

## [Kaplan journey captured on 'Secret Millionaire' show](#)

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When he got in the taxi, he did not know where he was going — other than someplace bad.

Steve Kaplan, Buffalo Grove resident and successful businessman, was packed for a week's worth of just about anything. The taxi was moving south on Interstate 94, headed for the division between the Edens spur and Interstate 294.

He figured that if the driver stayed southbound and took I-294, he was on the way to O'Hare International Airport, and probably a flight to Colorado, where he owns property in Aspen. Nine months ago, when Kaplan began his mystery trip, it was plenty chilly in the Rockies, but the one thing he knew was that on this trip, he would not be drinking in a warming house or enjoying any views.

The driver turned east, and Kaplan, 50, knew right away what that meant: His weeklong experience of filming a reality television show about millionaires helping the much-less fortunate would take place on Chicago's infamous south side.

"It was an emotional journey," he said.

Kaplan's journey became an episode of Secret Millionaire, a reality television show on ABC, which aired Sunday night. The series' concept takes wealthy subjects out of their environs, drops them into bad neighborhoods and has them search for organizers of volunteer agencies making a real difference; the millionaires pose as regular folks filming a documentary about volunteerism and work with the agencies they find, then later reveal themselves as benefactors looking for groups to fund.

"The heroes of the show are not the people with the money," Kaplan said.

The native of Niles and Des Plaines came into his own money, he said, partly through hard work and partly through putting a natural talent to maximum use.

"I've worked ever since I was 13," Kaplan said. "I found that I had a really good knack for understanding people, and understanding bureaucracies."

After washing dishes, landscaping and bussing tables through his teen years, started his first business, Sampling Corporation of America, at age 23 in Glenview. His plan included a lot of cost-cutting: When he traveled to meet with clients, Kaplan parked his car in numerous hotel lots, and never set foot inside the hotel.

"I'd be sleeping in my car because I didn't want the hotel room," he said. "I'd rather take my client out to lunch."

His hardline self-propulsion worked, and at age 30, he said he sold SCA off for \$50 million. Dozens of other businesses, most with some degree of success, followed.

“I replicated what I did,” Kaplan said. “I’m more of a street guy, as opposed to academia.”

Today Kaplan is a business consultant, coaching others in how to find success with what they are already doing. He has also written two books about his experiences, and has moved into the entertainment industry — he helped produce the Broadway show “Leap of Faith,” which earned a nomination for Best Musical at this spring’s Tony Awards.

It was his interest in entertainment that got him on the small screen, but not in the way he expected.

About a year ago, Kaplan was in Los Angeles, marketing his idea for a television show to production company Zodiak Media Group, makers of reality series *Wife Swap* and *Hardcore Pawn* among others. He admits that Zodiak did not bite on his pitch (“It’s in the working stages,” he said of his idea), but that they were extremely interested in him as a subject for one of their new projects.

*Secret Millionaire* was airing its first, six-episode season at the time, and looking for new benefactors to film. When they made a counter-pitch to him, Kaplan jumped.

“I was in in a minute,” he said.

Which is how he got into the back seat of a taxi, destination unknown.

Rather than driving him all the way, the cabbie dumped Kaplan off at the train station at Howard and Clark streets, the northernmost stop of Chicago’s Red Line.

“I took the El until it ended at 95th,” Kaplan said, “and then I walked another 20 blocks.”

He was walking to the abandoned house where he would spend the next week, in the Roseland neighborhood. He stayed near Michigan Avenue — but at 117th Street, that is a world away from the lodgings of The Magnificent Mile.

A white man with cameras following him through an almost entirely African-American neighborhood drew a lot of attention.

“Welcome to hell,” he recalled some people shouting. “Get out of here!”

He had to leave his money, mobile phone and other comforts behind — the producers provided him with \$47 to live on, the equivalent of a week on welfare. He stayed in a barely-furnished house with graffiti on the walls, and recalled the tent he pitched in the mud while climbing Africa’s Mount Kilimanjaro as more pleasant accommodations. But, with the show’s security around, he did not fear for his safety...much.

“My only issue was some crazy dude coming by and doing a drive-by there,” he said.

Kaplan spent some of that week volunteering with three non-profits; Zodiak contacted them last July, posing as a company filming a documentary about American non-profit companies. Bruce Otto, executive director of Housing Opportunities and Maintenance for the Elderly, said that he and his volunteers began to suspect that the crew of 30 was actually filming them for *Secret Millionaire*, but that the surprise they showed when their newest volunteer became their newest donor was genuine.

“He was very good, he was very engaging,” Otto said Monday of Kaplan’s work with HOME senior

citizens. “He asked a lot of really good questions.”

But the problems that stymie Roseland are complicated and deep-rooted, and Kaplan experienced one of them first-hand. When he was not volunteering, he found that there was not much in the neighborhood for him or its residents to occupy themselves with.

“I could see how long stretches of boredom equals crime and problems,” he said.

When the week ended, Kaplan said he went back to Buffalo Grove with a much clearer understanding of what life is like for thousands of his fellow Chicagoans. He was also relieved to learn that, in his week away from all his usual communication channels, nothing out of the ordinary had happened in his professional or personal lives.

Otto said he was pleased with how Secret Millionaire portrayed HOME, and that Sunday’s episode was the end of a long, arduous and fortuitous chapter for the agency.

“They kind of took over our lives for three days,” he said. “The last year, really.”

And from the wrap of filming until Sunday night, when Kaplan reunited with a few of those he helped for a viewing party at a North Side restaurant, he said he thought about the differences, and similarities, between Roseland and Buffalo Grove. When he studied Roseland’s view of the Loop’s skyline, he found it backwards from what he saw in his River North office.

“It was very symbolic,” he said. “It was the other side of the coin.

“The stereotype is that it’s all bad, and it’s not,” he added. “The problems are economic, it’s jobs. If they had things to do, they’d do them.”