**Reporter has street in his soul, healing in his heart**

by Remy Reya on October 20, 2019

Framed by a wall of CDs, Kevin Fagan is hunched over his guitar in a black plastic chair. He’s wearing a baggy button-down and faded blue jeans, exuding a calm verve as he begins to strum. He’s joined by Steve Rubenstein on the harmonica. It’s a callback to 1971 – “Angel from Montgomery”.

Sitting in the audience of that El Cerrito music shop, you might just see two middle-aged men who like folk music. But you wouldn’t guess their day jobs. When he steps out from behind the microphone, Fagan is a reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, a gig he’s had for almost thirty years. If you asked Rubenstein, who’s also his colleague at the newspaper, you’d hear that he’s “the most hardworking, diligent, compassionate and painstaking reporter I know.”

His writing has covered topics ranging from executions to wildfires, and he’s done deep investigations into Indian casino gambling and the hidden lives of prostitutes in Nevada. But his most powerful work has always been about homelessness.

Fagan says that his childhood experience of poverty led him to an interest in what he calls the “plight of the underclass.” Encouraged by his mother, a Navy journalist, he began to write for the school newspaper and local publications.

“From age 14…that was it,” Fagan said. “That’s the only career I ever wanted.”

After making pit stops at the BBC London, United Press International in New Zealand, the *Lodi News-Sentinel*, and the *Oakland Tribune*, Fagan finally found himself on general assignment for the *Chronicle* in 1992. He would cover disasters, crimes, and general news, but he had a proclivity for reporting on the conditions of poverty.

Fagan says that many of his colleagues focused on homelessness in the ‘80s and ‘90s, but that the work fell out of fashion by the 2000s due to a “compassion fatigue”. According to the *Chronicle*’s [website](https://www.sfchronicle.com/author/kevin-fagan/), Fagan was the only beat reporter covering homelessness full-time from 2003 to 2006. But the loneliness didn’t bother him – his dedication to the subject, coupled with a [change-up](https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Chronicle-names-managing-editor-Robert-2796989.php) in leadership at the newspaper, allowed his reporting to reach new heights.

Fagan had already worked on some stories with Brant Ward, a staff photographer who had been at the *Chronicle* since 1983. But in 2002, the new managing editor tasked the duo with an unprecedented assignment: to cover homelessness in San Francisco ethnographically.

Several months of living alongside homeless individuals on the streets of San Francisco culminated in the “Shame of the City” series – a five-day exposé that included personal accounts of suffering and inside looks at places often hidden from public view.

The work was taxing and thankless. The reporters slept among homeless community members on traffic islands, in parks, and on beaches. Fagan got attacked by dogs in a homeless camp and had to burn his clothes because of pigeon lice; Ward found himself “downtrodden and ready for a drink” on some occasions. But they pressed on, convinced of the importance of their work.

One of the many articles featured in the series, [“A Rugged Refuge”](https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/SHAME-OF-THE-CITY-A-Rugged-Refuge-Many-2525717.php), detailed the circumstances of a notorious shelter reputed to be a drug haven by people who opted instead to sleep on the streets. After registering as citizens in the homeless system, Ward and Fagan went undercover for two nights at the Multi-Service Center South on Fifth and Bryant streets.

If they had informed the staff that they were journalists ahead of time, Fagan thinks, “they’d clean it up, they’d chase out the crazies, and they’d show their best face.” So, in pursuit of a genuine image of the shelter, they decided only to reveal their motives if asked.

On the inside, Ward snapped photos and Fagan took notes on folded-up yellow notepad paper he kept in his back pocket. They captured everything from illicit drug sales to an altercation between two men in the shelter. After two nights, they left.

Fagan only reached out to counselors and leaders after a few months on the streets, deciding to prioritize the voices of the people directly affected by the issues. In his research, he also sought out figures on the demography of homelessness and funding for various social support programs. The goal, he said, was to put the individual stories they found in context.

The duo won several [awards](https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Making-a-difference/Change-Agent/2012/0510/Journalist-Kevin-Fagan-looked-for-solutions-to-homelessness) for their reporting, and Fagan says that all 40,000 reprints of the series were taken, consumed by curious readers and used as an educational tool in high schools and colleges across the country. In some cases, the subjects’ lives were transformed – after one of Rita Grant’s high school friends [spotted](https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/SHAME-OF-THE-CITY-Reclaiming-her-life-2706491.php) her in the first installment of the “Shame of the City” series, Rita’s family flew from Florida to California to help her [rebuild](https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/REASON-TO-SMILE-Rita-Grant-s-teeth-were-a-raw-2633690.php) her life.

But Fagan also says that its publication also led to several concrete policy changes: more supportive housing, an increased emphasis on street outreach counseling, the expansion of shelter hours, and an investment in targeted new programs. “The mayor, Gavin Newsom, read that story that I wrote of [Rita’s] redemption,” Fagan said. “And he created a program based on that called [Homeward Bound](http://hsh.sfgov.org/homeward-bound/) that gives people bus tickets to go home. And you know, a lot of those folks get new lives.”

Ward [retired](https://www.petaluma360.com/entertainment/9478289-181/toolin-around-town-photographer-brant?sba=AAS) from the *Chronicle* and began freelancing work in 2016, but Fagan is still in the newsroom, covering homelessness as vigorously as ever. His passion is clear in every word.

“I mean, the guy lives and breathes fucking newspapers,” Ward said of his longtime partner. “He loves everything about it. He loves the bylines, he loves the reporting, he loves the meeting the people…I even think he loves the damn deadlines. He just- he eats it up.”

“The *Chronicle* is damn lucky – and they know it – to have him,” he added.

Not much has changed since his early days at the paper. Fagan still goes out into the streets of San Francisco to get stories straight from the source. His coverage still has an impact – a recent piece led to the [reunification](https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Once-homeless-now-found-Danville-native-13817848.php#photo-17336700) of two long-separated brothers. And he still finds comfort in music.

He plays around the Bay Area with two bands: Finding Fable and the Irish Newsboys (a group of fellow and former reporters). And his reporting often flows directly to his songwriting.

One of his original songs, called “Little Bit”, details Fagan’s experience trying to get an interview from a woman (nicknamed Little Bit) on the streets while working with Brant Ward. The song features beautiful guitar fingering and some layered harmonies. And it reflects Fagan’s deep-seated belief that truth comes from moments of vulnerability with people with firsthand experience.

“There’s a stream of life that’s flowing all around us /

But no one wants to hear you, no one else can see /

So, Little Bit, come and tell me what you find /

Little Bit, come and tell me what you see /

Little Bit, do you know what you see? /

Can you tell me what you see?”

Fagan was lucky enough to find his beat in both music and journalism early on – and since then, he’s used both to be a voice for the voiceless. Now, decades later, his mission is the same.