

Dark Days, Bright Nights
Surviving the Las Vegas Storm Drains
Media Kit

QUICK HITS

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A vivid and enlightening oral account of homelessness in the Las Vegas storm drains and the hard work of re-entering mainstream society.

ABOUT THE BOOK

The hundreds of people living in the flood channels of Las Vegas have provided one of the more fascinating and enduring international stories of the past decade. This underground community has received plenty of news coverage and dramatic portrayals by the entertainment industry including "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation," "Criminal Minds" and the Jason Bourne franchise.

What has gained less attention is how dozens of tunnel dwellers have clawed their way out of the drains to create full lives.

"Dark Days, Bright Nights," the follow-up to the bestselling "Beneath the Neon," shares the harrowing stories of Sin City's most marginalized people, from bottoming out in homelessness to mending relationships with family and adjusting to jobs, housing and sobriety. These redemption stories cast light on a rarely seen side of Las Vegas and offer a portrait of homelessness and recovery in America. They are the happy, non-Hollywood endings to the infamous tunnel tale, documented through stark photographs and unflinchingly honest personal accounts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew O'Brien is a journalist and social worker who has been considered the foremost authority on homelessness in the Las Vegas storm drains for the past 15 years. As a staff writer for the Las Vegas alternative weekly newspaper CityLife, he co-wrote a series on the issue in 2002. It went viral and received national media attention. In 2004, he began work on a book about the subject, "Beneath the Neon: Life and Death in the Tunnels of Las Vegas," a collection of gritty narratives exposing the dark side of Las Vegas.

In 2009, O'Brien founded Shine a Light, a not-for-profit organization that provides food, clothing, housing and counseling services to those in the drains. Through his outreach work and as a guide for visiting journalists, he has continued to visit the tunnels and assist people seeking paths out of homelessness. These inspiring stories, which O'Brien would have never envisioned when he first went underground in 2002, led him to conduct interviews for a new book collecting voices of hope and recovery forged from deep despair.

O'Brien is also the author of "My Week at the Blue Angel," a collection of narrative journalism. He has a master's degree in creative writing from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and a Silver Pen (mid-career award) from the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame.

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

Las Vegas-based Central Recovery Press (CRP) is a full-service publishing and intellectual property clearinghouse specializing in a full spectrum of behavioral healthcare topics, including addiction treatment and recovery, addiction and the family, parenting, relationships, trauma, grief and loss, and mindfulness.

CRP's mission is to shift the prevailing perception of addiction, co-occurring, and other behavioral health issues as moral failing, character weakness or vice, offering materials that promote a broader view of recovery and encourage a holistic approach to emotional, physical, mental and spiritual well-being.

SAMPLE CHAPTER

Discovering the Drains

To understand the topography of the Las Vegas Valley, as I explained in my book *Beneath the Neon*, simply look at the palm of your hand. The mounds on the perimeter of the palm are the mountain ranges surrounding the valley. The concave interior is the basin floor. The lines are flood channels, the more prominent ones primary washes that widen and deepen over time. Like a palm, the valley is enclosed, except for a shallow groove in a bottom corner. The Las Vegas Wash, which marks the basin's lowest elevation, drains through this groove and into Lake Mead.

Located in the heart of the Mojave — the driest desert in North America — Las Vegas is

lethally hot and arid. Its average high temperature in June, July, and August is 102 degrees Fahrenheit. The average yearly rainfall is only four inches, most of which falls during the so-called monsoon season, when Vegas is susceptible to flash floods. The asphalt, concrete, and hardpan desert soil absorb little water. The slopes of the basin carry it onto streets and into natural flood channels, toward the Las Vegas Wash, at speeds exceeding twenty-five miles per hour.

In 1985, after a series of floods crippled Las Vegas, the state legislature created the Clark County Regional Flood Control District. The goal was to develop a plan to reduce flooding by building a network of channels. It was Nevada's first coordinated attempt to control flooding, which at the time had only been done piecemeal by the various Southern Nevada entities, including Clark County, Las Vegas, North Las Vegas, and Boulder City.

Along with the valley, which grew from a population of 750,000 in 1990 to now over two million people, the flood system is constantly expanding. The intricate web spans from mountain range to mountain range, like the lines on a palm, and currently consists of eighty detention basins and 600 miles of channel, roughly half of which are underground.

Despite these figures — and the crucial role the drains play in the city's functionality — the flood channels are not a prominent feature of the Vegas landscape or lore. They lie low, in off-the-beaten-path places, blocked off by walls and chainlink fences or camouflaged by the beige desert floor.

Which begs the question, "How did you discover the storm drains?"

Szmauz, 24, a rock musician from the mountains of New Hampshire, had a violent and unforgettable introduction to the drains: I was giving this other homeless guy hot dogs I'd found in a dumpster near Tropicana and McLeod, and out of the corner of my eye I see this big guy come over and he decks me. The hot dogs go flying. I was stunned. It took me a second to realize I just got hit in the face.

He starts wailing on me and I fight back. I'm not a small guy, so he took off.

I had this meat cleaver on me and I'm chasing him down the street with it. The drug dealers that lived in the shitty apartments nearby knew me. I was a loyal customer of theirs. They were like, "Dude, what's up?"

I said, "Get that guy!"

We're all chasing him and he dipped through a hole in a fence and went down into a wash and into a tunnel. We all stopped. We're like, we're not going in there!

And that's how I discovered the tunnels.

Barry, 48, a sex offender from Howell, Michigan, came to Las Vegas after an eighteen-year incarceration: In prison I'd seen that show *Modern Marvels* on the History Channel and they talked about the flood channels, so when I got to Vegas I just walked around town looking for 'em. Down past the "Welcome" sign I found one and figured I'd check it out.

It was dark, scary. I was wondering who I'd meet. Any decent people or just rats, spiders, and trash. I had a flashlight on me. I always carry one.

That's when I ran into Kregg. He'd lived down there a while and they called him "The Mayor." He had a wall of plastic up and I knocked on it and talked to him for a couple minutes. Told him my name, where I was from, what I was in prison for, and his response was, "There's room farther down to make a camp, but don't tell no one what you were in prison for."

Manny, 47, a member of the Tlingit Indian Tribe in Alaska, lived in the tunnels for ten years: I knew about the ones by the Rio. Me and a girlfriend had stayed in them when we were young. I didn't mind it because I was with her and we had one foot in and one out. We were just kids having fun.

But in 2001 I got into a fight. This dude was looking at me and I was looking at him, then he started talking shit. I was a young man and he was an older guy, and I beat him down. I thought that was it. I went to get a drink in Mermaids casino and I come out, and I feel someone crack me from the side with a beer bottle.

I stumbled down to Bonneville Avenue. My tank top was soaked with blood. That's as far as I got before I passed out.

When I woke up in the hospital the doctor said, "There's a chance you're going to lose sight in that eye."

"What are the chances?"

"Ninety-nine percent."

I ended up getting several stitches and I lost sight in my left eye.

When I was released I went to a buddy's house, but I didn't want to be a burden and I didn't feel like hustling wearing an eye patch. That's when I went back into the

drains.

Ricky Lee, 53, lived in the tunnels off and on from 1995 to 2016, and is part ruffian, part poet: I was living in an abandoned hotel, but I was working. I was handing out smut on the Strip. The hotel owner would come by every once in a while and kick me out. I told him, "I got a job. How 'bout I pay you for the room?"

He said that'd be fine, so I gave him eighty dollars a week.

I saw the tunnels being built not far from the hotel, and I had always admired the TV show *Beauty and the Beast*. That guy Vincent lived in tunnels and I wanted to do that too.

Half Pint, 58, from western Nebraska, got her street name for her diminutive stature: My first night on the streets I slept behind a dumpster at 7-Eleven, then I walked and ended up at Desert Breeze Park. I was so fucked up on pills. I woke up at the park tied to a bench, half naked. I had no idea what happened.

I kept walking and somebody told me I could go down into this culvert, an open flood plain by the Orleans casino. There were three big tunnels and I went in the middle of one and was immediately met by all sorts of spiders and weird smells. It was really dark and my eyes had to adjust. I passed out.

When I woke there were other people there. "Hey, you all right? What are you doing here?"

One of the guys said, "You can't stay here and puke all over our stuff. Get outta here!"

I started crying and he had a moment of sympathy. He said, "You don't look like you belong here."

"I don't." I gave him a sob story and he offered me a crack pipe.

Tex, 46, is a funny, friendly Army vet who described his twelve years in the drains with a thick Southern drawl: When you're in Vegas and homeless the best thing for you is not to be seen. Vegas doesn't like homeless people and the police harass you, so I found me a tunnel and made it my home. There's a homeless person on just about every corner and one of 'em showed me the spot.

David, 62, from Harlem, New York, served in the Air Force for ten years before becoming addicted to crack and moving to Las Vegas: I used to credit hustle. That's a

whole subculture in Vegas. Some of the hustlers stayed in the tunnels. After we would hit a lick—turn and burn with someone’s coin bucket—we’d get some dope and go down to their spot and get high.

Shaggy, 29, was a heroin addict in the tunnels from 2011 to 2014. His mom, One Shoe Sue, also lived in the drains: I was going back and forth by bus between Summerlin and Henderson. It’d take about three hours. I’d panhandle and make 100 bucks, and I kept my backpack and sleeping bag on me and I’d crash wherever I landed. Eventually a few guys from the tunnels saw me panhandling near Eastern Avenue and the 215. They actually challenged me. They tried to get me to move from my spot. They said my time was up, but I wouldn’t leave.

Later that day they sought me out and said, “Hey, man. You got heart. You should come down with us where you’re safe and out of the way.”

Stephen, 62, was born and raised in Las Vegas. A longtime waiter and maître d’, he found himself living under Paradise Road near the Hard Rock Hotel: I just woke up one day and was living, or I should say dying, in the tunnels under Paradise.

Q & A

Each question is answered by Matthew O’Brien

Q: What compelled you to write this book?

A: Several people who lived in the underground flood channels of Las Vegas found their way out and were reintegrating into society. I knew many of them; some I considered friends. Over coffee or through Facebook, I heard snippets of their stories about childhood, homelessness, discovering the drains, and getting out and getting clean, and I was struck by how compelling and inspiring the stories were. I wanted to share what I’d heard. I felt obligated to. My first book, “Beneath the Neon,” showed the dark side of homelessness in Las Vegas. It only seemed fair to tell the other side of the story — the happy ending I could never have envisioned when I first stumbled into the drains.

Q: Why structure the book as an oral account?

A: After interviewing more than 35 people who’d made it out of the tunnels, I had a lot of interesting stories, but I wasn’t sure how to structure them. I considered monologues, but more than 35 of them? That would be overkill. So which 10 to 15 people would I focus on? There were so many worthy subjects and powerful stories. Finally, after consulting some writer friends, I decided that a collage of oral accounts would work well, and the

book began to take shape. I turned the questions I'd asked the subjects into chapter headings, included the most memorable responses in each chapter, and edited and arranged the stories to give them a narrative flow.

Q: What did you learn while working on the book?

A: I learned that oral accounts are harder to craft than one might think, but they are definitely worth the effort. I learned that a lot of the stereotypes about the homeless are not true. I learned that most of the homeless do want to get off the streets and have a better life. I also learned that, in general, people who have been homeless are, for whatever reason, incredible storytellers, as I hope this book attests.

Q: What do you hope readers will take away from these stories?

A: I hope they will have a better understanding of homelessness and its root causes and they will view and treat the homeless more compassionately than they do now. I also hope they will have a more complete picture of Las Vegas, an international city that is misinterpreted in many ways. That was one of the more interesting things to me as I edited the interviews: the new perspective they gave me on Vegas, though I had lived in the city for nearly 20 years.

Q: Do you keep in touch with the interview subjects?

A: Of the 36 people I interviewed for the book, I'm currently in touch with about 25 of them, I would say. Because I'm writing and teaching in Central America, I keep in contact with them mostly through Facebook. Some I communicate with on a weekly basis. And, of course, when I'm in Las Vegas, I get coffee or lunch with the ones who are still in the area. Some of these people I have known for more than 15 years, our relationship dating back to when I met them in the drains.

Q: Is Shine a Light, the community project you founded in 2009, still active?

A: Yes. I founded Shine a Light as a way to give back to the people in the tunnels, who had given me so much, by allowing me into their homes and by sharing their stories for "Beneath the Neon." Initially, it was mostly me giving out bottled water and socks and lending an ear to these individuals. Then I started collaborating with local nonprofits, and we were able to offer housing, counseling and other services. Now Shine a Light is a full-fledged Freedom House Sober Living program that's run by two guys who used to live in the tunnels. In the past year or so, they've housed more than 50 people and helped hundreds more.

Q: Do you miss the tunnels and the people in them?

A: Immensely. I started exploring the drains in 2002, when I was managing editor of the Las Vegas CityLife newspaper. I continued to explore them in 2004, while researching "Beneath the Neon." My duties for Shine a Light continued to take me underground on a

regular basis. And I also escorted media down there quite often. What started out as mere research for a CityLife story became, and remains, a huge part of my life.

Q: What are the main issues related to homelessness in Las Vegas?

A: There are quite a few issues related to homelessness in Vegas. One of the first that comes to mind is the criminalization of the homeless. That has been a problem in the valley for years, though there has been some improvement on that front. Other issues include: homelessness in a top tourist destination; life in the underground flood channels; how do street people survive in Sin City; and COVID-19 and the local homeless community.

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