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The Pride and Pain of a Guide to L.A.'s World of Gangs

By JESSE KATZ
TIMES STAFF WRITER

During the early 1990s, when I covered gangs for this newspaper, no man loomed larger for me than James J. Galipeau.

A veteran of the Los Angeles County Probation Department's metropolitan specialized gang unit, Jim was my master key to the Blood and Crip underworld, taking me on house calls, schooling me in history, inviting me to epic soul food lunches with his cadre of tattooed ex-cons and battle-scarred O.G.s.

Whenever I (college graduate, no arrests, living in Glendale) felt lost or scared or disillusioned, Jim managed to restore my empathy. He loved the 'hood and respected the power of its antiheroes, the Rollin' 60s, the Van Ness Gangster Bloods, the Eight-Tray Gangster Crips. Big, white, bald and salty, he could find heart in the heartless, reason in the irrational.

Jim shared his gift not just with me, of course, but with anyone groping in the South-Central labyrinth: He was a surrogate for the thousands of fatherless young homies who ended up in his caseload; a trailblazer for the generations of gang intervention workers who followed his example; an interpreter for the millions of viewers who tuned in to *Nightline* and *Geraldo* and *Oprah* after the Los Angeles riots, listening to him untangle the roots of urban American rage.

His career had begun in the ashes of Watts, just as the Crips and Bloods were about to be born, and even as he approached his mid- 50s, Jim still counted their surviving architects — Tookie, Monster, Snoop, Big Smokey — as his peers. "I care about them and they care about me and we've had a long life together," he wrote in a book proposal, still unpublished. "Statistically, most of them should not have lived to be as old as they are. They tell me, having been down in the ghetto so long, there's no reason I should have stayed alive either."

I left Los Angeles in 1994 to work in our Houston bureau; while I was gone, Jim began to die.

In a city that is the gang and entertainment capital of the world, it is only fitting that the premier font of street wisdom should have come straight out of Central Casting.

Chain-smoking and slurping day-old coffee from a 32-ounce sports bottle, his head shaved and his Fu Manchu graying, Jim was 6 feet and 230 pounds of swagger. He had gold earrings, gold rings and a gold eagle hanging from a gold chain around his neck. He wore cowboy boots and over-dyed Cross Colours denim, carried a 9-millimeter Ruger in his fanny pack and, under his black leather jacket, sometimes went bare-chested.

His nickname was Kojak, but a better moniker might have been Shaft—“the white Shaft,” said his daughter, Celeste. A New Hampshire native of French- Canadian descent, he could jaw like a Compton rapper, even inject the N-word without offense. “He realized the advantages he had as a white male,” she said, “but in his soul, I think, he was black.”

His faith in redemption was shaped by autobiography. He was 10 when the family moved to Long Beach, where his father worked double shifts as an aerospace machinist and his mother lay bedridden with multiple sclerosis. Unsupervised, Jim turned into a 1950s hoodlum, starting with rumbles and drag races, later graduating to grand theft auto and liquor store break-ins.

By 14, he was on probation. “One time, I came to jail, as usual, and they called my father,” Jim told NPR interviewer Terry Gross. “And they tell him, ‘Mr. Galipeau, you know, we’re going to have to take your son away from you, you know . . . he’s just too wild.’ ” Jim dared them to do it. But then he caught a glimpse of his dad, always quiet, steady, reserved. “I looked at him and he started crying. He just broke down physically.”

His father was his mother’s nurse, and as a child, Jim had only a single prayer: “Please, God, don’t let this man die.”

Seeing his father’s tears changed everything. “All of a sudden, I realized. . . . I am killing this man.”

Jim fought in Vietnam, then got a master’s degree in psychology from Cal State Long Beach before joining the Probation Department in 1966. He worked the old-fashioned way, giving his word, earning respect, convincing even stone-cold gangbangers to settle disputes without bloodshed. “These people are proud and honorable,” he once said in a *Playboy* interview. “Their code of conduct may not meet with the approval of society, but it is just as strict.”

Jim’s code was also unorthodox. He was a notorious partyer and womanizer, sometimes blurring the line between job and recreation. He hired felons and housed them. He broke his department’s no-weapons policy every day he showed up for work. It was tolerated—though sometimes only barely—because Jim had the juice to keep people from dying. “He knew that the real experts were the brothers who had actually lived

this madness . . . individuals who are now trying to fix what we created,” said Kenneth “Big Smokey” Riley, a 39-year-old former Crip.

Like most in his line of work, Jim did not measure success in statistics, but in personal stories – the lives he saved, one at a time. When I left the gang beat, I wrote about my experience for the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, but ended it on a sour note: His sense of hope, after all I had witnessed, was not enough to sustain me.

Jim called me in Texas, his gravelly baritone at a full roar.

“How could you do that?” He was more hurt than angry.

“After all I taught you, after all I showed you, how could you give up on us like that?”

Jim and I made amends, but when I returned to Los Angeles in 1998 – the year he retired – his kidneys were shot.

Life revolved around a dialysis machine, five hours a day, three days a week. He was tired and humiliated, tethered by hoses and tubes and monitors.

His wife of 23 years, June, offered to donate a kidney – a gift of unconditional love. “As you know, he wasn’t the easiest person to deal with,” said June, who also knew a husband who wrote poetry, who aced *Jeopardy* questions and who filled their house on Imperial Highway with more cats than she cares to count.

On Jan. 10, his kidneys were removed. The next day, before doctors could even plan for the transplant, Jim died.

By the time I found out, weeks had gone by. It was too late to write a standard obituary. I felt terrible that I had not been there for him – as a friend and as a journalist – that this rare and generous giant had been snatched away, at 57, without any kind of public acknowledgment.

I felt even worse, though, knowing Jim’s wounds were mostly self-inflicted. He had abused his body, early on, with everything from whiskey to heroin; later, suffering from diabetes and high blood pressure, he filled himself with a diet of fat. The first time we feasted at Harold & Belle’s, our favorite Creole spot, I was stunned to see Jim season his french fries with a slathering of whipped butter.

Whether it was drink or drugs or food, “he was always trying to kind of stuff things down in him,” said Celeste, 32, his only child. She thinks his pain began as a boy, with his mother crippled by disease. But as an adult, it turned to guilt: His own daughter now battles multiple sclerosis.

“There was a sadness that he masked,” she said. “He didn’t see how great he was.”

If he did not, it is worth repeating. Jim, my brother, you never gave up.