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Buffalo Grove's 'Secret Millionaire' sees South Side poverty for himself

By **Jamie Sotonoff Jessica Cilella**

Reality TV felt pretty real to Buffalo Grove resident Steve Kaplan.

The businessman and best-selling author will star in Sunday's episode of ABC's "Secret Millionaire," airing at 7 p.m.

On the show, Kaplan spends a week living on about \$47 in welfare wages and sleeping on the floor of a bloodstained abandoned house in the rough Roseland neighborhood on Chicago's South Side.

"I thought it was going to be more of a show and less reality, but it's amazing how true to the experience (this show) is," he said. "It was everything. During shooting, even if I wanted a cup of coffee, I had to go and buy it. (The crew) wouldn't just give it to me."

Kaplan heard gunfire every night and said a police or ambulance siren roared through the neighborhood "every three minutes."

He'd been exposed to extreme poverty in his world travels and spent years working low-wage jobs such as dishwasher and landscaper — even sleeping in his car some nights when first launching his marketing and advertising business. Yet Kaplan said his week living on the South Side around the end of last summer was unlike anything he'd seen or experienced.

"It was the hopelessness and the acceptance that nothing is going to change. It hit me on a more visceral level," said Kaplan, 52, who grew up in Des Plaines and Niles and is a Maine North High School alumnus.

While he adapted to the food and environment, Kaplan said the hardest part of living in the neighborhood was feeling isolated.

"The lack of entertainment was really difficult for me," he said. "I could see how idle time is not a good thing."

Cameras followed Kaplan as he spent the week volunteering and talking to people in the neighborhood, not letting them know about his wealth until he could make a personal connection and see how his money could improve their lives.

He ultimately ended up helping three charities, including Roseland-based Kids Off The Block Inc., which provides alternatives to gangs and drugs for at-risk, low-income youths; Housing Opportunities and Maintenance for the Elderly (H.O.M.E.); and Bin Donated, which collects large donations from hotels and other businesses to distribute to more than 70 charities across the city.

Judson Kinnucan, founder of Bin Donated, said that when he met Kaplan, he thought he was a very nice and

hardworking guy but had no idea he was a millionaire.

“I was in shock and elated,” Kinnucan said, adding that since Kaplan's donation he has hired a new employee and made improvements in operations.

Besides monetary donations, Kaplan also gave one of the charities a space in his downtown office and still volunteers his time in the neighborhood.

“I continue to be rewarded by the experience,” he said during a phone interview.

The straight-talking, divorced father of two said he hopes the show will inspire viewers to turn around their lives.

“I try to live my life helping people because I consider myself fortunate,” he said. “I know that sounds cliché, but it happens to be true.”