.

It's known as permanent supportive housing. And there are many public/private partnerships that do that. Several of them exist downtown and there are others around the state. And what happens is that their incentives for private investment and what's known as permanent supportive housing, which is not just a roof over your head but all of the services that you might need whether it's mental health services, addiction rehab. There are a lot of people down there who are so-called dual diagnosis. You've got a mental illness and you've got an addiction problem. And so, very recently, I called Casey Horan, who's the director of Lamp where Nathaniel still stays. And I said, "What's your waiting list like right now?" And she said, "It's"-- and we're talking about people who go there during the day for the services but do not have a bed because there's a shortage of beds. And she said the waiting list is 700 people. So you look at her agency and a couple of others and they've got these huge waiting lists and it's no surprise that if you go down to Skid Row, people are still sleeping in the gutters, chasing rats with sticks.

And the city and the county have moved to begin doing a better job of creating permanent supportive housing but we are way, way, way behind New York City. And we were talking earlier about how

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graziadio School of Business and Management

President Bush's homeless czar, Phillip Mangano or Mongano, I'm not sure how you pronounce it, is a guy who really gets it and who, of all of the homeless advocates, including Casey, the director of Lamp, just love because he comes to town and says, "Look, all of you cities and counties that are saying we don't have the money to do more permanent supportive housing need to understand that what you're doing is more expensive because what you're doing now is having all of these cops down here. And the problem is not over when they arrest somebody for jaywalking because there's a warrant out on them because they couldn't afford to pay the last jay walking ticket. You're tying up people with the police and in jails and in the court system and in psychiatric emergency wards and state prisons. And it is costing us a fortune. And if you invest it up front with public, private partnerships, in permanent supportive housing like New York has done, you can knock out this problem. So that's one of the ways that we can do a much better job of having business people get involved.

I mean another way is to-- we were talking about this as well. I think not just business but social organizations, parishes, synagogues, I think, could find much more constructive ways to buddy up, to get trained, to team with Lamp or with the Midnight Mission or whatever it is so that people can make a difference in someone's life on a day other than Thanksgiving. It's nice that everybody wants to run downtown on Thanksgiving but it is the only day of the year they don't need your help because 80,000 other people are there to help. They need it on all the other days. And I don't think that you have to make an investment in someone's life the way I have with Nathaniel. This is an unusual case. But an hour a week to hook up with somebody through some social organization, a service organization, or through, you know, whatever congregation you're involved in, I just see great opportunities there.

And, you know, it's not a one-way thing as I've just explained to you here. It's not just giving—the rewards that will come your way. I was speaking about this at All Saints Church a couple weeks ago and described these rewards. And I said, "You feel as though you've been delivered to a state of grace." A simple act of human kindness and generosity brings many, many returns. And it's not a one-way thing. Nathaniel has given back in so many ways that have changed my life forever. I've never met a person like him and I've never had either as challenging or as ritually rewarding an experience.

Linda Livingstone: I'm going to open it up and what questions do we have from the audience about this particular story or other aspects of what Mr. Lopez does? We've got microphones we can-- okay, back here.

Woman 1: <inaudible>

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graziadio School of Business and Management

Linda Livingstone: Let's get you a microphone real quick.

Woman 1: Oh, thank you. They have a School on Wheels and it was started here in Malibu by Agnes Stevens and they go to the children living in the cars. And now, they've been able to open several buildings down in all of downtown Los Angeles to give books and school supplies. And that's something that's just very local that maybe people would be interested in. It's School on Wheels. Thank you, Mr. Lopez.

Steve Lopez: Yeah, well, there are lots of different ways to get involved. Anybody who wants to know more about Lamp, just go to www.Lampcommunity.org or check out Union Rescue Mission or the Midnight Mission. These are all groups that are having an incredible impact on-- you know, Casey Horan and her team, they are rescuing lives. They are salvaging the lives of hundreds of Nathaniels. And it's another reason I'm uncomfortable getting credit for doing all of this for Nathaniel. These are people who do this work day in and day out with little recognition and the miracles that they-- I mean it's hard work. It's just hard work. And the right organizations can really change people's lives.

And the first person who made me aware of this was actually in my days at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. And it's kind of a funny story. I was rummaging around for a Thanksgiving column. And I wanted it to be sort of upbeat because it was Thanksgiving. And I asked a colleague. I said, "I can't think of anything that's not a complete cliché, you know. Do you have any ideas?" And he said, "Yeah, go see Sister Mary." "What do you mean Sister Mary?" Sister Mary Scullion is a nun with the Sisters of Mercy in downtown Philadelphia who, in the evening, puts on her overcoat and goes out on the streets in her sneakers on, you know, 20-degree nights trying to talk people with mental illness in off the streets so they don't freeze to death. And she brings them to this convent and has created this little home for them in there. "And so, why don't you go to the convent and see all of these mentally ill women who are in there?" And I said, "That's an upbeat Thanksgiving day column?" <laughs> And he said, "I'll tell you what, go over there and hang with Sister Mary and some of the people she's rescued. And if you don't come away feeling great and inspired, I'll buy you lunch anywhere you want to go."

So I went over and sure enough, Sister Mary had all of these women who she had over time talked into trusting her, coming in off the street. One woman, Georgianna, had lost all of her toes from frostbite but had been reunited with family that she hadn't spoken to in years and ended up working as the receptionist of Project Home, which is what Sister Mary calls this thing. And Sister Mary, she was one of the pioneers in permanent supportive housing. Not only do you live there, but you get training to work in their diner and in their clothing store, their second-hand store. So you live there, you get training there, you're reunited

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graziadio School of Business and Management

with family there and you have this whole new community. There are so many people, so many ways to make a difference. And it's going to be, as I said, all the more important than ever in this economy as fundraising becomes difficult for non-profits and as, you know, government contributions to these efforts are squeezed.

Linda Livingstone: You mentioned the Union Rescue Mission. I don't know how many people in the audience are aware of this but our graduate school of education and psychology had a psychology clinic that they operate at the Union Rescue Mission. And our school of law actually provides free law services at the Union Rescue Mission. So there's mentioning things going on just through the university in terms of helping.

Steve Lopez: Here's another way you can help, speaking of the Union Rescue Mission. Andy Bales runs the Union Rescue Mission. And he's a minister. And the Union Rescue Mission is right smack dab in the middle of Skid Row. You've seen them in the news for, among other things, patient dumping. Hospitals that dump patients right out. Andy's got a camera out there so he nails them on this. But Andy bought this property way out in Northeastern San Fernando Valley like near Pacoima. It's called Hope Gardens. And he saw it as a place to get all of the women and children off of Skid Row and out into a safe environment where the children would be tended to by day and the women would go to college so that it's not just you're getting out of Skid Row but you're going to have a new life once you become self-sufficient. So they bought this property for something like \$7 million and it really is in the middle of nowhere. There's not a house within about a mile and a half of it. And there was community opposition. And this thing was bottled up for years at a tremendous cost to the Union Rescue Mission, the attorney's fees, fighting this thing, getting the support of the Board of Supervisors.

So another thing people can do is just stand up and scream. Business, you know, owners, citizens of Los Angeles just stand up and scream. It's a strange place and that so few people know who their supervisor is, what they do or what impact they have on people's lives. But it's a way, if you were more engaged, to just stand up and scream and say, "We are not going to tolerate this." These are women and children. And the kids are seeing, you know, bodies on the street and seeing, you know, people chasing rats with sticks. And here's somebody who has made an investment in getting them out of harm's way and there's community opposition. What are you talking about? So it's another way to get involved and make a difference.

Linda Livingstone: Yes, that's great. Other questions? We've got time for one or two more. Yeah?

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graziadio School of Business and Management

Woman 2: Hi, Steve. Thank you so much for your story. I've been so inspired as I'm sure everyone else has. I did send you an e-mail and I'm sure it's in your file box and don't worry about <laughs> replying back to me. You can answer me now. But my "Nathaniel" is a bum on Beverly Boulevard down in Beverly Hills near The Grove. His name is Jerry. And I encountered him about a year ago and I'm definitely not the kind of person who's homeless friendly. They always kind of freak me out. And this guy came across my path. He's somewhat capitalistic and entrepreneurial. And it's kind of come across my path over the last several weeks that I feel like I have to do something. And it's not enough for me just to go down there and give him money or give him a Bible or give him clothes, but that I feel like I need to do something more. And if it is within my power to help him, then I have to do it because nobody else has. And it's been a year and nothing's changed. And I don't really know where to start.

I mean, I'm just a businesswoman, you know, and he's a 53-year-old homeless man from Prague. And he doesn't seem to have any mental issues. He seems very lucid and quite bright and brilliant and just seems to talk my ear off every time I go down there. But I mean no one else is really interested and I don't really know what to do to help him out. He gets mugged all the time and gets robbed. And it's just been this vicious cycle of, you know, being left on the streets. I mean what advice do you have?

Steve Lopez: Well, I mean, I would locate the nearest agency that helps people like that and notify them and tell them exactly where. But better than that, send me another e-mail and say, "Remember me from Pepperdine" in the message field and I will call you and put you in touch with somebody who can go out there and try to do-- it's called outreach. And the philosophy is we'll meet them where they are. And in the case of Lamp and the Village-- there are two teachers here who just told me that they visited the Village. Oh, yeah, the social psychology faculty and your introductory social work, they just visited the Village in Long Beach, which is the same model as Lamp on Skid Row. And they have this thing that they call-- well, the philosophy of meeting you where you are or meeting them where they are and what it means. You go out and you talk to-- what's his name, Jerry?

Woman 2: Jerry.

Steve Lopez: They would send somebody out and they would know that it could be two dozen, three dozen trips. But they go out and say, "Hey, it's cold today. Jerry, you need a jacket. We got one." Or "You look hungry, would you like a sandwich?" and "Hey, if you would need a shower, come back to Path" or whatever place might be the nearest. It might be Path. And you work on that and work on that and work on that. And you might say, "Well, that's a long shot" but guess what, the people were sent out there to do that outreach used to live on the street, so they know all of the excuses. They know the whole deal and

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graziadio School of Business and Management

they've been trained to try to establish trust and to break through. And the first time I went to the Village, it was an amazing experience because as I was going into ask Dr. Mark Regans for some advice on how to handle and deal with and help Nathaniel, there was guy waiting to see him and it was like an emergency situation. The guy had been suicidal and they let me sit in on the counseling session. And the doctor did not come off as a doctor. He just asked him, "What are your needs right now." And you know, "You're limping. Does your foot hurt?" and "Hey, we got a lot of stuff here that you can take advantage of and do you need housing, do you need this, do you need that?" He wasn't trying to make a quick diagnosis and then write a prescription. And David, was the patient's name, really took to that well. You know, he was very calm and he said, "Okay, I think I'll come back tomorrow."

And when David left and I was talking to the doctor about that, I looked around and I saw all of these guys sitting at desk's and I said, "Are they doctors too?" And he said, "No, those are outreach workers." And I said, "Well, what are they doing?" He said, "They go out and they meet them where they are. And they try to talk people in." And I said, "That sounds tough but an interesting job." And Reagan says, "It is tough but they all used to live on the street and now they work here pulling more people in." So just e-mail me and I'll see if we could hook you up with an outreach worker who might try to establish a relationship with Jerry.

Linda Livingstone: I'll take one more question. Let's go down here. I know everybody's got lots of questions, but we'll close with this one.

Man 1: Thank you. Stepping away from Nathaniel's story, a wonderful story, looking forward to the movie.

Steve Lopez: You mean the book? I'm sorry, you mean the book.

<laughter>

Man 1: The book was phenomenal too. Stepping away from that, you've been a columnist with a lot of success for many years. You seem to have an enviable job. You throw rocks at the bad people and you inspire us to support people like Nathaniel and those kinds of causes. Over the years, have you ever gotten it wrong? Have you thrown too many rocks at the wrong person or supported somebody who turned out to be not as worthy?

Steve Lopez: I was not informed that there would be tough questions here.

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graziadio School of Business and Management

<laughter>

Steve Lopez: And that is...

Linda Livingstone: They get to ask them. You don't have to take them, yeah.

Steve Lopez: That is an excellent question. Unfortunately, it comes just as they're ringing the dinner bell.

<laughter>

Steve Lopez: Let me try to answer that. But here we are in Malibu and nobody's asked me big questions. I really appreciate that because everywhere I've been going it seems like it's the first question is, what's Robert Downey Jr. like and what's it like to have him play you. But you guys are asking much better questions.

<laughter>

Linda Livingstone: It's the way we educate our students.

Steve Lopez: I appreciate that. I really do appreciate that. Have I been too tough on certain people? Have I gotten it wrong at times? <laughs> I think that there are times when maybe the tone was off. I know that there have been times when the tone was off and I went after somebody a little bit too harshly. And I had an editor early on when I worked at the *San Jose Mercury News* who was very good at catching that because I did it a lot. When I going after public officials in particular, he said, "You know, you just have <chuckles> no restraint." And he said, "Let me tell you, if you want to take somebody apart, if you want to go after somebody and really beat up on them, the sledgehammer is not the tool of choice, use a double edged sword, you know. We're talking rapier width. Let them stand for just a few seconds before they fall over dead." And it was really good advice.

And he was the one who taught me about the power of understatement and using humor sometimes pulls you back just a little bit if—if it's not ridicule, if it's clever. But there have been many times when I really struggled with have I gone too far. I wrote a column that appeared this past Sunday, I think, that I wrote it

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graziadio School of Business and Management

on Friday when they informed me that-- late Thursday, they said, the entire California page is going to be the names of Californians who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan. So it would not be appropriate for me to have a column that day about a woman who was complaining about the utility boxes <chuckles> put up by Sprint. And they said you really need to do something on the war. And I said, "Well, I've spoken out against this war and I don't think it's an appropriate time or place to do that. I don't want to do a grave dance. And I think that I need to keep my views out of it if I do it and just find a way to, you know, just honor the dead." And then another editor said, "But you cannot completely surrender who you are or what your feelings are. You can't give that up entirely. And so, I wrote the column, which I thought was pretty much down the middle, true to my own feelings but respectful and treating families with dignity. And I could not sleep because just wrestling with was I too much this way, was I too much that way. And it's something that I do all the time. So I really struggle to try to get it right. And I'm sure that in my long 30-year-plus history, I've gone over the line too many times but it's something that I'm always trying to watch out for.

Linda Livingstone: What was the response to that?

Steve Lopez: The response that I got and that the paper is getting, there are people who thought listing the names of the dead was an anti-war statement and they've complained about that. I thought that it was a powerful tribute and I thought one of the things that made it so powerful was that whether you're pro war, anti-war or anywhere in between, it just evoked powerful feelings. And so, I thought it was really a success. But I got people saying how dare you use the occasion of, you know, Memorial Day to speak out against the war, which I didn't really think that I did. I said that, you know, I certainly didn't go over the line, I didn't think, and then other people saying, "Since when did you become such a supporter of, you know, a war in which hundreds of thousands of people have been killed." So I think that's a good sign, that I got it from both sides.

Linda Livingstone: That probably was kind of where you wanted it to be.

Steve Lopez: Yeah.

Linda Livingstone: Yeah. Well, I just want to thank you so much for being here. And I know there's probably dozens of other questions that we could ask you that would be wonderful to hear tonight. But I really appreciate you being so honest and open about the experiences that you've had. And I think it's been a really wonderful evening together. I know just a couple of things that I take away from this, especially as you've told this story about Nathaniel, is, one, just sort of being more aware and paying

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graziadio School of Business and Management

attention to what's going on around us on a different level than we may be normally do or you wouldn't have even noticed Nathaniel if you sort of hadn't been doing that. And that partly may come from your reporter's background and your news background. But I think the other piece of it too that strikes me is just thinking about the kind of impact we each individually can have. We sometimes think we don't have the ability to influence and impact these issues on a grand scale. But if we all do our part on even a small scale, it has a big impact over time. So I appreciate you coming and sort of sharing that experience with us. And it's impacting how we think about some of these issues.

Steve Lopez: Well, thank you for having me and for this whole presentation. And I appreciate that people came out and asked such smart questions and none about the movie. And should I give them one question about the movie?

Linda Livingstone: Okay, who has a burning question about the movie? Okay, one right back here.

Woman 3: When will it be released?

<laughter>

Steve Lopez: When will it be released? It's supposed to be released on November 21. And poor Robert Downey has to go from being Iron Man to newspaper man. But I will say, quickly, about the movie, that DreamWorks was determined not to just, you know, drive through Skid Row and take a quick look and make its movie and get out. Joe Wright is the director. He's the guy who directed "Atonement." And from my very first meetings with Joe, he wanted to see Skid Row. The producers here are Gary Foster and Russ Krasnoff who, when they met with me, wanted to see Skid Row and wanted to meet Nathaniel. And I said, "What kind of a movie are you going to make?" And they said, "It's about his impact on you as much as it's about your impact on him. It's about friendship. It's a love story. It's a buddy movie." And I said, "But he's a very sick man. He's a wonderful man who is very sick. You're not going to sugar coat it, are you? And, you know, we can't put a smile on the end of this thing and a happy ending.

I see it as a story that's filled with hope. And it's powerful and dramatic." And he said, you know, "We're not going to have him conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the end of this movie." And they have been true to their word. And they decided that they did not want actors to play the people on Skid Row. So dozens of people who live on Skid Row are in this movie. And the cast and the crew, not only were

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graziadio School of Business and Management

impressed <chuckles> by the fact that they showed up and did so well-- well, I explained to them, "Look, they don't have agents."

<laughter>

Steve Lopez: But not only did they do their jobs really well but the cast and crew were moved by these stories. And we're talking this-- tonight is a story about human connections. Jamie Foxx was deeply affected by this movie. It's a story that I hope to tell one day with more knowledge of the situation and with his permission. But everybody who worked on this movie was deeply affected by the powerful stories of survival and courage that they encountered. And it worked the other way around too. The people who live on Skid Row all marveled at how they were treated with such dignity. So I'm hoping that all of this comes through in the movie. And Mr. Ayers, people often ask, what does he think about all of this. Well, the fact is, he doesn't <chuckles> really have much of an interest in it. And he appreciates that they would like, for instance, call him over to perform for cast and crew. He loves that. To the extent that the movie is recognizing that his career could have been something really wonderful, he likes that. But he's not interested in the movie process or in seeing movies.

He wants to play music. So on the day that they filmed the scene at Disney Hall where Nathaniel and I first went there to see Beethoven's Third, I had told Nathaniel and he said, "Okay, I'll meet you at Disney Hall, Mr. Lopez." And I said, "Yeah, we don't want to miss this. All of your buddies and the L.A. Philharmonic, they're playing themselves in the movie." And since he knows all of them, I thought okay, he'll want to be up there and see all of that. So I go to Disney Hall and when I get there, there may be two or 300 people inside Disney Hall, the cast and crew, all of the equipment, the L.A. Phil and Nathaniel's out in front across the street playing the violin. And I went over and I said, "Nathaniel, this is it. Let's go in and watch them do our scene." And he said, "Yeah, oh, that's now, isn't it?" He said, "You know, it's a beautiful sunny day. The weather's great. I'm really getting into this piece right here. Can I go in later?" I said, "They're making the-- this is the scene. We've been talking about this. This is the day. Jamie Foxx and Robert Downey Jr. are in our seats and we're going to go and watch them. And all of your friends in the orchestra are there." And he said, "Yeah, oh, yeah, yeah." He said, "But, you know, I mean it's just gorgeous out here. And I think I'm going to stay here a little bit longer." I walked across the street and the producer, Gary Foster was there and met me and said, "What's he doing?" And I looked across the street and there he was alone. And I said, "Gary, we got the right title for this thing. The soloist is happy as a clam. Let's just let him be."

Linda Livingstone: Thank you so much.

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graziadio School of Business and Management

<applause>

Linda Livingstone: Well, thank all of you for coming and being a part of this last installment in our Dean's Executive Leadership Series. We look forward to having you back next year when we get started again in the fall. Have a safe trip home.

End

