



## UWG Alumnus Shares His Experience Exploring the Underground Flood Channels of Las Vegas

Arrianah Jones  
*Contributing Writer*

The University of West Georgia welcomed back UWG alumnus, journalist and activist Matthew O’Brien to discuss his book *Beneath the Neon, Life and Death in the Tunnels of Las Vegas*; and the Shine a Light Foundation, a nonprofit organization he started to help the homeless communities living in the storm drains under Las Vegas. UWG Professor of Political Science Sal Peralta and Professor of Creative Writing Alison Umminger, led the discussion.

O’Brien moved to Vegas after his graduation from UWG in 1995, with dreams of becoming an established writer. He began working at a magazine called *Las Vegas City Life* and worked his way up to Managing Editor. While in his early career, O’Brien read an article in the *Las Vegas Review Journal* about a murderer who had been on the run. The man was captured, but had originally evaded police using the underground flood channels of Las Vegas. O’Brien found inspiration here.

“There’s about 300 miles of underground channels in Las Vegas, and I thought if I explored as many of them as I could, there was bound to be a book there,” said O’Brien.

He started following Timmy ‘TJ’ Weber, the escape murderer’s trail, then followed other tunnels and interviewed the homeless. The book opens with O’Brien describing just how terrified he was to enter. He writes compellingly and applies fictional elements to his non-fictional writing,

using descriptive language and vivid imagery like the entrance “drooling with algae”, and the “mildewy air”. He places the reader in his shoes, leaving them wondering how he mustered up the courage to continue.

“I went down there on edge, terrified,” said O’Brien. “But then I met some really cool people.”

He met a man named Lawrence who slept on an elevated cot near the ceiling and was able to recite original poetry off the top of his head. O’Brien also met Billy, a man who’d survived the storm drains and had made a life for himself. He keeps in touch with him to this day, and regards him as a friend.

“I realized several years later that a lot of people I met in the tunnels had gotten off the drugs, quit gambling, found jobs and reunited with family,” said O’Brien. “I felt obligated to tell their stories, how they can change and did change.”

O’Brien’s experience in the drains gave him a new outlook on life, and made him more grateful for what he has. His greatest hope in publishing his book was that a nonprofit organization, or the government would help the people down there; his worst fear being that the police would sweep them out. But when nothing was done, he decided he wanted to give something back to them. That’s when he started taking things like socks, hats and bottles of water to the homeless people in the drains. It eventually became a community

THIS WEEK:

Living West

PAGES 1-2

UWG Alumnus Shares His Experience Exploring the Underground Flood Channels of Las Vegas

By Arrianah Jones

Georgia Students Simulate the Struggles of Dementia

By Breanna Tillie

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

PAGE 4

Crossroads Live Delivers a Phenomenal Production of Dear Evan Hansen in Columbus

By Breanna Tillie

project.

“People started donating stuff to me,” said O’Brien. “I became a middleman for the homeless, and anyone who wanted to help them.”

He made connections with nonprofits and started taking their social workers to operate housing, it only grew from there. Shine a Light now has a large headquarters with a barbershop, storage room and housing where hundreds of people a year come, and it’s all staffed by individuals who used to live in the tunnels.



Photo: Arrianah Jones,  
*The West Georgian*



Georgia Students Simulate the Struggles of Dementia

Breanna Tillie  
Editor-In-Chief

In Georgia, approximately 12% of the population aged 65 and older lives with Alzheimer’s disease, which is a type of dementia. In 2022, 288,436 deaths among U.S. adults aged 65 and older were attributed to dementia. To educate students on this condition and spread awareness, the Three Rivers Aging Agency hosted a dementia simulation on April 14 in the Campus Center Ballroom.

“My professor wanted us to either participate or observe the simulation,” said Abbie Klein, a participant in the simulation. “I chose to participate because if people have to live through that every day, the best I can do is see what it’s like for ten minutes.”

The simulation brought the circumstances of dementia to life through its equipment and the immersive environment it created.

“We put on equipment to simulate sense deprivation,” said Klein. “We wore thick, oversized gloves that made us lose fine motor skills because the fingers were so big.”

Because dementia may also impact vision and sound interpretation, the simulation also compromised the participant’s ability to see and hear.

“We had to wear glasses that were darkened and blacked out to where I only had a little bit of vision,”

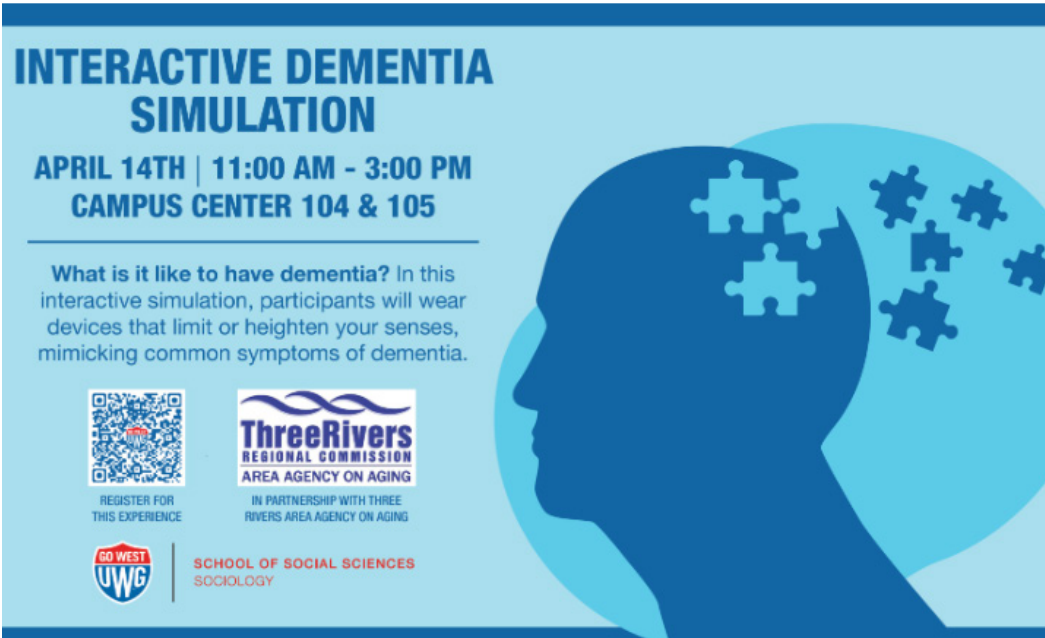


Photo courtesy of University of West Georgia

said Klein. “We wore headphones that played a really loud recording of muffled voices with random loud sirens and bangs periodically going through them.”

The simulation brought to light how difficult it is to complete everyday tasks with such a condition.

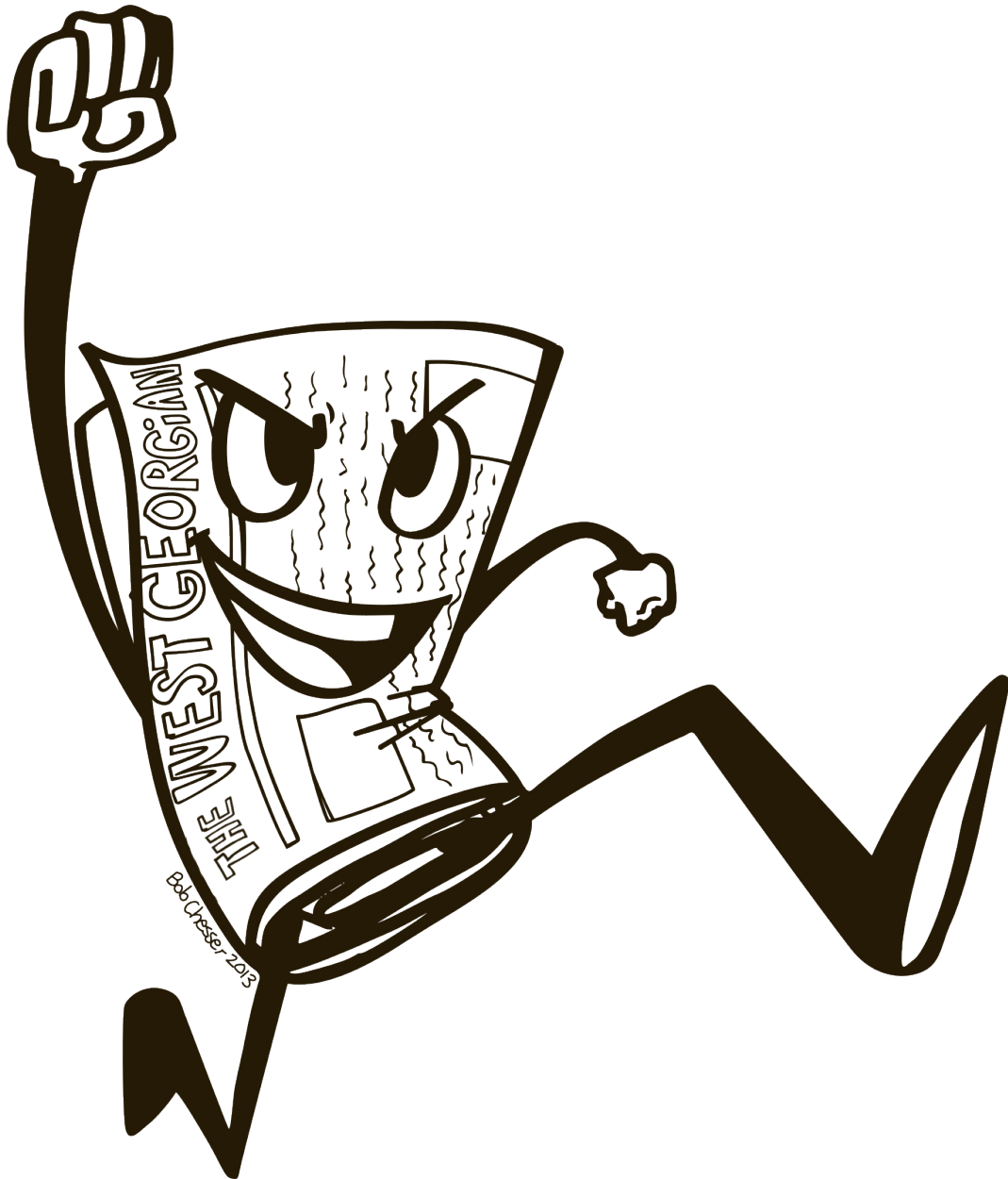
“We also wore plastic inserts in our shoes that had little plastic spikes in them to simulate pins and needles in the feet and not being able to walk very well,” said Klein. “For the actual simulation, they put us in a room and asked us to do simple tasks. But because of the headphones and my lack of vision, I didn’t know what

they were asking me to do. It was really difficult to complete tasks. Me and four other students kind of just wandered around the room for about ten minutes just wondering what we were supposed to do.”

Klein states that after the simulation, she will never view dementia, or those living with it, the same way again.

“I was very uneducated on dementia,” said Klein. “I didn’t realize it was as serious as it was. This taught me how to approach people with dementia better and to be more empathetic to what they went through.”

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# Arts and Entertainment

## Crossroads Live Delivers a Phenomenal Production of Dear Evan Hansen in Columbus

Breanna Tillie  
*Editor-In-Chief*

Crossroads Live presented a phenomenal production of the hit Broadway musical Dear Evan Hansen at the RiverCenter for the Performing Arts in Columbus, Ga., on April 18.

“Dear Evan Hansen” portrays the story of a teenager named Evan who struggles with anxiety. As a way to build his confidence, his therapist tasks him with writing letters to himself to express his feelings. Having recently broken his arm, Evan’s mother also suggests that Evan asks students to sign his cast.

At the beginning of the show, Conner, a bullied student from Evan’s high school with emotional issues, signs Evan’s cast and gets ahold of the letter Evan wrote to himself. Afterwards, Conner puts the letter in his pocket and takes his own life. When Conner’s parents find the letter in their son’s pocket, they are convinced that the letter is a suicide note from Conner that he addressed to Evan.

Unable to properly clear up the misunderstanding because of his anxiety, Evan goes along with this thought and fabricates a story about Conner being his best friend. The lie allows for Evan to experience being a part of Conner’s “perfect” family, dating the “perfect” girl, and experiencing a life he had always dreamed of. But when the

lie gets out, Evan must confront his insecurities.

While every number in the musical was performed with impressive skill and emotion, some of the ballads in the musical were especially memorable and left a lasting impact on the audience.

The ballad “For Forever” by Michael Fabish, who starred as Evan, was absolutely beautiful and deeply moving. The song happens when Evan begins to create a made-up story to deceive Connor’s family, but Fabish performed it with such emotion that it does not come across that way to the audience. It is clear that Evan is sad and lonely. This fantasy that he has manufactured is about Evan dreaming about what it is like to be a part of something other than the isolation he has always known. Fabish presents a version of Evan that is easy to sympathize with.

Additionally, the following ballad “Requiem,” performed by Conner’s family, with Jeff Brooks as Larry, Hatty Ryan King as Zoe, and Caitlin Sams as Cynthia, also packed an enormous emotional punch. The performances all show such complex and diverse manifestations of grief.

Arguably, the most interesting dynamic in the show was the relationship between Evan and his mother, played by Bre Cade. Evan’s



Photo courtesy of  
Dear Evan Hansen

mother, Heidi, is a single mother who is doing the best she can but is coming up short and knows it. Cade’s performance of “So big, So Small,” a song about Heidi wanting to protect her son, conveyed her feelings toward this exceptionally well. A number of sniffles from the audience were audible during the breaks of this song. This performance was also a reminder that Evan, for all of his mistakes throughout the show, is still only a child who is still trying to navigate growing up.

The “Crossroads Live” production of “Dear Evan Hansen” is now performing in Waterbury, CT., but theater fans in Georgia are forever grateful that this production has graced us in the south.



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