ON THE NEWS

A Journalist's Own Story of Recovery and Self-Discovery

JOHN BOEL

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FOREWORD

uestion: How do you know when your life has hit the skids?

Answer: When a TV reporter contacts you and requests an interview.

Yes, there is a chance it's going to be a positive story. But 99 times out of 100, it's not going to be good.

How do I know? Because I've been doing it for more than a quarter of a century. Stroking, schmoozing, sometimes shamelessly working people for interviews at the worst moments of their lives. You know Don Henley's song line: "Get the widow on the set; we need dirty laundry."

Today, my life came full circle. The dirtiest laundry on the clothesline is mine. A big, embarrassing pair of soiled underwear flapping in the breeze for all to see. People can't seem to get enough of my dirty laundry because when I wasn't publicly tattling on people as a news anchor, I was taking down bad guys as an investigative reporter. After my second DUI in two years, a surreal termination, and a month-long stay in rehab, one of my rival Louisville news anchors asks me if she can be the one to "share" my story.

No. I'd rather tell my own story. In fact, I have many stories to tell—from the people I met and lessons I learned while I was *on* the news—to the people I met and lessons

I learned while I was *in* the news. Outrageous stories. Disgusting stories. Sad stories. Courage from people and places no one expected. Inspiration from unlikely sources. Comical ironies in the television news business. And painful stories after I've been handed a "reporter involvement" assignment that sends me places where no one wants to go.

All journalists are taught to tell both sides of the TV news story. Few journalists have lived and learned from both sides of the TV news spotlight as I have.

PUBLIC PARK PLEASURE

Reality TV at the best pick-up place in town

he sweat pours off me like a faucet turned wide open. I'm sitting on a picnic table overlooking the Ohio River at a public park in Louisville. Nice breeze. Beautiful view.

Only one problem: men keep walking up and asking me if I want to have sex. No foreplay. No discretion. They don't even ask my first name. The hidden camera and microphone under my shirt capture everything.

"Ever thought about being with another man before?" the first visitor asks.

"Hi," I reply.

Where I'm from, you at least say hello before propositioning someone for sex. But not here. This is Eva Bandman Park, one of many public parks advertised on the Internet as a great place for men to meet and have sex. I was sent here to see if an ordinary citizen, sitting in a public park, is subjected to lewd or perverted activity.

The practice isn't new, but the TV coverage of it is. It began at a Texas TV station. At the end of a jaw-dropping special report that even showed the male sex acts going on, the horrified news anchor apologized to the viewers, basically saying in its lust for ratings points, the station had lost its sense of decency in allowing that report to air.

He got in big trouble. The report was then replicated in almost every local news market in the United States. The guy assigned to it in Louisville for the first time: John Boel.

"I'll give you a b--- --- if you got a place to do it," one guy offers. He stands right there in front of me and starts masturbating. Man, if he only knew the hidden camera under my shirt is capturing all of this, and he's going to be a porn star on the evening news. I get up and walk to another spot in the park. He follows me and picks back up where he left off. I move again, and he follows again.

This guy is driving a marked van, with the name of a very well-known plumbing contractor on his vehicle and on his shirt. As he tinkers with his own plumbing, I want to show him my hidden camera. But instead, I flee to our surveillance van.

"You're lousy at this," my photographer laughs.

"Then, let's switch," I fire back, sweat pouring off my nose. "I'll stay here and shoot this and you go out there."

"No way, man," he says. So I call it a day.

But I have to come up with something, so I head back out. This time I pull in and park at Cox Park on the Ohio River. The camera I have taped to the passenger side door captures something my colleagues can't believe. A mere eight seconds after I shift the car into park, a middle-aged man pulls in next to me. He immediately gets out, walks over to my window, and while manipulating his manhood, asks me a question.

"Want a b----?"

Again, not even a hello first.

"No, thanks," I reply, realizing I won't even have to edit the tape this time to show how fast you get solicited for sex in these parks.

The ratings for these reports are higher than for anything I've ever done. So, I am sent out to do more. I interview a Louisville cop who says he made 70 sodomy arrests in one park, in one summer, for this stuff. And that was 28 years ago. He arrested other police officers, funeral home directors, teachers, car salesmen but, fortunately, no TV reporters.

I interview another officer who recently made 117 public park pervert arrests, including nine ministers and eight teachers. Most fascinating are the demographics of this. He crunched the arrest numbers and found the average park pervert who gets caught is a 51-year-old white, married male. I go out with him on one of his undercover missions and witness something that trumps everything I have already observed.

While we videotape another in a series of white, married, fifty-something-year-old males being handcuffed and hauled away in an Indiana park, we notice an old man just sitting in his car, watching it all. After deciding we have more than enough material, and realizing this is like shooting fish in a barrel, we decide to leave. Our marked news car, and the marked police cars, all stream past the guy who's been watching. He then promptly drives over to our undercover officer, sticks his arm out of his open car window, and begins massaging the officer's groin area. Clearly the dumbest or horniest man on earth, he is hauled in to the nearby police post.

This is an interview I have to do. We walk over, fire up the camera, extend the microphone and start asking questions.

"You were watching the officers bust men for the very same thing. Then you did it, too. What were you thinking?"

He mumbles something, and then I notice a stain soaking his pants. The dirty old man just defecated in his drawers.

We pack up our gear and drive furiously to get back to the station. We want to laugh until we cry, but we can't. We're too sick. Finally, my photographer says, "Boel, you finally did it. You finally scared the crap out of someone."

CELEBRITY REHAB Without Dr. Drew

No Charlie or Lindsay when you need them

hen your life has crash-landed, and you hurriedly pack for rehab, it's surprising what you throw in the suitcase. I have plenty of pairs of shorts in Minnesota, where it's below freezing before Halloween. I packed the jersey of my favorite NFL quarterback who, I'm told, was in this very unit kicking his addiction. I'm so glad my family threw photographs in my suitcase. As I set them out, one-by-one, I see a common theme. I remember every one of these moments spanning the past decade, and in every photo, I'm horrified to realize I had been drinking.

As a journalist fresh out of college, my first investigative report was on an alcohol treatment center. Now I'm in one. The first thing I learn is that this is going to be nothing like my favorite TV show, "Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew." No lounging around the pool verbally sparring with spoiled babies. Beginning at 6:30, a tightly-scripted 14-hour day is printed out in individual schedules. You get fined if your bed is not made right or a light is left on. Chores are assigned weekly. I get garbage duty.

The counselors don't remotely resemble Dr. Drew. They're all recovering addicts or alcoholics and they cannot be fooled. One of them was a meth-head. He says he walked in on two guys, dead of a meth overdose, and responded like any normal human being would—by going through their pockets in case they had any more unused drugs.

Compassion seems to be lacking in everyone's stories. A heroin junkie, shipped in here by bus without any shoes on, fondly describes something they call the "Dead Junkie House." It's an abandoned house where all the heroin addicts in town went to shoot up over the years. One of them keeled over and died of an overdose with the needle still sticking out of his arm. Drug addicts came and went for days, months and years. Nobody did anything. The dead junkie decomposed right in front of them. Over time, the needle got rusty. But the story never gets old.

There are 18 guys in my unit. Talk about diversity. A federal judge. A stand-up comedian. A professional motorcycle racer. A drug dealer who was making \$50,000 a month. A golf course superintendent who was knocking down a case of beer a day. An oxycontin fiend who got mugged three different times in one night trying to score some in Chicago. And a staggering number of college kids who are already in rehab.

Nobody is here because he thought it was high time to get cleaned up. Every person is here because of a cataclysmic event in life. An arrest. A divorce. A lost job. Only one man on the unit is here because of an "intervention." His family paid a professional interventionist \$5,000 to get him here. I asked him what they got for \$5,000. He said the man drove him to the airport, flew with him, and then followed the shuttle from the airport to the rehab center. Apparently they were worried he might open the door on the moving shuttle van and make a break for freedom across a field. My favorite detail: the interventionist bought him a beer at the airport. Professional interventionist sounds like a fun, lucrative job.

Almost every day, a new guy stumbles in and a 28-day veteran graduates and heads back to reality. The difference between the incoming and outgoing flights is amazing to me, so I have some hope.

But I'm also surrounded by several blowhards who know everything. Problem is, they're back in treatment for the third or fourth time, clearly not practicing what they preach.

One of the first things we have to do is take a battery of tests. The only one I recognize is the MMPI, which is supposed to gauge my mental health by asking me questions like, "Have you ever wanted to be a girl?" A man next to me, who is dressed like a woman, is taking the same test. I wonder how she/he answered.

While I have my doubts, these tests turn out to be more than accurate. My psychologist tells me I scored off the chart for depression, anxiety and shame. I used to score well on tests in math, reading and writing.

The first time I pick up a newspaper, there's a big feature story on the retirement of a popular local news anchor I idolized in college. In fact, I decided to get into broadcast journalism because of his great investigative reports I watched while belting down bottles of Buckhorn beer in my dorm. One thing I didn't know about him until this newspaper feature: he got sent to rehab by his employer after alcohol swallowed him up. Funny how God keeps sending me signals.

Every morning after our meditation and prayer session, I go downstairs to the laundry room where no one can see me cry, and the dryer can drown out my sobbing. I'm a thousand miles away from friends and family at holiday time. I've been publicly crucified in the media. Lost my job. Killed my career. Humiliated my family. I can't imagine being humbled any lower. But when my peer reviews are read to me at the halfway point of my stay, I get ripped for "grandiosity." Most of them think I'm Ron Burgundy, the big-shot news anchor, who's too cool for everyone else. They think I'm a self-absorbed, bragging blowhard who's judgmental, superficial and doesn't care about anyone else.

I'm shocked.

Then I realize they nailed it.