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Ashley Dias' legacy lives on



Photo Sharon K. Sobotta

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When he heard they needed crossing guards at school, he didn't hesitate to help. That's the kind of person he was."

Eleven-year-old Angelique Dias-Vanni is Ashley Dias's niece. She attends sixth grade at Stanley Middle School and passes the crosswalk where her uncle lost his life each day. Angelique says she has many fond memories of hiking and taste testing yogurt. "We've gotta keep moving forward in life," Angelique says. "But I'd like people to remember to drive safely. Don't drink and drive. Don't text and drive. Drive carefully and pay attention."

Three of Ashley Dias's childhood friends took turns at the mic sharing a little bit about the Ashley that they knew and came to love – a guy with a sense of humor, who accepted people as they were and kept people around him smiling. Kieren Guller traveled all the way from Arizona for the unveiling of Ashley's plaque. While Guller thinks it was heroic of Ashley to put himself in between a moving vehicle and children, he wants Ashley to be remembered for much more than that.

"I moved around a lot as a kid and never really planted roots or knew quite where I belonged," Guller says. "When

I met Ashley, it was pretty much life changing. It was like I found my home."

Guller's mom died when he was just 8 years old. After that his family moved to Concord because they could no longer afford to stay in Lafayette. "My dad fought hard to keep me in the school district but it was hard. I could definitely feel the difference between my family and the families in town who had money," Guller recalls. "Ashley's family just opened their door to me. It didn't matter that he had more than I did. He never put money above our friendship. He made me feel like I belonged."

History and humanity collide in Steve Falk's 'California Story'

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The writing tone stretches its range; moving with Falk's skillful handling from humor to pain to pathos to straightforward just-the-facts reporting.

In two of the most personal chapters that Falk says were the hardest to write, he pays tribute to two lives lost: his brother and brilliantly talented painter, Bret Falk, in 2006, and a dear friend, Chris Newton, who died at the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. "The most difficult part was writing about the two people who passed away," says Falk. "It was intimidating to try to

capture the entire character, the 360-degree view of these people on paper. I knew it would be impossible and I just had to hope it was good enough."

On the flip side, writing about his children and his spouse was celebratory. "They are superlative in every way. I love no creatures more than them. I was literally smiling at the keyboard," he recalls.

In addition to emotion, Falk's writing process involved the structure a person might expect of a city manager accustomed to planning, schedules and agendas. He purchased a deck of 3 x 5 cards and started writing titles for the stories he remembered. He carried them around, quickly adding to the collection until he had 40 stories. "I gave myself one week for each story. I had a schedule where I sat down and wrote from 8 a.m. to noon, doing half days. I didn't adhere exactly to that, but it took me about 40 weeks to write 40 chapters." Consolidating two stories into one chapter and organically weaving stories of California into each, the combination of facts and personal voice reveal larger, universal themes that address home, family, identity, faith, parenting, love, death, convictions, ethics, philosophies. An undercurrent of the pandemic is a silent partner as each topic suggests a summation—or simply, how our human experience due to COVID gained urgency and our values reached heightened intensity in the face of mortality and an eventual "The End" to every story.

Chapter 35 is largely concerned with the Terraces of Lafayette, a 22-acre project

that proposed to be the largest single development in the city's 50-year history and became a decade-long battleground. Ultimately, the story and Falk landed on the pages of The New York Times. Having fought the good fight for years, Falk eventually tendered his resignation in part because he recognized his true nature and determined an exit was best. "That was one of the easier chapters to write because it was fact-based. But at the same time, it serves as the climax for the book project. The material after that is the wrap-up because in that chapter I come to this challenging set of ethical decisions. I have to decide what it means to have a conscience. In some ways, it's the summation of a lot of parts about me that I lay out in previous chapters."

With the final chapter of the series arriving on Sept. 18, Falk has planned a community cupcake party. "I reserved the Madrone Picnic Area in Roberts Regional Park in the East Bay hills on that day for a COVID-safe gathering to talk about the project, maybe read a few chapters, and visit with each other."

After that, his plans are to continue as lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley, in the Goldman School of Public Policy. "It's a class called City Management. No surprises there," he says. And writing more chapters? Other than figuring out how to convert the existing series and add a paywall and continuing to paint, another artistic endeavor he has for years pursued, Falk has no definite plans. His family—and California history as it continues to roll out—may soon say otherwise.

To read "California Story," visit www.californiastory.net/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

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