

The Night I Was Saved by Spider-Man

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA | DECEMBER 2010

I've rustled up dinner for some fairly tough customers, but nothing quite prepared me for the challenge of cooking for a group of runaway teenagers.



Or, so I discovered when I spent time at Los Angeles Youth Network (LAYN), a constellation of homeless shelters that care for homeless adolescents and teenagers—many of whom were kicked out of their childhood homes because they are gay.

Word has begun to get out among my circle of friends that I'm researching different ways that needy people get fed. Various people have come forward with ideas and invitations. One of that particularly intrigued me was from my old pal, Hope Biller, who is on the board of Los Angeles Youth Network.

“I hope you don't think this is going to be like *The Brady Bunch*.”

Nearly twenty years ago, Hope was my assistant at Edelman Worldwide, a global public relations agency where I then toiled on such consumer food products as Maxwell House Coffee, Lea & Perrins Worcestershire Sauce, and Nestle's Tollhouse chocolate chip morsels. These days, she is a reality TV casting director and she lives with her husband, Ken, who's a television producer, and their two children, Sofia and Sam, in Los Feliz, a quiet neighborhood just below Griffith Park. Sam, a seven-year-old, and Sofia, who is 10, are precociously sophisticated children; they know how to behave in first class airplane cabins, or on sound stages. What's far more impressive, I was to discover, is that they aren't in the least bit jaded. Instead, Sam and Sofia have open, relaxed demeanors around those who are less fortunate than they are.

A few months later, I had reasons to travel to Los Angeles and, so, I recalled Hope's suggestion. When I telephoned, I learned that she would love some company, as Ken was in New Zealand working on a sci-fi/fantasy television series called “Legend of the Seeker,” and she was a little lonely. If I wanted to prepare a dinner at a LAYN group house in West Hollywood, she and the kids would be happy to be my sous-chefs.

This was an offer I could not refuse. Retrieving the telephone number she'd given me for the LAYN's head of “volunteer efforts,” I gave this person a call. After I introduced myself, I explained my plan. In addition to making dinner for however many children lived at the group house, I might also provide a few cooking lessons, demonstrating how easy it was to, say, sautee spinach and garlic, or make a quick tomato sauce for pasta.

After I'd pitched this idea, there was a rather long pause.

“Don't expect too much from these kids,” he said. “Many of them have been very brutalized by their upbringing. They are angry and closed down. It's not like everyone sits together and eats family-style. It's great what you want to do, but I hope you don't think this is going to be like *The Brady Bunch*.”

I was surprised by his sarcasm. It is a touchy matter, this volunteering to cook for others. There appears no particularly correct way to go about it, but seemingly limitless ways to get it wrong. Perhaps it's because making someone a meal is, quite literally, an imposition of your taste—in this case, your taste in food—onto someone else. I may prefer to think of my whipping up chicken curry or couscous as gastrophilanthropy; others, apparently like this gentleman, may consider it gastro-colonialism. *Who am I to tell anyone what they should eat?*

“Fine, I completely understand,” I said. “Maybe I was getting ahead of myself, with the idea of cooking lessons. I wonder, though, if you can suggest some types of food that the children especially like to eat?”

Again, there was a longish delay before he finally answered.

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“No, it’s anyone’s guess what they’ll want to eat on any given night, but if they like it, they’ll eat like wolves. Especially the boys. So, if you’re confident of your cooking, I’d say you should make twice as much as you’d normally prepare.”

Not much direction to go on, but it was a start.



Over the next few days, as I began to daydream about possible menus (macaroni and cheese? Stir-Fry? Sloppy Joes?) I tried to imagine what these kids in Los Angeles would be like. I’ll admit, in my ignorance, the idea of a runaway teenager seemed somehow anachronistic, a throwback to the 1960’s. While it is true that public perception has shifted over time, and today the media is much likelier to fuel fears of “missing” or “abducted” children, or youngsters who are coerced into prostitution or “sexual trafficking,” the phenomenon of kids running away from home is still a very serious problem in America.

According to the National Runaway Switchboard, an organization based in Chicago, Illinois that maintains a toll-free number (1-800-RUNAWAY) to provide help to children who have already, or are thinking of, running away, an estimated fifteen-percent of American children will flee their homes at some point between the ages of 10 and 18. It’s also thought there may be between 1 million to 3 million runaway and homeless kids currently living on the streets in the United States.

That said, I wasn’t completely wrong in my initial impression, as a 21st-century shelter like Los Angeles Youth Network is still heavily influenced by public policy decisions made back in the 1960’s when runaway youth first became a national problem. Such, at least, is the theory of Karen M. Staller is an Associate professor of Social Work at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

In her book, *Runaways: How the Sixties Counterculture Shaped Today’s Practices and Policies*, (Columbia University Press, 2006), Staller explains that until the early 1960’s, there was a tendency to think of runaway kids as modern-day Huckleberry Finns. They were somewhat romantically imagined as simply “lighting out for the territory,” on a kind of youthful lark, their belongings tied up in a kerchief that dangled at the end of a stick, slung over one shoulder. However, when waves of Baby Boomers began to enter their teenaged years in the mid-1960’s, runaways began to be perceived more as part of the so-called “hippie” phenomenon. Youths bolting from their parents’ homes in unprecedented numbers, were now seen as psychologically troubled and critical of society as a whole, rather than mere “adventurers.” In response, elected officials began tinkering with the basic rules governing when, and how, to regulate America’s youth. For instance, in 1971 the Twenty-sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution lowered the voting age from 21 to 18.

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Some of this, I knew from personal experience, as one of my older sisters ran away from our house, back in the late 1960’s. It was wintertime, and we were living on Long Island, in the suburbs of New York City. One morning, Martha went off to high school (from which she was scheduled to graduate the following spring), and that night, she failed to return home. Without leaving a note, without leaving a trace, she’d simply vanished. Nearly a half-century later, how well I recall the panic and disbelief that surrounded our house! Doubtless they knew it was a waste of time, but having to do something, on many evenings my parents drove the rest of their children into Manhattan. Dad would slowly drive around different parts of downtown, with some of us scanning the sidewalks to the left, others to the right, keeping our eyes on the look-out for Martha. We never found her.

She came back a few weeks later. It was only then that we learned she’d had a plan in the works for months. Martha hoarded all

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her babysitting money and high school graduations gifts, until she's saved enough to buy a one-way airplane ticket to North Carolina, of all places, and found a room in a boarding house. One night her landlady got the story out of her and subsequently called my parents who went down to retrieve her.

Any cook will tell you that some meals come together easily, nearly magically, as if an unseen hand were stirring the sauce. Others feel jinxed, like they are a disaster from the start.

While she was still missing, though, my parents, like many others like them, were fearful that Martha might even have found her way out to San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. Staller's book brings us back to 1967, as the media and pop music groups of the day promoted a so-called "Summer of Love," a phenomenon which brought thousands of runaways to California.



A counterculture group called the "Diggers" organized help for this influx of homeless young people, providing free places to sleep, free clinics, free food, and telephone help lines. When Huckleberry House opened in San Francisco, it was the first of

what would become a nationwide movement of alternative and radical service providers that sheltered runaway children. Other shelters followed in the late 1960's, such as Covenant House in New York City, Ozone House in Ann Arbor, and Looking Glass in Chicago. Considered radical at the time, these places were not part of the traditional child welfare or juvenile justice systems. Teenagers asked for help directly and were not ordered into treatment by judges or other authorities. Most of these care providers would not call parents or police against the teenager's wishes. Ground-breaking in the 1960's, in 2011 it is still the prevailing ethos at a place like Los Angeles Youth Network.

A few days later, someone from LAYN called me back, with a more specific food idea. At the West Hollywood group house, there was one particular girl, Cindy, who asked if someone could make *chiles rellenos*. As the story was told to me, it seems Cindy did especially well on a school test, and she really hoped life would somehow reward her with this dish—one she remembered her Mexican grandmother making. Now, I agree with Cindy. *Chiles rellenos* are delicious, but what makes them so is a very time-consuming and labor-intensive recipe. Not exactly the sort of meal you want to make for 25 kids, who I was warned, I should actually count as 50 because of their wolfish appetites. I knew better, but I immediately agreed that *chiles rellenos* would be a snap for me to make. *No hay problema*. Well, they were a goddam problem, both for me, and for poor Hope, who generously offered me the full run of her kitchen.

Any cook will tell you that some meals come together easily, nearly magically, as if an unseen hand were stirring the sauce. Others feel jinxed, like they are a disaster from the start. My *chiles rellenos* were in the latter category, beginning with the fact that all of Los Angeles' best grocery store chains—Gelson's, Von's and Robertson's—either did not carry, or were mysteriously sold out of, Poblano peppers. As a result, I had to scour a half-dozen hispanic grocery stores east of downtown, in order to find 50 Poblanos big and plump enough to hold stuffing. Then, there was the searing and de-seeding of these peppers, making a meat stuffing, dipping the stuffed peppers in an egg white batter, and frying them till they were golden brown. *Ay Dios Mio!*

A lifetime ago, back when Hope was my assistant at a public relations agency, she was used to seeing me take on impossible projects, and spend inordinate amounts of time fussing over insane details like the manufacture of the "world's biggest chocolate chip morsel," that would be cut apart with a jackhammer at a press event. Still, I think Hope thought I'd gone a little crazy, as I brooded over a huge pot of black beans cooking on the back of her stove for parts of two days. Finally, though, the food was ready, and on a cold, rainy night of September—it felt more like an evening in Portland, Maine, than sunny Los Angeles—we loaded up Hope's car, and she, Sofia, Sam and I drove over to West Hollywood.

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As I'd been warned, what we encountered here was a pretty fearsome bunch of teenagers. We rang the bell, knocked on the door, and repeated. Ring-ring; knock-knock. Finally, a kid opened the door for us, but turned away without any greeting, and ambled back to the living room. Here, a group of maybe a dozen kids were sprawled on sofas, chairs and the floor, all watching a Vin Diesel movie on a television larger than any I'd ever seen before. They had the thing cranked to such an incredible volume, it felt as if my own body were being pummeled by each punch thrown onscreen. Thinking some super-heroic action of my own was required, I turned on my biggest, brightest smile. "Hey, you guys! We've brought you an incredible feast of Mexican food!"

I put out the three sorts of salsas I'd made, with varying degree of spiciness: mild, medium, and lethal.

No one said hello. No one offered to help us unpack the car. Instead, as Hope and I repeatedly struggled through the living room, hauling in foil-wrapped pans and hampers full of food, we would occasionally hear little groans of impatience when we momentarily blocked the television screen. In the kitchen, we found two boys about to dig into a cardboard box recently delivered from Pizza Hut.

I am not all that fragile—really, I'm not—but the smell of it nearly made me gag. "You guys! Don't eat that!" I commanded. "Didn't anyone tell you that we're having Mexican food tonight?" They both looked at me like I was a cop, which, under the circumstances, I sort of was.

"Give me fifteen minutes, please? If you don't like what I've made, you can eat the pizza, O.K.?"

Without answering, they shuffled away. They left behind their pizza, however, which I immediately threw away.



As I hurried to get things ready, I was relieved I'd cooked everything at Hope's house, and not relied on this house's kitchen, which I'd been assured was "professional" grade. Ha! Of the stove top's four electric burners, only two worked. There were no pots bigger than what's necessary to boil an egg in, and—I was later told, as a suicide prevention precaution—there were no knives whatsoever, and only plastic eating utensils. Juggling the pans between the little fire I could muster, I heated up the *chiles rellenos*, rice, black beans, and a zucchini, tomato and corn casserole. I put out the three sorts of salsas I'd made, with varying degree of spiciness: mild, medium, and lethal. As I'd hoped might happen, the scent of these various dishes began to waft out into the living room, and a few of the kids managed to drag themselves away from Vin Diesel long enough to pop their heads into the kitchen. I asked after Cindy. I thought she might be particularly excited to see what was going on, and would act as some sort of emissary to the others.

"She ain't here," a young man with a comically thick mop of black hair told me. "She, like, ran away, and no one's, like, heard from her for, I dunno, like, a week?"

I looked at Hope, but she made a point to be gazing elsewhere.

This was discouraging. Very. But then, I got a grip. What was really discouraging was that a child like Cindy, wherever she was, had been kicked out of her own house and ended up here at LAYN. Children need to be shown love, not judgment. Well, maybe a little tough love could also do. I went out into the living room, and placed myself squarely in front of the enormous T.V.

"O.K., you guys. I know you don't know me, but I have cooked for two days, making some really good food just for you. Will you please come into the kitchen, and at least look at it?" The sounds of cars crashing and shattering glass boomed forth from behind me. I could actually feel the backs of my thighs trembling, the vibrations were so strong.

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No one moved.

“Please? I promise you, you’ll be happy you did.”

Still no one shifted position even a fraction of an inch. It was like I’d entered an opium den, and every person present was doped to the gills, reclining on a distant star.

Thinking I’d have to win them over, one by one, I wandered into another room where I saw a young man sitting next to a table above which were heat lamps. I thought he was tending a terrarium, or maybe trying to harvest bean sprouts. Nope. It was his collection of arachnids, a.k.a. spiders. I don’t know if I am unusually prone to fear and loathing of creepy-crawly things, but it took nearly all that was left of my good will to sit with this teenager, and hear him discourse on his various specimens, including tarantulas, black widows, brown recluses, Trapdoor spiders, Feather-legged Spiders, Lynx Spiders and Long-Legged Spiders.

“Oh, a Daddy LongLegs! We have those back in New York!” I said, trying to get into the game. My outburst was ignored.

There are at least 50,000 species of spiders, I learned, and most have eight jointed legs, no wings, no antennae, and eight eyes that typically are arranged in two rows of four. Spiders are not particularly interested in people; they spend their entire life span capturing and eating other insects (about 2,000 in a year), thereby doing a great deal of good for our environment.

“Most spiders are killed only because they scare people, not because they are actually dangerous to humans,” the kid said, his voice doleful.

It occurred to me that there was some sort of encouraging comparison to be made between homophobia and arachnophobia. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could learn to love everyone equally, gay or straight, human or spider, eight-legged or two? But the sentiment was convoluted, and I couldn’t quite get it phrased right in my mind, so I sat silent. Finally, though, after he’d shown me

how a centipede can stun a fly and then suck it in whole for later digestion, I wondered aloud if he might like to do the same to a *chile relleno*?

A home-cooked meal turned a roomful of sullen and angry teenagers into a bunch of dopey, drippy, happy children.

He laughed, the first hint of mirth I’d seen since entering this house. Happily, Spider-Man seemed to have some credibility around the ‘hood; when he went into the kitchen, others followed.

Well, dear readers, I want to go on record as saying that I now believe in transubstantiation. No, not the Roman Catholic dogma that believes the wafer and wine become the *actual body and blood of Jesus Christ* during a communion service. Rather, what I saw in Los Angeles was equally astounding. A home-cooked meal turned a roomful of sullen and angry teenagers into a bunch of dopey, drippy, happy children.

So, a sultry Latina who had been weeping, alone, in the corner of the living room when we arrived, was now eating her apple cobbler (you didn’t know that was *Cucina Mexicana*?) and asking me why she could taste lemons. Her heavily-mascaraed eyes widened in amazement as I explained the concept of “zesting” to her. A very fabulous young black kid who’d looked me up and down like I was a used car when we arrived, now was all smiles, and wanting to know if I’d ever heard of The Fashion Institute of Design and Technology in New York. Actually, yes, I told him. I can see it from my office window. What did he want to know? And, there was the pudgy Mexican boy who looked like he’d attended The Hell’s Angel Preparatory School, his long, lank hair hanging down in his face so you could just about see his nose, and enough metal drilled through his ears, lips and cheeks, that a magnet would have sucked him across the room. Yet, a plate of food, or two, (or four) later, and he had Hope’s son, Sam, in his lap, tickling him, and Sam was laughing himself sick, giving as good as he got, and twisting the kid’s nose ring.

The Brady Bunch? No. But, at least for a night, this was family-style.