

A man with a short haircut and a small earring is shown in profile, looking down at a camera he is holding. He is wearing a dark polo shirt. The background is dark, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting his face and the camera. The text is overlaid on the image.

DEATH of a CAMERAMAN

By Aaron Cox

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Names and image likeness have been changed throughout this book to ensure privacy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I need to take some time to thank and acknowledge some people that have played important roles in my life. Firstly, I need to thank my parents. Thank you dad for doing the best you knew how to do. And thank you mom (RIP)... you plugged a lot of holes in my life, as a friend, as a counselor, as a mother and you gave me all that you could so I could follow my dreams, even when it meant losing your time with me. I love you and I miss you dearly mom with all my heart... Words truly can't describe...

I need to thank my Aunt Martha, Aunt Nancy (RIP), Uncle Charles (RIP) and Aunt Christine for being my Guardian Angels on this Earth. You all have played a very big role in the formation of who I am, whether you believe it or not (at least the good parts). I've taken in so much at our round table discussions. I love you all.

I need to thank my brother and sister for putting up with me. I can be relentless at times, and tough to deal with. And more than anyone else (well Cousin David gets a healthy dosage too)... you guys get to see the unfiltered version of me... I really truly hope the good outweighs the bad. I love you all.

I need to thank my Grandmother in Heaven (RIP) for giving me that tough love, but I never doubted whether she loved me or not. She did everything just perfect... even when she disciplined me, I couldn't even be mad about it. I still hear the sweet sound of your voice, and your full vivacious laugh... I love you Grandma.

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My LA family, the Ingrams... thank you for helping me transition to LA. Dr. Ingram... you hold the distinction of being that rare "sister-cousin"...

Cheryl & Ed Freeman... I'm speechless... Cheryl you are like my big sister... I could always confide in you... And Freeman Freeeeee!... I don't know if I know another couple that knows how to have more fun than these two. So many memories... hours talking at the convalescents, Resort de Freeman, at the dining room table... I can't thank you both enough.

Cousin Kyle... man you already know! Since that first summer cuz... I think it was the summer of 07'... who knew?!?!... Looking forward to the future, while always enjoying the present.

Cousin David you are my big brother. Throughout my life from my teen years on, you have consistently been that person for me I can always talk to.

Louis & Joanie... When I tell people about you two, I refer to you as my NY parents... Louis you were a helluva example of what a "boss" could be like... leading from the heart. You truly cared about the people you worked with, and the work you do... I think Pinnochio's father Geppetto was based around you... Holidays I spent in NY with you guys, like Greek Easter, always felt like I was with family. I left NY over 20 years ago now and we haven't missed a beat. I miss and love you guys... Get your swimsuit packed Joanie... we're going to Tahiti soon!...

Riky Rik man you're always down... since day one... we just cliqued. Des Madres!!

MackDaddy - Or now more appropriately... the DaddyMack... You've been there practically the whole way. We literally grew up like brothers... I'm so glad you are still in my life today. I'm proud of you man... everything you've become.

MY HUMBLE BEGINNINGS



True story. The first job I ever got, aside from my monthly allowance from my father (for mowing a ton of lawn), was during my sophomore year of high school. I played on the JV basketball team, and I was approached by my high school's Athletic Director to use a VHS camcorder to shoot and record the varsity basketball teams games after I played. I used to think they hired me because I probably seemed like the most responsible teen in the bunch. And while that might have been true, little did anyone know how much that would foreshadow the first stage of my professional life. That was literally my first job — shooting sports entertainment. For a guy like me, who loves sports and in particular basketball, it was the perfect marriage of interests. That was my first taste of life behind the camera.

MY NEW YORK STATE OF MIND

Fast forward six years and a Bachelor's degree in Telecommunications later — The evening of December 31, 2000, New Year's Eve, I said goodbye to Metro Detroit and boarded a flight to New York City. I spent the last hour of 2000 stuck in traffic, celebrating the New Year in the back of a taxi on my way to my new apartment in Brooklyn. I had never been to New York before, but I was excited about going there and the overall direction my life was headed.

I didn't know anybody in New York and, even though I left everyone and everything I knew, I was ready to embark upon my life's next chapter. I was fresh out of college, probably still wearing my cap and gown from Michigan State University's graduation ceremony only weeks before. I was excited, fearless, and grateful... but also suffering the naiveté that comes with being a young adult. However, mostly importantly I was filled with an attitude that anything is possible.



I WANTED TO SHOOT FOR *THE REAL WORLD*

My first plan was to get a job at MTV... of course... But little did I know, that must have been every other young person's dream, with similar ambitions too. That didn't work out... I think I have a foggy memory of waiting half a day in MTV's lobby for my name to get called, and I eventually just left... While I didn't get hired on staff at MTV, later in life, I would eventually work for MTV's (now former) Head of Casting, and I cast some of MTV's promos, commercials, and some of their dating shows.



My first opportunity came when I landed an internship at Image Group Entertainment. At that time, it was the largest production studio in New York. My memory of it is really foggy, but it felt like their production offices were huge. I think they had two, or three floors in a commercial NYC skyscraper. It felt massive. I know I never even toured the entire facility; I would have gotten lost.

I spent my days logging footage for reality shows they were producing. It was trivial but someone had to do it and I actually enjoyed the experience. I had to log what I saw in each shot, trying hard to be objective but also rating how entertaining the content was. The editors would refer to my notes to discern footage that might make it into the final cut. I represented their target audience, after all, and I felt like an actual contributor.

New York City was a special place to me. It is truly a one-of-a-kind place... so cultured and diverse.

I wish everyone could spend at least one year of their life living in that city. It was a fantastic place for me to start my career as a broke, dreamy-eyed young person just learning how to hustle. This was all months before 9/11, of course.

Once I got beyond the limitations of my overpriced cardboard-box-of-an-apartment, NYC was better than anything I could have imagined. I still communicate with my core group of friends from there to this day. Somehow, New York proved to be equal parts fairy tale and nightmare.

I subsidized my internship by getting a bartender's license and bouncing around different bars and clubs in Brooklyn and Manhattan a few nights per week. I was also attending a 2-year Acting Conservatory in the Chelsea district of Manhattan which was linked to a casting studio on 19th Street between 5th and 6th Avenue.

MY FIRST PROFESSIONAL JOB

One day after class, a studio tech failed to show up for work. The studio was desperate to find someone to set up a media event at the last minute. I just happened to be at the right place at the right time. They asked me if I thought I could do it and I said yes. I set up a video projector and a couple of cameras. After bailing them out, they hired me full time and that was the start of my professional career in the entertainment industry.

I started off as a studio tech and video editor, working with the ancient U-matic three-quarter inch tape decks. (Those decks were older than Moses before I even came along.) I was editing with Adobe Premiere and Avid in college but, for some reason, the casting industry was still using these ancient A-B editing decks from the 1970s. In general, as I entered the workforce, analog equipment was being phased out, and digital media was becoming the standard.



I get a bit nostalgic thinking of some of the “good ol’ days,”... especially my time in New York. The early 2000s were the heyday of hip-hop. I was working on videos for Puff Daddy (his AKA at that time), 50 Cent, Missy Elliott ... it was an exciting time with so many legendary musical artists, but it didn't stop there. I met Britney Spears (who was a huge superstar at that time) as we walked into a nightclub together. She was very sweet and spoke to me first. Since I wasn't exactly her target demographic, I wasn't 100% sure it was even her at first. But when the club doorman let us in, his reaction to her said it all.

I remember when Denzel Washington was casting his directorial debut, *Antwone Fisher*. He went around the studio giving everyone an opportunity. If he thought you might fit a part, he offered you an audition whether you were an actor or not. He even asked our studio janitor! That was such a humbling display of generosity from a true Hollywood titan.



NOSTALGIA

Another one of my favorite memories was meeting Salma Hayek. She is a bombshell. Ever since seeing her in *Dusk Till Dawn*, everyone was gaga over her (if you weren't already before then). Salma came to the studio for about 7–10 days to cast her Emmy-nominated directorial debut, *The Maldonado Miracle*.

I had co-written a screenplay with another tech and dear friend. The pages were still warm from coming out of the printer when she showed up, much to our surprise. Long before we ever knew she was coming to the studio, we had actually written it with Salma Hayek in mind in the lead role. One day, we were tasked with the assignment of putting away a bunch of chairs near the studio she was working in. We didn't really want to be seen by her in that light. But, as fate would have it, she actually came out and approached us for directions to the bathroom... of course.

On her return, we rallied the nerve to quickly pitch her our screenplay and she asked for a copy right there on the spot. Can you believe that?! She actually left the studio with our script! My writing partner and I danced around and celebrated in our little-equipment-closet-of-an-office, absolutely on cloud nine that afternoon. You would have thought maybe we hit the lottery.

Everyday in the Big Apple offered a new possibility. Trust me, I'm forgetting more than I can ever possibly remember. I've met so many people through the industry. Remember the sexy brunette viral sensation, "The Obama Girl," Amber Lee Ettinger? I met her years before she ever went viral. She was a sweet little blonde when we met. I remember when Melania Trump was just another model that would come in for casting auditions I was working... I never had any inkling that she would ever become the nation's First Lady. One time, I was asked to set up a shoot in a rush for a socialite named Paris Hilton. I had to mad-dash to be ready to put Paris on tape that afternoon, not even knowing who she was at the time because it was so early in her ascension to fame. But she never showed up. Who knows why not? The producer didn't act very surprised when I told her, but still they were less than thrilled about having to pay the bill anyway.



CASTING CLIENTS & CAMPAIGNS

I was casting for all types of clients and campaigns — MTV, VH1, Calvin Klein, Victoria's Secret. I was working with print producers for magazines like Cosmo, Allure, Seventeen, and a dozen others. I was making it as a freelancer in New York. I wasn't rich by any means, but I was making it. I even put up the initial seed money to be a partner in a Harlem takeout restaurant on 145th St & Malcolm X Blvd. I was a young entrepreneur and creative. Life was fresh, full of friends, and I was having fun in "The City."

9/11 TERRORIST ATTACK

On the flip side, however, after the terrorist attack on 9/11, the casting studio was suffering from cash flow problems. I never really understood why. Maybe fewer students were attracted to New York for fear of more terrorist attacks. Our paychecks were bouncing regularly or being held back for weeks. It was deplorable. I was forced to use credit cards a lot of times when I just didn't have the cash flow to make ends meet. We all attempted to rally around each other to get through this tough period. You've probably heard the expression, "Life is full of hills and valleys." Well, this was my first real up close and personal experience in the "valley." It was during this stretch that I initially got serious about my savings. So I started contributing 13% of my studio income to a 401k. Now, 13 may have always typically been considered unlucky, but I was going to make it work to my favor.



MY FIRST SAVINGS PLAN

So, I was about 24 when I first decided to start saving money for the future. My maternal grandma, and my father were always in my ear stressing the importance of getting started with “saving early.” I didn’t fully understand how a 401k worked, but it seemed like everyone in my circles only ever spoke positively about them so it must have been the best move I could make, right?

Little did we all know, Ted Benna, regarded as “the father of the 401k,” would eventually express regret for his creation even calling it a “monster.”

What little I did know was that money was automatically deducted from my paycheck before I ever saw it so, once it was set up, I never really had to think about it. Sounds easy enough.

Hmmm ... “never really had to think about it” ... maybe there’s more to that on second thought. Is “setting and forgetting” the best strategy for planning one’s future?

What I also didn’t fully grasp was that, if I ever needed that money — before the legal retirement age of 59½ — I would pay not only income tax but also a 10% penalty. Really? I put my money away but then have to pay a 10% penalty simply to have access to it if I need it before retirement?

Plus, I didn’t realize that the money I was investing was at risk in the markets. I had no clue that market forces entirely beyond my control could take huge bites out of my savings ... my future, really. But, as the saying goes, “fluff around and find out.” And that’s exactly what I did, unfortunately. But I’ll circle back to that later.

While in New York, I also started to develop as a writer. I literally wrote a dozen horrible screenplays before I landed an agent with a script titled *Nice Guys Finish Last*. Meanwhile, I was developing a 2-part teleplay with a couple buddies I met while at MSU. I admit that the story was 99% their creative genius but I think I had a very strong influence on the storyline and the plot of the second part, in particular. And I was more or less leading the charge as far as marketing and pursuing a TV deal. That was my department. Thanks to my good friend “Toooooooodd”... We had a couple of private readings for a producer and some executives from HBO. We had a special guest, actor Adrien Brody, at one reading shortly before he would go on to win an Oscar for his role in *The Pianist*. This particular teleplay was eventually optioned by Fox. Our reviewers billed it as “X-Files meets *The Matrix*.”

I decided that, if the option agreement wasn’t enough of a reason to leave NY and migrate to sunny LA, I probably never would. I loved NY, I really did, and I loved the family of friends I made there. But I was only 26 by this time and, although I gave up a lot of relationship equity in the move, I was a bit tired of east coast winters. I was ready to trade skyscrapers for palm trees. At the time it felt like now or never.

But how could I possibly afford to pay for this pilgrimage across the country? Hmm ... why of course ... cash out my 401k!

I knew nothing at all about rollover options anyway. And HR wasn’t very forthcoming with any info... Plus, with the TV option agreement in place, I figured that I was about to become rrrriich anyway, so what was a few bucks in taxes? Well, let’s analyze that more thoroughly.

I had about \$7,000 in my 401k. I would probably have been in about the 24 percent federal tax bracket. Then, add in 5–6 percent for New York state tax, at least. Plus, on top of taxes, we can’t forget about that 10 percent penalty since I was nowhere close to 59½.

And where did I end up with my 401k money? I lost about 40 percent in taxes and penalties. Think about that — 40 percent! From \$7,000, I walked away with a little more than \$4,000.

I took it and made the move anyway. I wasn’t going to let Uncle Sam stop me from pursuing my dreams. In the end Uncle Sam didn’t have to... Unfortunately, the VP of Development at Fox did... he put a stop to things ... at least temporarily.

I met up with him one evening and he told me that they weren’t going to produce our show.

I contemplated whether my move from the Big Apple had been such a good idea a lot, during one very long bus ride home that night.



LA didn't stop being hard for me for the first two years I was there. I wish I could say otherwise, but I hated it, honestly. Everything moved so slow compared to NYC. And, at that time, you really needed a car to effectively get around. (Today, with rideshare apps, it is so much easier to live without owning your own vehicle.)

I really didn't know what I wanted to do if I wasn't working in the entertainment industry. I wasn't really interested in being a Production Assistant. One of my roommates in NY did that and would routinely tell me about nightmarish assignments. Once, he had to herd a flock of sheep up 12 flights of stairs for a music video dream sequence at around 3:00am in the morning ummm ... no thanks. I'll pass!

But I did actually work a few PA jobs in the name of networking. And, just as I expected, I was mostly regarded as a mindless two-legged mule. When working those jobs, I doubt there was ever a couch that was moved without me, or an IKEA desk that was assembled at 5:00 in the morning without me being the one twiddling the wrench. My favorite of these types of tasks was one-time being assign to hold a black flag to block sunlight while standing on a windy rooftop in midday heat near an active bee hive. This kind of work was pure bliss. LOL

I just didn't have the patience and temperament for that kind of work. I would have needed to commit to 200 plus days per year of those types of assignments to earn entry into a union. It's not that I was a stranger to hard work. I spent my formative years mowing the better part of 8½ acres of lawn with sheep, horses, dogs, ducks, rabbits, and racing pigeons. I've shoveled more sh*t than 99 percent of the U.S. population. So, by the time I began my professional career, I was just done with manual labor.

Not surprisingly, I needed to work because my 401k fund — what was left of it — ran out fairly quickly. So I answered an ad in the classified section of the LA Times. Imagine that — who looks for a job in the newspaper anymore?

The ad asked "Do you want to learn about money?" And I thought to myself, "Yeah, I do."

MORTGAGES & REFINANCE INDUSTRY

The ad was an invitation to become a mortgage banker in Beverly Hills, 90210, on Wilshire Boulevard. Once I got the job, my boss insisted that I get a second cell phone with a Beverly Hills 310 area code for client calls. He didn't want me using my Brooklyn number.

Surprisingly, I stayed in the mortgage & refinance business for about two years. I was in it for the knowledge as much as anything else, adding another layer to my financial education. I learned a lot about credit reports, refinancing, and the technicalities of what usually ends up being the single biggest purchase decision of most people's lives.



While at the bank, I became one of their top closers, fairly quickly. They started assigning originators to me, and I would then close their deals. One of those originators also produced live standup comedy shows several nights a month at the Hollywood Improv. We would talk about that on lunch breaks. Once he learned that I owned a professional video camera with video editing software and that I could burn DVDs, he asked me if I would shoot some of his comedy shows. I routinely made \$200–\$300 doing that three or four nights per month.

I met, shot, and worked with hundreds of comedians. Some of them really blew up. Craig Robinson, for example, was on the come up circuit back then. He was a lot of fun to shoot and hang with at the club. I'm glad he got his big break into movie stardom. Adam DeVine was on staff as a doorman at The Improv at that time and we spoke often. He was always nice to me, checking to see if I needed a drink or whatever. I didn't even know he was a comedian, he was so polite. But he is a funny guy! Basically just about everyone other than the kitchen crew is a comedian if they work at The Improv.

I'd also occasionally meet established stars that would pop in to practice new material. Andy Dick asked me to record his set one night.

I unknowingly had a full out conversation with Dane Cook there.

And, once, I was with Hollywood Royalty and almost didn't realize it! I was sitting down to eat before shooting, enjoying my favorite from their menu (the "Improv Burger"—it's so good!) when a gentleman went out of his way to come hide with me in the same corner. I thought it was a little strange because I had isolated myself from the rest of the crowd pretty well but this gentleman sat right beside me, about two feet away. You might have thought that we were there together. I only glanced at him at first because the burger had most of my attention. A small crowd started to form nearby; I just didn't know why. Suddenly, a producer walks right up and says, "Robin I just want to tell you how much we love you around here. We'd be honored if you want to go on tonight in my show."

At that moment I realized I was quietly eating dinner right next to Robin Williams (RIP). He graciously replied with a "Thank you." Eventually, he did perform a 20 minute set. I was just dumbfounded to have been sitting right next to someone who is as big as they come in Hollywood — up there with Tom Hanks, Denzel ... a star among stars. And I almost missed even realizing it. I'll never forget that night.

BACK TO CASTING

Anyway, when the housing bubble burst in 2008, my days in the mortgage industry came to an end. I bought a little roach-of-a-car and I started pitching myself to casting studios all over Los Angeles. You really had to know what you're doing to have the gall to come in off the street with no appointment and do that. In the beginning, I detected a hint of, "Ohhh ... here's this New York guy in here trying to get work." And some people's tone wasn't very welcoming to me, understandably.

Most casting directors aren't known for their warmth or jovial nature, anyway. People always want something from them. I already knew that. And, after four years in New York, I had already developed pretty thick skin. The casting directors no one wants to work for are the ones you always had the best chance of cutting your teeth with. The meanest bullies in the casting world eventually burn out the people working for them.

One Casting Director — who I shall not name — was notoriously wicked. No one wanted to work with her... when we met, even the studio she did business with the most was giving her the boot because they were over her antics. So, as fate would have it one day, she was desperate enough to try the "new guy." And that's how I got my foot in the door of casting in Hollywood. (And, wouldn't you know it, about ten years later, this same casting director became the Head of Casting at a major broadcast TV network which I also won't name ... geeeee ... sometimes this life really is so unfair.) Still, if I were to run into her now, I would probably just hug her and reminisce of our old times. Life is just too short.

I worked in casting, almost exclusively, for years. I mostly directed casting sessions for multi-million dollar campaigns with major brands like Google, Apple, Sony, Disney, Lancôme, Ulta, Gucci, Porsche, Lexus, Cadillac, Adidas, Nike, Clinique, etc. I have forgotten way more than I can remember. I've directed over 100,000 individual auditions. Directing is like a muscle that you exercise in the gym... the more you train it, the stronger it becomes.

It's a shame that the industry operates the way it does. I could have made a killing being a TV commercial director. I certainly know how to direct talent. But experience and know-how is not always the winning recipe in this business. More often, it's about relationships. It's about who you know.

In between casting jobs, I would work as a script doctor for screenwriters and producers and I would create reality TV sizzles to hopefully sell to networks to get my big pay day. I have worked with some of the biggest producers in Hollywood — Mark Morgan, an Executive Producer of the Twilight franchise, for example. I also worked with Scott Mednick (just type his name into IMDB). I partnered with Eric Conte, former Head of Programming and Production at MTV2 and MTVu) to pitch reality TV concepts with William Morris Agency. I developed and co-executive produced spec shows with Steve Harvey, Judge Mathis, and Suzanne De Passe (credited with discovering Michael Jackson).

I am a bona fide hustler, operating at the highest level using my network and my talent to the best of my abilities. I was taking meetings at Warner Brothers, MGM, Lionsgate, etc. My motto in life is "There is no time like now." When I meet people that overthink and get stuck in paralysis by analysis. I quickly move on from them because I would rather try and fail than be stuck on the treadmill of life because of fear, or indecision. I don't believe I have the luxury of time to be stuck. I believe you have to be prepared before taking action, but I'm also here to pursue my dreams. The great Creator of this world made me in their image ... so it's no wonder that I like to create, too!

I believe in making things happen, I don't just sit around and wish someone would read something of mine and take enough personal interest to just help me out of the kindness of their heart and then deliver a deal on a silver platter for me out of the sky.

I may write fairy tales, but I don't believe in them.

HOW TO SEPERATE THE "WANNA-BE'S" FROM THE "G.O.A.T'S"



This has been my way of life for the last 20 years. I've cast some cool projects for artists and talent of all types. I orchestrated the casting for all the North American Runway Models for season one of Heidi Klum and Tim Gunn's "Making the Cut" on the Amazon Prime Network. I worked on projects with major film Directors like Christopher Guest, Francis Lawrence, Joe Pytka. I worked with amazing film cinematographers like Mauro Fiore who would direct commercials when they weren't working on a film set. I worked with Mauro right after he won the Oscar for Avatar (2009). He was such a nice guy to everyone. And I worked regularly with Steven Speilberg's Director of Photography, Janusz Kaminski, for years. Janusz was particularly fun and playful with a great sense of humor. One time, he arrived at the studio before all the clients and asked me to pretend to be him and he would pretend to be me. He had never met the clients before, so when I was pretending to be him, it got the biggest laugh afterward since the clients were not expecting that I was Janusz. We played them for a solid 20 minutes before we let them in on the joke. ONLY... and I do mean only Janusz would do something like that.

A lot of people I have met at the top of the industry have been nothing short of great, giving, gracious cooperatives. There have been, of course, a few exceptions — people trying to "look great" and act "Hollywood" to prove that they are someone by creating uncomfortable atmospheres where they are flexing control. The majority of the time, the true greats don't need to remind everyone of how great they are with every decision. And they generally surround themselves with great people. They experiment, they play, they share the creative process and don't pretend to know everything. They seek to catch lightning in a bottle. They experiment, trying and failing, because that is part of the process.

Such is life in the Hollywood hustle. Everybody wants to be — or at least look — important. It's very exaggerated in this business. I haven't done much casting since the on-set of the Covid pandemic. But on my last casting job for a TV series earlier this year, I walked off after hearing the most ridiculous remark from a young director in his twenties. I sent the creative team my formal separation letter the very next morning because I am just incapable of tolerating any more "Hollywood" B.S.

UNPREPARED WHEN COVID-19 HIT

When Covid hit and was declared public enemy number one, the whole world shut down, including Hollywood. Say what you will, but the effects of Covid on society were very serious. I remember the excessive purchasing at stores ... whole aisles sold out of bread, meat, or toilet paper. I've heard people in an attempt to minimize Covid-19 point to how many people also die every year in the U.S. from the flu. So I turned to Google. When I Googled that, I saw under 35,000 people die from the flu every year. But in the first three years of Covid in the U.S. alone, at least 100 million people tested positive for it with over one million deaths. Average the death toll over three years and that's over 333,000 people dying per year from Covid. With a fatality rate of around 10 times that of your common flu, Covid was a bona fide pandemic. To put that in proper perspective, in just three years Covid killed as many people as the common flu would have killed in 30 years ... it's just no comparison. I lost at least one uncle and a cousin to the Covid-19 virus, so it hit my family hard. Covid set the stage for the perfect storm that would change the trajectory of my life forever.

With no castings, I couldn't make enough money to make ends meet. I had been producing a podcast for a TV Celebrity client of mine who pulled the plug around this time. And even though there was a moratorium on evictions, I was subleasing and the person I subleased from wanted me to move out if I couldn't keep up with the rent.

That first night I spent in my car was officially the **Death of a Cameraman**. I knew from then on I couldn't count on that resume to bring me back to the solvent world I once knew.



HOMELESS IN HOLLYWOOD

I ended up living out of my car for months. I made just enough money through Fiverr.com coaching actors and doing YouTube SEO to pay for my cell phone bill and maintain a gym membership. I worked out everyday just to have somewhere to go ... and somewhere to take a shower. I couldn't afford a healthy diet but was lucky to have food at all. Before I went homeless, I was friendly with a local pizza shop that had just opened. When I learned that they would just throw out all the unsold pizza, I asked them to let me feed the homeless with it. Every night around 2:00 in the morning, I would go over and pick up three to four boxes worth of pizza and pass out free pizza to people up and down Hollywood Boulevard for months. I never thought that I would become one of them. But when I found myself homeless, I kept on collecting those unsold pizzas and passing them out but with a difference. I always kept one for myself.

I would fill up five empty water bottles at the gym every day to last me the next 24 hours. I bought soda refills in my 62 ounce Big Gulp mug from 7-eleven. I had virtually eliminated all soda from my diet for years, but during this time it was truly one of the highlights of my week to get a new fountain soda. The sugar gave me a rush and made me feel good. At a time when I had very few "feel good" moments, soda was a life vest. [Unfortunately, I've struggled with a soda addiction ever since.]

I also never knew just how hard it was to find a bathroom when you are homeless ... and I must have had a bladder infection or something because I had to go... A LOT. I was fortunate as a photographer that I had a changing tent in my kit for models. I kept it in my car trunk for the beach or wherever. After about a week, I finally got the idea to just go anywhere with grass, set up my tent, and let nature run its course. No one knew what I was doing inside that tent. Fortunately, I was able to stay within blocks of my gym so I always made it there for more serious business. It's a big time absorber otherwise just to stay sanitary as a homeless person. I consider myself very fortunate. Rarely, if ever, did I have to completely improvise.

Living in Hollywood, a lot of nights, I would go out and hustle, taking photos on the streets of tourists. It wasn't great money. The most I ever made was about \$30 one night, but there's something about interacting with other people enjoying themselves that took my mind off my own circumstances at least for a couple hours. I usually made \$5-10 which was enough to buy some snacks at 7-Eleven.

I really didn't think I looked noticeably homeless until I walked past a restaurant where a couple was having lunch outdoors one day. I looked over at them and whatever they were eating and I smiled and said to them, "that looks good." I didn't skip a beat and kept it moving. But as I reached the next crosswalk, the guy had chased me down to hand me the food. So I accepted it. I get watery-eyed whenever I think about that, because I wasn't just accepting the food. I knew at that moment, I had to accept that people could finally see the "homelessness" on me. That's when I knew that I was in rougher shape than I thought I was... Who had I become? And where was my life going now?

Probably the absolute worst thing about my homelessness was that I wanted to scream out for help but I didn't feel like I could tell anyone. In the industry, it is hard to show vulnerability. When people pick up on desperation, they often avoid you like a leper. Now I have family in California, but I couldn't even tell them what I was dealing with because I didn't want this information getting back to my father. He took care of my mother ill with dementia, and I just didn't want to add to any of the family stress. So I was avoiding contact with everyone I knew practically. There were a couple of friends that I spoke to during this time, here and there, that I might have told if pressed. But I dodged a lot of phone calls and I tried to call back when I thought I might catch their voicemail. I was mostly successful in avoiding people.



The physical life of homelessness is certainly painful enough. I couldn't fully stretch out in my car at night... but at least I had a car. I was absolutely miserable eating pizza every day ... one of my favorite foods, usually. Plus, time just drags when you have nothing to do. As joblessness seeps in, and homelessness takes over, it becomes harder and harder to position yourself for work. I also worried nonstop that someone was going to make me move my car. It is hard to find free parking. In LA, you are always moving your car due to time limits, street sweeping day. There's always something. I just had to hope that I could keep enough gas in my car to move when necessary and avoid getting ticketed and towed.

Beyond all the physical discomfort -- the internal anguish, isolation and loneliness was more painful than anything I ever experienced physically. Left alone to my thoughts, I often thought about my choices in life that brought me here to this lowly place. Every second in that place just sucks the life out of you and it is very hard to see that silver lining when you're in the fire.

I could handle being homeless and living out of my car, but having virtually no reliable income on top of that was exasperating. I was exhausted trying to put on a happy face with clients through Facetime for my coaching sessions. I spent many hours wondering if I would ever see my family or friends again in person. All these fancy people I had met in the industry, or fancy events... none of it could do anything for me now. This business didn't love me... I was completely isolated and alone with my problems while still being surrounded by a sea of people, if that makes any sense. I wondered how I would ever get out of this situation. My thoughts were very foggy. My father would call me on Facetime occasionally. Since I was always in the car, I'd come up with some story about where I was getting ready to go and pretend to be upbeat. I couldn't tell him and my mother the truth... that, inside, I was devastated and though I had already been through some battles in life... I was wallowing in a pain I had never known before.

I wondered why this was happening to me. I have always largely been respectful to people and to the law. I have integrity. I want to work. I'm not trying to mooch off of people. People close to me always comment on how much I work... I couldn't understand it.

My mentor, who I refer to as "Elder!" is worth a few million in property, liquid assets, money in the bank, and he grosses relatively close to half a million dollars per year. When I asked him to loan me my rent money, he beat me down so hard verbally. I didn't think the \$3,000 I asked him for was practically anything for him. I would have done it for him no questions asked if the shoe were on the other foot. In short, ultimately he was right, but he gave in after giving me a very tough lecture... He bought me some time, but my ship sank 30 days later, anyway.

In hindsight, he showed me that he loved me by loaning me the money. If he had not attempted to help me, I probably wouldn't know how to reconcile that because I was always super supportive of him in any way I could be. But to quote the infamous Mel Robbins, who I enjoy listening to, "Every time you rescue somebody you rob them of the opportunity to grow. Every time you step in and you make the problem go away, you make the person a little weaker... and more dependent on you. So if you truly want somebody to tap into the strength they have inside themselves ..." I'm paraphrasing the rest — you basically have to let them hit rock bottom and that's when they are ready for real help. Elder told me at one point "I think God's got you, right where He wants you." And that was very hard to hear. I could probably only take that from Elder.

GETTING MY HEAD ABOVE WATER

Alone in my car, I ranted to God about my situation on multiple occasions, hoping to hear a response so I could figure out the meaning of all this. I would walk Hollywood Blvd almost every day and talk to different business owners to see if I could take photos or market anything online for them. And I had three deals: one with the pizza shop, another with a weed dispensary, and the last with a kitchen remodeling company. All three of them promised that we were on the verge of doing business together. Every Friday, they would say “next week.” And those weeks would turn to months. I dreamed about just a single deal going through so that I could get a cheap motel room and stretch out on a bed, but nothing ever materialized.

The only good thing about hitting rock bottom is that — if you don’t get stuck — you can only go in one direction from there... up.



One day, I realized that I had to stop counting on others to “pay me for something.” My search for clients kept going nowhere... I was only treading water. I started racking my brain to come up with a new plan. Then, one night while staring out at the black sky from my car, it just kept coming back to me that I had a license to sell life insurance. I didn’t need to have the product in hand; I just needed to connect with people who wanted that product.

I knew that I was in no physical condition to record YouTube videos of myself talking about business related. So I couldn’t lean on my YouTube SEO skills. I was going to have to stretch and learn a new skill. It was at this moment that I realized that I would have to learn how to market a business through a website if I were going to leverage my life insurance license.

It was this or die trying because I didn’t have anything else.

I already knew YouTube SEO but it would take a lot more time for me to master web SEO. Fortunately, I had plenty of time and now I had my focus. My \$300/month Equinox gym membership paid off because they had Wi-Fi in the lobby so that’s where I would go to study most evenings.

But even though I was making progress, the loneliness was getting bad. One day, I called a friend from childhood — I’ll just refer to him as Kang. He moved to California too, and we used to live within walking distance of each other when we both lived in Koreatown. He introduced me to great Korean BBQ. Now he lives in Garden Grove, California and we have kept in touch for over 30 years.

We could talk about the Detroit Pistons and Lions together all day and were having one of those easy conversations for more than half an hour. But then, he asked if we could connect in person and my tone changed very quickly. I was trying to dodge that request but he kept asking, “do you still live in the same place?” He had been to my Hollywood loft before... I think he sensed something. He’s known me since 4th, or 5th grade, after all.

THE ROAD TO REDEMPTION

I got real quiet. I had already experienced telling a couple “friends” and they had completely ghosted me. Should I confide in him? Eventually, I spilled the beans. Kang immediately asked me to come over. He had his two daughters with him that weekend and was planning to grill some BBQ. But I had to confess that I didn't have enough gas in my car to drive from Hollywood all the way to Garden Grove.

Little did I know that, as we were talking, he had looked me up on PayPal and sent me \$1,000 while we were still on the phone. He told me to look for a Paypal notification, and come over as soon as I could. Talk about “real friends”, right? This was nothing short of true heroism from him.

When I saw the PayPal notification, tears rolled down my face.

I went that evening. He couldn't believe that I had been living like that for months without getting ahold of him. He told me that I could stay with him as long as I needed to get back on my feet. He had his daughters (elementary school age) every Wednesday night and every other weekend.

Kang offered me the foundation for my recovery. He graciously stocked the refrigerator so that I could always eat something. He was awesome to provide me with a sanctuary. He did more than he'll ever know rescuing me off the street. That was very brave of him. And I am forever grateful to him and his little girls' compassion for taking their Uncle Aaron in.

While living with Kang, I got a part time job running an event photo booth at birthday parties, graduation parties, etc. It was mostly weekends and I only made \$300–400/week. It was something, but it wasn't a career by any stretch of the imagination. Meanwhile, I was studying web marketing. It took a lot of time to build, a lot of time to learn, and a lot of time to gather momentum and take effect.



Occasionally, I would also shoot fashion shows and various productions at acting schools in the Chinese community plus events for Chime TV, the first Chinese-American TV channel. Sometimes, I would do things that didn't even pay just to get out of the house and to network. One day, filming an event for Chime TV, I was introduced to a woman who had a beautiful and talented young daughter. Everybody saw real potential in her, she was only 11, but if you told me she was 15–16, I would have believed it. She was tall, already 5'7" or more at just 11 years old. Someone on the Board of Directors asked me to shoot some pictures of this young princess. After I gave the pictures to her mother, she sought me out to continue working with her daughter.

I did a lot of shooting and coaching with her. Her mother owned and managed several properties between Los Angeles and Lake Arrowhead. Of her own mind one day, she offered me a place to stay in the basement studio of her home in Temple City so that I could help her with her daughter and with her properties. I never even spoke to her about my situation, or any hardship; she just genuinely wanted my help.

This opportunity came completely out of the blue, but sometimes that's how God works. And it shows how serious the mother was about preparing her daughter for the entertainment industry. For me, it was an upgrade in a sense, to have privacy in her basement. There was a huge TV and a little bar... it had clearly been a man cave at one point. And in spite of Kang's graciousness, I'm sure he was ready for me to be off his couch. So I agreed, and moved in with them.

She had renters in the house as well as her 90-something-year-old mother and everyone was Chinese so I tried to learn a bit of the language. The grandmother (Nāinai is what we all called her because it means grandmother in Chinese) would feed the young princess dinner whereas I looked over her schooling and industry practice. When her mother was not around, I was her guardian; Nāinai wasn't quite up for that task full time. It was a fair trade for a free place to stay.

I became basically her Manager and Nanny ... her "Manny." People often gave this young princess more trust, because she looked so much more mature than she was... and she played on that... she thought she was grown but she needed discipline. She had the mind of a 5th grade child. Even her mother told me that she thought her young princess was spoiled and she was right. Nonetheless, we had a good time, mostly.

When her mother went out of town for a whole month, the young princess became a full-time responsibility. She taught me what it was like to have kids and especially the importance of not spoiling them. I had to make sure that she didn't play Roblox all day ... make sure that she did her chores, homework, took out the dog, went to bed at a decent hour, and ate breakfast in the morning ... I had to drive her to school whenever it rained, and insist she obeyed her grandmother. Thank goodness for the Google translate app... that was the only way I could communicate with Nāinai... The young princess was a handful. Kids are definitely not for the faint of heart. But it was during this time that the seeds I planted with my life insurance website started to pay off. My life insurance business began to grow.



REINVENTING MYSELF



So what did REINVENTION look like for me??... Well honestly I had no idea at first. But I was open to figuring it out. Until one day I got what initially seemed like a random call from an old buddy of mine Lonnie. Lonnie had been managing a casting studio on Sunset Blvd right up until Covid closed the doors. So Lonnie was out of work for awhile just like me. We're catching up a bit, and he tells me he got his life insurance license. I was kind of taken aback, because the field seemed so different from his interests. He had been managing a casting studio, building his own Casting Director career, writing screenplays, and video editing... Anyways he asks me to listen to a presentation on a life insurance product called an IUL, or Indexed Universal Life Insurance. I had no idea what it was, and I wasn't very interested... I might not have participated if it were anybody but him asking me. [I guess that begs the question... how open was I really??] But if I could help him by listening to his presentation than I was willing to do that. So he scheduled an appointment with me and his trainer for a Zoom meeting to go over this one particular product.

And without getting into all of the details about IUL policies right now (you're welcome to visit my website IULaccount.com), after they finished the presentation and I had heard all the features my exact words to them were, "Yo!... I can do this!" I felt the conviction in my soul that this was worth my attention. I had already tasted one realm of the financial industry before, with 2 years spent in the mortgages/refinancing industry... I guess financial services has always been in my blood... but the mortgage industry felt considerably more transactional to me... whereas this feels more holistic. So I onboarded with their firm and began studying for the Life Insurance Producer exam. I just took it one step at a time and eventually I crossed the finish line.

Today, I help people with Tax-Free Retirement strategies, and Estate Planning. It's very emotionally rewarding for me helping people navigate financial decisions they don't fully understand. I am very passionate about the subject matter of financial planning. I work with working class people on average salaries to high net-worth individuals. And I find that most people just don't receive enough education on financial planning, so I am happy to explore that subject with them. I mean, I understand firsthand what it feels like to make financial decisions (largely mistakes in my case) without fully understanding the consequences. At the time of this writing, I'm actually studying for my Series 65 Securities license to become a full service fiduciary financial investment advisor. I never would have imagined that I could find this kind of fulfillment in a financial career. I only wish I had explored this facet of the business sooner.

My story taught me why financial literacy matters. My work now is helping people understand options before life forces them to learn under pressure. I don't teach financial preparation because I read about crisis. I teach it because I lived what happens when you're not prepared for one. But that's me. For you... your reinvention may be something else altogether. I can't tell you what that is. You must put in the work, and take the steps to find that thing. The work won't do itself.

But an important part of the decision is to lead with passion. Find something you connect with at your core. The best person I ever worked for told me "If you find something you love... you'll never work a day in your life." Don't let your fear of failure win... Don't let other peoples opinions decide everything for you... Don't let other people's fear of what might happen to you win either. Nobody has a crystal ball. Now, I'm not saying, "If you're over 40, you should still tryout for an NBA team." Ofcourse use common sense. But it's okay to dream big... in fact, I encourage you to dream big... I just want you to be smart, and better prepared than I was.

REINVENTING MYSELF

I lived the life of a starving artist in New York, then the life of a professional freelancer in LA. On the flip side - my financial knowledge has also made it possible for me to actually spend more time following my creative ambitions. And when it comes to retirement... I no longer have that blank space in my head when I think about how I will create my own retirement. For years, I had no idea how I was going to put together a meaningful retirement. I was treating my personal retirement planning like a fairy-tale. My great hope was to sell a reality TV show or screenplay, and create this windfall of wealth. I could then put that money into the stock market or real estate. And this elaborate hope of mine was what I really believed, whole-heartedly.

It was only up until about five years ago that I learned how much simpler it can all be. I can make my retirement goals and financial dreams a reality without hitting some career grand slam or winning some other career lottery, figuratively speaking. The fairy tale strategy I was counting on before came with the odds of 1-in-a-million. And even though I almost pulled it off on several occasions, I still never got over the mountaintop of creating true financial security. I took a lot of risks, made a lot of sacrifices, missed a lot of birthday parties and other family events. It's fine to pursue your heart's ambitions, but leverage that activity with responsible actions as well. There's nothing worse than burning the candle at both ends, so to speak.

I hope I sparked some self-reflection for you... In this book I shared what pain taught me. Maybe it can help you prepare for your own storm.

In closing, I'll share something that I used to hear Elder say which always stuck with me: "If you don't see it before you see it ... you're never going to see it." That's so true.

Thank you so much for reading my story, **Death of a Cameraman**. If you like it, please share it with others. I hope it truly inspires or empowers somebody out there...

Thank you again... And I'll see you all... at the top!

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THANK YOU

We Welcome Your Feedback.

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