

A large crowd of people is seen from behind, looking towards a stage. The air is filled with falling confetti, and bright stage lights illuminate the scene. The overall atmosphere is one of a high-energy concert.

Rock 'N Roll BOSS

By Jeff Popka

The beer was flowing through me as I hurried towards the restroom. A sharp dressed middle-aged man cut me off, reaching out his right hand. I shook it and smiled. That was always the drill. He patted me on the shoulder with his other hand and cheerfully said, "Buy a round for your friends on you, not me." Then he tucked some money into my shirt pocket. "We will talk when the time is right. I just want a fair shake."

Not really knowing what he was talking about but never showing that fact, I assured him, "Right on, man. Thanks."

As I reached the urinal and did what I had to do, I felt instant relief. I pulled out the money from my pocket all the while thinking, "Yeah, twenty bucks is going to buy you a fair shake." To my surprise, the money was way more than I imagined. Eight one-hundred-dollar bills were suddenly in my hand. I quickly stuffed it back into my pocket as someone else strolled in.

"Hey, Jeff! Great party, huh?"

I shuddered a bit and replied, "Aren't they all?" We both laughed as I washed my hands and hurried back to the table.

I glanced over everyone sitting around the table in the posh Northwest Indiana restaurant. A County Commissioner, the Highway Superintendent, and his Assistant Superintendent, a County Vendor -- check that -- make it *two* County Vendors, one being a convicted felon. He actually was an incredibly good guy and a lot of fun. As I sat down, I spoke up, "Hey, this next round is on me." They all laughed because that was an absurd comment coming from me. The commissioner corrected me, "Put your damned money away." He always took care of me. He always took really good care of me. I shrugged and thought, "Ok. Merry Christmas to my kids. It couldn't have come at a better time."

Over the years, I learned to keep a lot of things to myself, conversations and emotions mostly. I was the guy a lot of people depended on. I could fix a speeding ticket, stop a DUI, or take care of somebody's kid who needed a summer job, all with a simple phone call or over a casual drink.

Possession of my business card was a literal Monopoly game piece; a "Get Out of Jail Free" card. In particular, if it had my signature on the back you were golden. Once I received a call from an on-duty cop. "Jeff, do you know this broad? She is saying she knows you and has your card, but she is really fucked up." If I knew the name it was easy, but every once in a while I had to play 20 questions to figure it out, only to finally realize, "Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. That's so-and-so's girlfriend. She's good." Instead of a trip to the county jail, she would receive an escort home.

I liked my status. I loved my perceived power. But it all came with costs. I constantly looked over my shoulder. I occasionally would receive death threats towards my family. In particular, I had a former employee whom I had fired threaten to dip my three young children in acid. He didn't threaten me to my face, of course. He did so all under the guise of being a leader from an infamous regional motorcycle gang whose signature he forged to the letter. Unfortunately for him, my guys actually knew the biker

leader. He was informed and none too pleased with these antics and did not want any trouble with us. Over the course of the next year, a series of unfortunate events befell my former employee. His false termination claim never reached a hearing. He was subsequently beaten up at a biker picnic. He wrecked his bike at an intersection near his house due to loose gravel. His woman left him after a domestic disturbance in which HE called the police. Upon the cops' arrival, she smugly told them where he kept his weed. Those officers were my friends. He was, of course, arrested. What a streak of bad luck. Anyway, I never heard from him again. Rumor has it that the bikers told him they would kill him if he used their identity or if he messed with me again. I cannot confirm that, but I feel really confident that is exactly what occurred.

I constantly had to be sure nobody was following me or watching in some capacity. It wasn't necessarily from bad guys, either. My biggest worry was the Feds, or as we called them, the three stooges (as in FBI). After that eight-hundred-dollars was tucked in my pocket, I thought I was surely being set up. Was that a Fed? I didn't solicit that money, though. It couldn't have been a Fed. It went around and around in my mind. That wasn't the only time, either. I never solicited anything. One time, the County Chairman asked me if I needed anything and I jokingly replied, "Yeah, one thousand dollars would be nice right now." He pulled out his wallet and started counting money. I was laughing, "No! I am kidding...but thank you." I learned then not to joke about that. Accepting money (besides being illegal) meant you owed something. Many of my interactions were with some dangerous people involved in all kinds of shenanigans. I was the guy that had to keep things smooth with everyone because we needed to maintain support for our campaigns. The oddest thing about the guy in the restaurant is that I never heard from him again. To this day I do not know who the hell he was.

I would sometimes end up in the strangest places, which occasionally was the following morning. I never truly knew what would happen. If somebody important to our campaign wanted to drink all night, we drank all night. Believe me, I had no problem with that. I had a great network of "friends" who were all over the area. I once walked into a midnight illegal poker hall in East Chicago, Indiana, with a couple of the guys. We were the only non-African Americans in the place. It was packed and in a church basement. We were invited there and had some drinks and laughs with our contacts. I remember a gentleman walking up to me saying, "The only color we care about in this place is green." That was probably my first direct contact with the Black Mafia.

One afternoon, I found myself in Chicago City Hall in the office of a very powerful alderman. He was not there at the time. His assistant told me to use the office at the end of the hall so that I could get better reception on my cell phone while I called the business associate he wanted me to talk with. I was then pitched a concept of hosting carnivals at my place of employment. I was the Lake County, Indiana Fairgrounds Superintendent at that time. While talking on the phone, I realized I was in the office of the alderman who was also the Father-in-Law of then-Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich. Blago is currently incarcerated in the federal pen for various kickback crimes. I never moved forward with the carnivals because I never felt comfortable doing business that was not my idea or the brainchild of my inner circle.

The fairgrounds, which I grew up loving, was my place. Besides the Lake County Fair (which I hated), there were many other great events year-round. I helped with some and others I did not involve myself. Gun shows were held there throughout the year. I had zero interest in them. I believed that the county government had no business making money off gun sales. They did so via a cut of admission charges and also through rental fees. The promoters hired certain Lake County police officers to run security for their events. I was in charge of security at all Lake County Fairgrounds events (thanks to the Lake County Board of Commissioners) except the fair, and I wanted nothing to do with the gun shows. I let them fly with whomever they wanted. At one point, a local multi-millionaire developer who also happened to be a licensed gun dealer gave me a call. "Jeff, I have some people you should meet. They are all in the sheriff's office and they want a meeting with you." I basically said I wasn't interested, and he told me that was a mistake. "It could be really good for you," I assured him I appreciated the offer, but it was not going to happen. Unsurprisingly, four of these officers involved ended up in the federal pen for illegal and fraudulent gun deals. In one case, a gun they helped to supply to a buyer in Georgia ended up used in a murder. I thank God I never took that meeting.

I used to receive calls with invitations on the daily. Mostly, though, I had people calling for help. I could pick and choose whom I would meet with unless my boss sent me somewhere specifically. I want to stress this fact: The County Commissioner (who was my direct boss) never put me in a bad situation. He protected me from that. He was clean. Despite our eventual very public feud (which was brought on by others and my ego), I have nothing but respect for him to this day. I even ran a campaign against him. He understood where I was coming from and we are good friends again, and I am thankful for that. He remains an inspiration to me as I have never known anyone to fight for what he believes in as much as he does. He will take on anybody.

All of the events that really held my interest revolved around music. It was here that I learned how to build successful music shows and festivals. It all began when I was the Assistant Superintendent and Chief of Security. So, I learned about the first steps: Permitting, perimeter design, crowd control. I also hand-picked the police who would work these events. They were incredibly fun. If we were guilty of anything it was having a good time. Nobody knew what would end up happening. At one such event, Dave Mason and his band were going to play. Dave and his group were incredibly cool people. They hung out with us while I threw a party at my office. My office was a house located inside the fairgrounds and surrounded by a beautiful 86 fenced-in acres. Once we actually moved into the house, this became a curse. But, anyway, I remember one of Dave's players saying to me, "You know, we play all over the country and these are the most corrupt cops we have ever seen. They are hilarious! They are more wasted than the regular people here." I explained these are my guys. We hang out all the time and I hand-picked them. They were all friends of my other friends as well.

The band member then very seriously looked at me and said, "Do you think you can get us some weed?" I nonchalantly picked up my phone and asked him, "How much do you want?" My weed dealer was always on call. The best thing about it is, if I needed to pick any up for myself or close friends, I would do so in the fully police-loaded former DEA Crown Victoria that the county provided me.

Prior to moving the family into the fairgrounds house, my office was an after-hours playhouse. It served us well. Once I moved my family into the house (a huge mistake), my wife Jen and I were suddenly raising teenagers in a very public fishbowl. That proved to be very opportunistic for my political enemies. When my daughters were in middle school, they believed the paparazzi followed them. They would step out on our deck and sometimes a photographer would take their picture. Sometimes it was a newspaper reporter doing an unflattering article. It could have been the Feds or the other party stirring up trouble. Then again, it could have been a local pervert. Everything they did was being watched, which absolutely drove me crazy with anger. Just ask the *Post Tribune* reporter I threatened (and very nearly punched out) for writing an article about my son working part-time at the fairgrounds. They made a huge deal out of it, yet he was a great employee who helped people after hours during late events when the regular crew was no longer on duty. He helped them turn on/off lights, pick up trash, move picnic tables, whatever, and he was proud of his job. Due to that article, he subsequently lost his job. It broke his heart and totally pissed me off. They could say or imply anything they wanted about me. I was fair game. My family was off limits in my mind. That was crossing a line.

On the bright side, we also had some great opportunities living on the grounds. The legendary Jim Peterik (Ides of March, Survivor) hung out with us all day a couple of times. What a quality guy, who belongs in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame (two Grammys and an Oscar). He is a prolific songwriter, having penned songs for not only Ides of March and Survivor, but 38 Special, Sammy Hagar, and The Beach Boys. Jim was so cool...he would drink a few beers with me after the gig. Prior, he would spend the day hanging out with us playing guitar on our couch. My son Jeff was there experiencing all of this while learning to play guitar himself and soaked it all in.

There were other notable artists we hung out with, including The Smithereens (very cool guys), The BoDeans (not cool at all), Jackyl (extremely professional), to name a few. I remember an old friend walking up to a party at the house and asking, "Is that Dave Mason drinking a beer on your deck?" Why, yes, it surely was!

During this period of time, my son really developed musically. He tried starting a few bands. They were bad at first, of course, typical garage bands, but eventually he put something together very special, which led to a 2-week number one song on Chicago's Q101 local program plus a live performance at the Double Door in Chicago and at the Star Plaza in Merrillville, Indiana (thank you, Tom Lounges). They were good. They had label interest. I spent a ton of money promoting them (you're welcome, Tom Lounges). They were young. It fell apart. I learned a lot from all that coming down. Anyway, he developed as a guitarist and performer and is very talented due to that unique beginning. I must also mention that his guitar teacher, Josh Holmes, was one of the hottest regional acts at that time. We worked together many times.

Anyway, my son losing his job started the rift between the Commissioner and me. I felt I should not remove him from his position, but I was overruled. I was not used to being told no, I could not do something. I was arrogant as hell. As a result of all of this, I said I would not manage the Commissioner's next campaign. At this point, the sharks could smell blood and began to circle.

Let me put this in perspective a bit more. I grew up in politics. I was raised in that atmosphere -- where my parents and their friends had influence and connections. As a teenager I never had problems with the police. I could get caught speeding down US 30 while very drunk and running red lights due to a stuck gas pedal and get let go (cough, cough). The worst thing that would happen to me was the police telling my dad; other than that, no worries.

As an adult, once I pursued a political career, I again was very well protected. My influence led to business and job offers quite often. I used to hang out in a Chicago Bulls' skybox and watch Michael Jordan and company play whenever I was interested in doing so. I never knew who would be there: commissioners, mayors, judges, state reps. It was sweet because we could talk and interact without other watchful eyes and ears. We could actually be people just having a good time.

Everything was a meeting. Every day it was, "I have a meeting or two or three or four." At one particular lunch meeting, I was asked to bring Jen along. These guys wanted the county data processing business. I basically laughed in their face and told them that was not happening. That was business which was VERY protected. They said, "You and Jen will be the King and Queen of South Lake County. We can give Jen a great job and you just lead the way for us." Again, I respectfully declined. It was not that simple. I did not trust their intentions at all. I eventually turned down this and other so-called opportunities, which in turn created more enemies.

As time went on, the rift between the commissioner and I grew. Opportunists found the ability to drive that wedge further. This came especially from my Assistant Superintendent and his wife (my secretary). My assistant also worked for the Fair Board, which was a big problem. The Fair Board attacked as well by exaggerating things my kids did. I don't know about you, but if when I was a teenager and I had a fenced-in 86 acres to play in, I surely would have! I also found it quite hypocritical that the head of the Fair Board at that time asked a tree service owner to cut down some large trees on his property and bill it to the county. This guy and his wife accused us of all kinds of misdeeds. Believe me, I wasn't a saint, but my issues were having a good time and arranging others' business for political gain. The most hilarious fact about this situation is that the tree service owner was my weed dealer and the Fair Board president had no idea. I, of course, found out right away. My guy called me and said, "Should I do this?" I told him to tell him to go fuck himself. He didn't. He was more diplomatic than me.

In the end, we were accused of making money off the music shows, but they didn't go after me directly; they went after Jen and my son, Jeff. That was ridiculous. They called me the Rock-N-Roll Superintendent. That was not derogatory in my mind but meant to be so by the Fair Board. Again, the real story is we did not make money off these events. We actually poured our own cash into them. We could never make our money back. But, hey, it's easier to throw stones when you and your cronies are making bank off cash admissions to a 2-week event that draws a quarter of a million people. Or perhaps the real money is being made via the family and friend related vendors that work year-round doing construction, providing insurance, electrical services, etc., all on government property with a no-bid process. I am talking specifically about businesses owned and operated by members of the fair board and their relatives. But, you know, that is merely speculation on my part. Nobody investigates a family friendly event that brings so much joy to the community. I do know for certain that their treasurer was

the accountant for a Lake County Councilman from Gary who was tied into the Black Mafia. By the way, the Councilman went to prison for tax evasion. Great job there, accountant!

That very same councilman who went to prison was at one point the President of the Lake County Council. They held the purse strings. Raises were a very hard thing to acquire until I finally felt comfortable enough to arrange a meeting at Hydad's in Merrillville. We sat in the back where nobody else was around and I approached things this way, "I would like you to consider giving my department an increase."

"We might be able to make that happen. We have good control right now."

"You are a good friend. We will surely support you." As I said this, I raised up my fingers with each one representing one-hundred-dollar bills for "fundraiser tickets." I had learned you never mentioned money out loud. You never knew who was wearing a wire. That way I was clear and clean. No proof ever existed of our conversation. We shook hands and went on our way. After the budget hearings (or as I called them, "dog and pony shows"), I read in the paper that the fairgrounds was one of the few departments getting an increase in pay. Well, imagine that!

But investigate us over music events they did. The Commissioner and I, at this time, were at war. I was badly losing. Being paranoid and angry is not a good combination. We fought. It went public. Once I met with the reporter I had previously threatened and dropped him a few tidbits about political work I did for the past decade on the clock. Was it a mistake doing that? It made me even more enemies, but I will tell you the investigation came to a screeching halt. It was the only way I could protect my family, and it unsurprisingly worked. I knew then I'd better leave. I was not putting my family at risk.

Lake County, Indiana, is no different than any other government entity across our country. It's all "pay for play" in some manner everywhere. This is why our federal government is so screwed up. Local and state municipalities are the same. The insiders benefit and hold the power. Absolute power corrupts.

Some things I found amazing were that some so-called friends turned on us so quickly -- especially the one group that had a heavy equipment thief in their midst (which they were all aware of and even helped him hide stolen equipment after I tipped them all off that the police were onto him). My tip kept them all out of jail. Perhaps it was the cocaine he was supplying that made them forget how good of a friend I actually was. But, again, I am just assuming. I mean, after all, they were in public and high-profile positions, too. It was easier to turn on me than taking on the Commissioner. They caused my family a lot of damage.

Anyway, I could have gone to the Feds myself and brought a lot of people down. I did not do that. What none of them ever realized is that I had an old good friend who happened to be a Federal Prosecutor that once told me if the day ever came and I needed help, I could go to him and he would protect me. I always carried his business card. That is a connection I will never give up, but it's also one I would never use. All I did was go to the press and put a stop to my family's harassment.

To be clear again, the Commissioner never did anything wrong and I do not blame him. That was not always the case. I blamed him for everything at first. Time eventually told the real story. The investigation of my family was headed by the high-ranking police officer who met with Jen and I and offered us the South Lake County throne. He also happened to be one of the officers now in the federal pen for gun crimes, some of which were arranged during gun shows at the fairgrounds. Did I mention the Fair Board had hired him as their Chief of Security prior to his federal indictment?

In 2007, I abruptly decided to buy a Cadillac (I always wanted one) and move the family to Southern California. My wife Jen and I were caught in a turbulent crossfire and backlash of political fallout. This was due to my very public position and lifestyle. I blame nobody other than myself -- and my arrogance and sense of power, none of which matters to me now.

My family and I spent a month in Florida at first while I looked for work in California online. I wanted to get my family as far away from Lake County as I possibly could. I had been talking to somebody online previously while I was still at the fairgrounds. He was a real estate investor named Kevin from Orange County. He also had political aspirations. He wanted to meet with me, so Jen and I flew out to Los Angeles. I, in the meantime, had set up a couple of other interviews. We ended up staying in Newport Beach, and day one was my lunch meeting with Kevin. We talked and talked. He offered me a business deal that would pay me over six figures annually. He drove me back on Highway 101 to our hotel in his Bentley. I had no reason to take any further interviews. We were moving to Orange County, California.

It took a few weeks for us to make our arrangements, and we went to Newport Beach again and set up our temporary hotel stay at a very nice place. Jen and I spent our days looking for a city to call home. We found apartments we liked in Laguna Hills and another in Dana Point. In the meantime, I had kept in touch with my new business partner. Unexpectedly, as we were figuring out details of where we would live, Kevin vanished. He ghosted us. I did not know what was going on. Our nest egg we had was dwindling away, so we decided to go more inland and look for a cheaper place and also work. There was none to be found and we started to get dangerously close to being out of money after a few more weeks. It was very unlike me, but I remember praying for guidance before it became any worse. That night, I woke up to a very clear voice telling me to go to Oceanside. Before we left, Jen sold her wedding ring so that we had more cash on hand. That was an extremely difficult decision to make, but feeding our girls, who were with us, was our top priority. Sure, we could have always fled California and returned to my family's place in Florida, but that was not going to happen. So, we went to Oceanside in north San Diego County and rented a hotel room by the week. All based on the voice I heard. It without a doubt saved us. The very next morning Jen went to look for work and took a waitressing job at a fine dining restaurant called The Flying Bridge. This saved us at that point, but it was still very difficult. We had teetered at the point of homelessness.

After a short while, we moved into another hotel which was one block from the beach and Jen could still walk back and forth to work. What I failed to mention is we sold the Cadillac when we first arrived in Oceanside. Walking everywhere became the norm. In Southern California, it was not so bad because the weather is beautiful plus the public transportation system is very efficient and accessible.

The Flying Bridge was an amazing place. The food was tremendous, and the atmosphere was incredible. You could look down and see the Pacific Ocean and watch the heavenly sunsets. That was Jen and my favorite thing to do in Oceanside; watch the sunsets from the beach. I did it almost every night. Jen did when she could. She was making really good money and things were getting better, yet we needed income from me to afford a nice place. I sold cars briefly, which was laughable as I was a horrible salesperson. "Hey, you like this car? Then buy it." I mean, that's what I would do.

That job did not last long. The guaranteed money was ending, and I was scheduled to go on straight commission. Knowing my inability to sell, I was sure they were going to get rid of me, so I quit beforehand. I would be making zero dollars and wasting all my time. I decided to enjoy the holidays instead.

Enjoy the holidays we did. My son had finally moved out to California with us along with one of his friends. They were going to start a band, and once again, I started looking earnestly for work so we could get a house instead of being crammed into a residential hotel suite. The Beachwood was full of crack and meth heads and us. We spent a ton of time at the beach, including Christmas Day. We enjoyed sitting there all day with a campfire near the pier while the boys played guitar. We just hung out on the beach, and it's a very cool Christmas memory to have. The vibe was perfect.

New Year's morning I answered an ad for a job as an Executive Producer for a radio station in San Diego. I really responded as a joke because I had no qualifications for the position. The very next day, to my surprise, I received a call and they invited me for an interview. So, I took the Coaster train down to San Diego's Old Town and then I grabbed a bus for a bit and finally walked the remainder of the way to the station. I went into the building and checked in and waited. Someone came out to tell me so-and-so would be right with me. I waited and waited and there was nobody. It was approximately two hours when a lady came rushing out and said, "Oh my God, we are so sorry! There was a miscommunication and I did not know you were here." I laughed and told her I really had no place else to be. I followed her into her office, and we began to talk. The person that miscommunicated came in and apologized, and I told him it was fine; after all, stuff happens. He mentioned to the lady she should hire me because I patiently waited and was cool about it.

We proceeded to talk for a while. She was concerned because I was living in Oceanside and asked if I would be driving/commuting when I came to the studio. I told her I took the train, then a bus, and finally, I walked. She seemed stunned. "You did all that?" I answered, yes, that I really needed a good job. She told me even though I had no experience that she loved my personality and my perseverance, and she offered me the position. She also told me after training in the studio for a bit that I would be working from home and just needed to come into the studio once every 2 weeks. I was elated with that. She went on to say that if I took the train to just call when I arrived, and somebody would pick me up. This situation was idyllic. Little did I know at that time it would help launch my future. I was now an Executive Producer for an internet-based radio station, about which I knew nothing.

When I returned to the Crackwood (Oops! I meant "Beachwood"), I told Jen, "I got the job! I am an Executive Producer!" She was incredulous, "How did you pull that off?" I said, "I don't know, but I love the sound of it."

I developed my first talk show with a lifestyle coach from Los Angeles, then another life coach from Virginia. Next, it was an author in Ohio and then a restaurant guru from North Carolina. I was beginning to realize the power of the internet. I made good money when the shows began, and then again when the shows were renewed. We were finally able to rent a nice row house and could still walk to the beach. It was a longer walk, but yet, only a walk.

The owners of The Flying Bridge were angels to Jen. She worked her way into management, and they let her borrow a car so she no longer had to walk or take the bus. This was really crucial as we became strongly aware of missing young females throughout the area. Our eyes were opened to human trafficking. Our girls mostly had to stay by our sides or have their brother or his friend with them at all times. Jen was harassed and felt threatened many times while walking. I used to meet her at work, too, and walk with her. Missing girl photos were commonplace in the stores in the area. I since learned the I-5 corridor is a hotbed for human trafficking all up and down the entire West Coast. I learned this, though, years later.

The Executive Producer job was basically selling radio shows to authors, fitness gurus, athletes, etc. Again, I am not a salesman, so I was a bit concerned, but I dug in. I really wanted to move into a house before we all killed each other. It was not a hard sell at all. It was a creative approach as I developed talk show concepts with various candidates whom I researched and contacted. I looked at the people that were already hosting shows and directed my attention to similar people. It worked.

The staff I worked with was a really cool group. There was a musician and production expert that was an EP and also a well-known San Diego DJ who is one of the sweetest people I have ever met. Sweet Jane, you know it's true. I was happy and life was getting better. We loved the Southern California lifestyle, but we did not know how soon it would come crashing down.

The economy tanked in 2008. Suddenly, I was struggling to produce any new shows. I still had three renewed and they paid our rent. Jen was still making good money, but the owners of the restaurant faced a dilemma. They were about to lose their lease to a condo development. It was in their best interest to retire instead of opening elsewhere. What also didn't help the matter any was that my son and his friend were having trouble putting a band together and they had moved back to northwest Indiana in order to do so. I knew then our stay in California was doomed. It all happened very quickly. We flew the girls back to their uncle's house. I drove the moving truck and Jen kept me company. Ron and Jan from the Flying Bridge slipped Jen some extra cash to help with the move because they were caring people and actually were concerned about their employees losing work. They were great examples of kindness to us.

The California experiment was brief, yet impactful. The time there was well-spent from a healing standpoint. We sat on the beach quite often, reflecting on the past. Sometimes I found myself plotting

revenge. I was in a very dark place. However, the beauty and raw power of the Pacific Ocean is obvious. In time, tremendous healing and transformation took place within our hearts and souls. The friends we made there were pure, and their mere presence in our life, along with their sincere caring, nurtured us. It reminded us there were still good people left in the world. The ocean and the people near it awakened my soul.

While researching possible talk shows in Southern California, I came to know a life coach/intuitive from Colorado. We talked often about putting a show together, but the cost to do so was prohibitive at that time for her. While researching her, I became enthralled with her work. I didn't know anything about meditating and spirituality. I was rather sour on religion during this point in my life. I was very disappointed to be returning back home but felt it was best. Kelly Ballard encouraged me to find my center, taught me to breathe with a purpose, meditate, and follow my heart. I was becoming a very changed man, although I still harbored a lot of anger and was returning to the place that initiated it all. I still had and always will be releasing negative energy. I am always a bit taken aback when old feelings surface. They still do, but now I know how to breathe them away and center.

At the end of 2008, we were back living in northwest Indiana (Chicagoland) at my father-in-law's house while he and his wife lived the snowbird life in Florida. It was very strange for me to be home and out of the circles in which I once thrived. I wanted nothing to do with that life anymore. Here, I sat at a card table with a phone and laptop pondering my future. I was humbled, poor, and jobless. I looked for work but could find none. Nobody wanted to get in the middle of a perceived political power struggle. I was still bitter, but not as dark. I was in the midst of enlightenment.

Enlightenment is not instantaneous. I found once my curiosity about such things was awakened it just kept me digging. I remember at first being humored by the entire concept. Oh, I was a real skeptic. Once you begin meditating and learning to center, you get very relaxed. At this point, you begin to notice subtle hints and signs to any questions you may have. You are more open, and therefore, receptive. You may laugh at this, but I am telling you I have been living it and following this inner guidance for years now. It does not come from outside yourself, although repeating numbers and phrases will show up in your awareness via different platforms. Synchronistic happenings are even more foretelling. In other words, slow your roll and pay attention. If you aren't sure what it means, then meditate even more. The spirituality bug seriously bit me while in So Cal and has given me the strength to carry on despite all odds being against me.

I always had a connection with music. My mom instilled her love for The Beatles and Elvis into me at a very young age. I used to pretend that I had a radio show and would record my 45s after introducing the songs on my tape recorder. Friends would come over, and we had a blast making up different silly radio programs. I was always listening to music. Here, from these memories, my future would unfold.

Having no money and plenty of time, I started doing an internet-based radio show on a free platform. The experience I gained in San Diego allowed me to utilize and leverage the internet. "Indie On Air" featured music from independent artists that I had discovered online. I also invited various music-business folks onto my show so I could interview them. I was really, really bad. I stumbled. I mumbled.

Yet, somehow, I persevered. I learned from my guests. I continued on this blind musical journey while soaking up all the information that I could. During this period of my life, I took a lot of flak and heard plenty of negative comments and jokes from “friends” and family alike. Jen carried the financial burden while I was “playing” on my pretend radio show. I let nothing deter me, and Jen stood by my side. Besides, I still could not find any meaningful work.

There is nothing easy about following your heart when you do not get paid. Our societies focus on income, and earning a living hurts the creative types. I felt the doubt from people questioning me, “Where are you working now? Any leads on a job?” Or Jen would get, “Has Jeff found anything yet? Is he even trying? It must be really tough on you.” Yes, it was tough on us. The doubts from family and friends made it even tougher. I do realize they mostly asked out of concern, but the fact remains, that only put more pressure on us. The truth of the matter is, I was always looking for work. I just kept doing something I loved while I tried to obtain employment.

It was now 2010. I had only a couple of part-time jobs and still could not find any substantial work despite my education, experience, and qualifications, but I had a stirring thought during one of my frequent meditations. I decided I was going to utilize my virtual music connections and merge it with the physical. I brought up the subject with a couple of guys from an independent Los Angeles record label that had been on my program. They loved the idea. We put together a team to help figure it all out. The big questions were -- where and how? So, we communicated constantly and looked within our online networks where we could find some help. I was guided by my higher self, to South By Southwest (SXSW) in Texas.

I was able to put together two shows at decent venues prior to heading to Austin that first year. One was in Lansing, Illinois, and the other, in Kentucky near Cincinnati. I lined up artists to play these shows that were traveling to SXSW. The one in the Cincinnati area was anchored by a local regional act that assured me that they would draw a crowd, which never materialized. The show in Lansing was right across the border from where we lived in northwest Indiana. I put up the money to do these shows, and you know what kind of support I received from all the people questioning why I hadn’t found a job? Zero showed up...but strangers and music lovers did. One of my good friends (who remains a good friend) was there. One. Nobody else bothered. But, hey, the next time I ran into them, they would ask, “Hey, how did that show go? Did you make any money? I’m sorry I couldn’t make it...blah, blah, blah.” Bands hear the same thing all the time, especially from family at holidays: “Are you still doing that music thing or did you get a real job yet?”

I think what the general population does not get is...creative types are sensitive folks. We truly realize the impacts of words and emotions. We also understand how most people hate their jobs. They spend most of their lives doing something they dislike and then have regrets at the end. I figured if I could not find a “real” job, then I would just continue trying to make the music stuff work...even though I was not sure exactly what that meant. I just kept meditating and getting the same guidance. All I knew was that I was headed to South By Southwest in Austin, Texas, to put on some shows and hopefully, educate some people along the way about the seriousness of human trafficking. I used to be a taker and now I was encouraged to give.

In Austin, we had our first showcase scheduled at a place called The Red Shed Tavern, which eventually become very important in my life. We looked at this first night as a warmup. Everyone I lined up could meet the West Coast bands and label, and vice versa. It would be purely about fun. That was on a Wednesday night. Thursday was a scheduled off day, and then on Friday, we had our big show scheduled for a venue called MoMo's. We had some great acts and industry people from Los Angeles set to make special appearances. I was going to emcee. This event, I figured, would really launch my radio show's stature and greatly improve my chance of perhaps getting an actual paying job in the industry. On Saturday, we were playing a showcase at Whole Foods. That may sound funny, but during SXSW, many places turn into temporary music venues and host events. What a week it would be! I had high hopes and big dreams.

My son agreed to make the trip to Austin with me. We were still struggling financially but were able to make it work. We did not have a decent enough car to make that trip or the funds to fly, so we took the Amtrak train from Chicago to Austin. That was a really cool experience. Overnight, we ran into a major thunderstorm and the train was shaking like crazy. I thought it was amazing. My son and I just had a great time during this experience.

In Austin, we had a series of showcase events planned, featuring the artists from the tour. The first event was held at The Red Shed Tavern. I loved the vibe of the venue. It was outdoors and even though it was hot outside, the setting was sweet. It had a large beer garden with a red shed that opened up to a stage. It was a success and a lot of fun, as we were all together sharing similar hopes and dreams of "making it" in music. What a feeling it was to have this group of people together and we only knew each other from phone calls and by being on my radio show. It was a fun experience yet was about to take an unexpected terrible and tragic turn for my family.

During the early planning stages of The Abolitionist Tour 2011, our youngest daughter had gotten pregnant. It was not an ideal situation, but there was plenty of love to go around in our family and we welcomed an addition. As it turned out, she was due around the time I was scheduled to be in Texas. How cool was that going to be? Two major life events at the same time! This had the makings of a fantastic week. The day after The Red Shed event, we went and hung out on Sixth Street and just took in the sights. Later that evening, my son and I were going to see The Strokes. After that show, we were going to meet up with the rest of our group on Sixth Street to watch our friends in Lovebette perform. All this time, we knew we could get a call telling me I was a Grandpa. We eagerly anticipated that call.

The call came as The Strokes finished their final song. My son and I were already in a great mood. The show was fantastic. Jeff fielded the call and was having trouble hearing due to the crowd noise. He told me it was Jen. I was elated. My heart was racing. We were going to really celebrate that night. Life had taken a great turn for us. After years of struggle, happiness was finally at our doorstep.

Then I noticed my son was suddenly somber. He hung up the phone and explained to me that Brittany went to the hospital and my Grandson Tristan had died. All I could say was, "You are kidding." My son snapped at me, "Why would I lie about that?" It was real. We kept walking slower without saying a word. I could not breathe. I could not walk anymore. I kept bending over trying to catch my breath. My son

Jeff took charge of the situation, despite his youth. He coaxed me onto a bus to take us back to where we were staying. I could not think straight. I have never felt so far from home ever in my life. All I could think was my poor daughter. She is only eighteen. I need to be with her.

The bus was suffocating to me. I told Jeff we needed to get off and he agreed. Everyone around us was obnoxious, but in actuality, they were just having a good time. I went from the highest of the highs to low; very, very low. To me, my son became a man that night. I was a basket case. He encouraged me as we walked back to the apartment. He got me inside. Nobody else was at the place except for a Los Angeles singer. She said hello as we entered. I could not speak. She just looked at us with concern. Tears were streaming down my face. We went into our room where we could get on the phone. I attempted to talk to Jen. I was questioning everything and demanding that I come home immediately to be with Brit. My son wisely took the phone from me and told his mom he would take care of everything. He had saved up a decent amount of money and he arranged for a flight home first thing in the morning. We packed up our things and went outside to wait for a taxi. I stood in the front yard waiting and crying. We waited forever. I now know how impossible it is to get a taxi during SXSW. This was before the era of Uber or Lyft. Lucy, the singer, came outside to ask what was wrong just as the guys from the label and some band members showed up. "Jeff, what are you doing? What is wrong?" I tearfully explained that my grandson was stillborn. Needless to say, tears were soon streaming down their faces too. Mark from the label drove us immediately to the airport. I am forever thankful. We spent a long night awaiting that early flight back to Midway in Chicago. At this point in time, music and the missed opportunities were the last things on my mind.

The next few days were surreal. It was all about Brittany and being sure she was going to be okay. Our little family, which is very loving, stayed very close. We survived the personal attacks, but this was much different. Grief and shock were the order of the day. It was extremely hard on every single one of us. Jen was broken. Jeff was stunned. Courtney took it very hard. We all did. Once again, our world had crashed down. Let me tell you, to those people that say, "It was probably for the best" or "God has His intentions," you can go fuck yourselves. Unless you experience what we did, do not talk. It does not help.

We had a small private funeral, which also was surreal. Our family will forever be grateful to Burdan Funeral Home in Cedar Lake, Indiana for their help. Good people exist, though you sometimes do not realize it until your worst moments. They just suddenly appear in the right place.

Jen and I became recluses. We did not want to go anywhere or see people. She still had to work, and I sat home with Brittany. It was a very good thing that I did not have a job at this time. During this period, I was doing a radio show called "The Indie Spirit" with my friend Kelly Ballard. I took some time off. Two weeks after this I agreed to do the show again and talk about grief. This is easily the hardest show I have ever done. The music I selected for it fit perfectly and there were plenty of tears. However, at this point, I had no intention of carrying on with my music journey. I questioned life in general. I was back living in the darkness.

Pain and grief cause one to consider giving up. I felt there was no reason to continue on with music, but my soul would not let me. In hindsight, it was music that helped us get through the hardest times. Pills and alcohol did their part, too. I struggled with my decisions to continue on for months. My daughter Brittany told me to continue and to not let Tristan's passing result in my giving up. It would only add to our heartache. I have since used this tragedy as inspiration.

Despite everything, I planned again for another Austin SXSW journey in 2012. I called this "The Ascension Tour." I contacted the owners of The Red Shed and asked if I could do it again. To my surprise, they quickly agreed. They said they loved working with me. I began to feel alive again.

I approached Ervin Pulliam from Match 1 Entertainment about joining me again. Ervin and I had really hit it off in Austin the short time I was there, but he always kept in touch with me, even afterward. Ervin was originally from Gary, Indiana and his parents knew my parents. We knew a lot of the same political people but did not know that until we were having drinks in Texas. This is why we have a bond. He knew exactly what I had been through and yet our connection was the shared love of music.

The Ascension Tour was a success despite no longer having the Los Angeles record label involved. We were starting on our own. Artists Danika Holmes, Lovebettie, and David Martinez returned. My old friend Jason Jeka (former Josh Holmes Band) came on board. Jason and I traveled together to Austin as his band Fivestar Deluxe played a show in Winfield, Indiana and in Chicago, then toured to Iowa for a couple of shows. Jason and I then continued to Texas. We had a fabulously good time.

Once in Austin, it was very bittersweet for me. It was a bit difficult, but once we were all together again it was like a family reunion. Our little music community was very cathartic. It was probably here that I realized that like vibrations attract like-minded people. I had spent years eliminating toxic, negative people from my life. It is unbelievable how much energy is consumed in dealing with negativity. Believe me, it is very hard to remain positive and focused when dealing with one letdown after another. You realize who your true friends and supporters are, though. My music community was way more supportive than the people back home. This gave me great insight.

This year while at The Red Shed Tavern, the owners Andy and Meranda asked me if I would return again the following year and perhaps add another day. I readily agreed because everything about it "felt" right. I was feeling at home in Austin for one week, more so than my actual home.

One big effect of going to SXSW every year was the new connections and growth of my music network. I always met new people who wanted to be involved for the love of music. There was no money being made, however, my radio audience continued to grow. The submissions I would receive came in more often and I did not need to hunt for new music so much. At this time, I was beginning to receive music from all over the world. Radio hosts also wanted to interview me about my music work. Things were beginning to change.

Back at home we still had to deal with life issues. Things were still very difficult. I stayed true to my meditation routine and kept myself centered. I was offered a chance to run a political campaign against

my former boss. I accepted, but in my heart, I was hesitant. However, I really had no other opportunity to find meaningful work and this just may be the key. I still had plenty of anger over the entire political situation. I am appreciative that I had this chance, even though we were not successful. I had the chance to spend some time with people who were of high character and were accustomed to personal attacks, which they handled gracefully. It taught me a lot and helped to bring me out of my reclusive shell.

Jen and I were tired of being in Lake County. I needed to use my degree to find a good paying job. We were tired of being poor. Even though my music network was growing, we still had life issues to deal with. I put it out to the universe. I decided to send resumes all over the country. If something was meant to be, it would come to fruition. It did.

I was offered a General Manager job in Evansville, Indiana for a small St. Louis-based restaurant chain. It was a great paying job and we knew Jen would have no problem finding work in her field of employment. I was not doing any events in Lake County anyway as all my physical music work was in Texas and my other projects were internet-based. I would actually be closer to Texas yet not too far from our family that remained up North. It was a good move for us. Financially we would be way better off.

I happily worked and worked and worked and worked. All my off time was about music. I kept doing both. Everything continued to grow. The radio show and the now re-branded Texas Indie Fest began to blossom. I now had more funds to spend and used it to greatly begin increasing the production budget. I had to work constantly, but I was extremely driven and loyal to my passion. Over the next few years, the fest grew to three days. The Red Shed Tavern was my home away from home and every year seemed like a family reunion. Plus, the Texas Indie Fest family was ever-growing.

By 2016, my network was massive, but I needed help. The music business was growing, and I could not do it myself. Jason Jeka did a lot of graphic work for me, but I had to start thinking about bringing on more people. Again, I turned to the universe to help me attract like-minded folks.

Texas Indie Fest in 2015 brought an interesting encounter for me. On the Friday night of the events, it was pouring down rain. The outside was unusable. The only acts that could play were acoustic. It was disappointing because the inside of The Red Shed was very small, but we all hung out and had a great party. However, rumors started to swirl in the bar that the Stone Temple Pilots were there. It wasn't them, but it was someone who used to be in that group.

One of my radio artists from California came up to me and said, "You need to meet my friends. You do realize there are a lot of people in Los Angeles that don't understand how you have been able to build this festival as you have. They are very intrigued by you. But anyway, my friend Scott Weiland is here and wants to meet you." Scott was with his new band The Wildabouts, and despite the storm and lack of good production, they hung out for a few hours and it was incredibly cool. I knew then that things in my music world had changed and I needed to be bolder.

2017 was quickly arriving and it was really still just me doing the work year-round to get this festival bigger and keep it moving forward. I won't deny it that every year I questioned if I would put myself through it again. It was expensive and I needed real help. I talked to Andy and Meranda and decided to add a 4th day. We were now going to have over 40 bands playing. Ervin always has some artists that he lines up, but I needed to get more submissions and I wanted to improve the quality of our depth. I approached ReverbNation to see if they may have some interest in helping me find artists. They told me about the various campaigns they run through their platform and invited me to submit. I did so and they accepted. This was a major turning point.

The 2017 event was scheduled. I was now receiving literally thousands of submissions. I spent most of my off time with headphones on. The interest in my radio work was growing. Yet, I knew my web presence as far as being professional was extremely lacking. Then one fateful day, an internet radio contact reached out to me. His name is Richard Bedell and he owned Fish Creek Radio in Michigan. "How about I come to your festival and broadcast it live in its entirety?" I really loved this idea and readily agreed. I was surprised he would be coming all the way from Michigan to do so. "I'm moving to San Antonio," was his response.

I was excited about this development, but I never realized how important it would become until I actually met Richard in person. He was very chill and just frankly a lover of independent music like me. His entire programming at Fish Creek Radio is built on indie artists. We had a lot in common. Remember, like vibrations attract like-minded people? This was clearly the case.

One thing Richard and I did not have in common was he is a tech nerd. That was the part that I was sorely lacking. So first, I asked him if he would like to produce some radio shows with me. He happily agreed and we developed "Emit the Vibe."

Richard and I began to talk more and more, and I mentioned I really wanted to start a label that catered to and worked with artists instead of financing them and burying them in debt. We were very in tune with the ills of the music industry and all the leeches out there. We just plain and simple, wanted to help artists. By merging our operations, we were able to both offer more, and in turn, increase our reach greatly. We moved forward and launched Indie On Air Records. This is something I tried to do previously but could not do so by myself. Now I had Richard.

We continue to grow exponentially every year. I expanded my call out for more like-minded people to join our quest. They appeared from all over the country. Now, different music platforms and projects keep contacting me. I listen to everyone, but if the vibe is not right, I will not move forward. What we are doing is special. My creative mind never stops. Richard provided me the technological help that I needed. I can dream something up and he can put it together. We feed off of each other. We now have a great group of people who have joined us that have different unique abilities. We work together to accomplish the dreams I have had. I find it wonderful and humbling that people would do so. We have so many projects on tap now that it is insane. How do we make it all happen? We never stop.

One thing I have found over the course of the past decade is my love to write. Kiki Plesha and her ION Indie Magazine allow me that outlet as I am now a music journalist as well. To Kiki, I am ever thankful. She is one of the most tenacious, professional individuals I have ever met. Any artists who are fortunate to work with her should be very thankful. I know I am.

I can tell you there is no easy way to accomplish your dreams. Life will continue to throw challenges in front of you. That does not mean you must quit. I hope my story can help inspire others to accomplish their dreams. Life is a journey. I am still not sure where all this will lead. I just know that I have a music community of people behind me that is worldwide. Indie Fest New Zealand is happening. Thank you, Steve Wright. Our venture into internet TV is launching. Thank you, Jessica, Angela, and Chad. Our label is growing and releasing music. Thank you to all the artists involved. Our new partner Paul is a huge part of our new growth. We continue our search for more to join us. We continue dreaming. I will keep creating.

I turned my life around from one full of negativity and darkness to one of positivity and hope. I opened my heart and soul to the wonders of the universe. I still get challenged, I still get depressed and angry, but I can deal with things better now. I wish I would have learned this while much younger, but without the life experiences I have had I would never be where I am now. Anyone can change; just breathe and center.

Texas Indie Fest is now in its 9th year. It has grown to proportions that also birthed Indie On Air Records. Wednesday, March 13th through Saturday, March 16th, 2019, we will present 48 bands at Texas Mist (1115 Old Bastrop HWY, Austin, TX 78745) during SXSW week. We received nearly 4000 submissions this year. That fateful day sitting at the card table facing hopelessness and doubt has grown into this. Passion and perseverance prevailed over loss and grief. It was by no means easy, yet love has won. This is Texas Indie Fest. Feel the music. Feel the passion. Emit the vibe.