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Surf and salvation

by Joe Ferullo

NCR Today

She's a former prostitute, and a victim of priest abuse when she was just a child. And her most prized position -- a surfing championship trophy -- sits in a most unlikely place: on the desk of Los Angeles' Cardinal Roger Mahony.

Her name Mary Settleholm, and her story is movingly told in Sunday's *Los Angeles Times* by columnist Steve Lopez.

Lopez has become something of a bard for the West Coast down-and-out. He's the writer who discovered a brilliant classical musician living on the streets of L.A.'s Skid Row, and turned his battle with mental illness into the book and movie called "The Soloist." The columnist is out of the old journalism mold: not afraid to go to the dark places, and reveal the stories of people who have no other way to make themselves heard.

In Mary Settleholm, he has found another miracle. She was abused as a child -- first by a babysitter, then by a parish priest -- and as a teenager turned to prostitution for survival. All the while, surfing was her sole escape, but she was split in two -- torn by her abuse, yet lifted up by her achievements in the ocean. In 1972, she won the U.S. Women's title, at age 17. But soon, she was living on the streets.

And then, many years later, in 2002, she met Sr. Sheila McNiff, appointed by Cardinal Mahony to reach out to abuse victims. Through Sr. McNiff, Settleholm was able to sit down with Cardinal Mahony, tell her story, and receive the apology she craved. She gave the cardinal her surfing trophy as a gesture of reconciliation. He keeps it on his desk to this day.

From that, Settleholm was able to reclaim and rebuild her life: Today, she takes into her home and cares for other "street workers," helping to lift them out of their old lives. She also runs a surfing school for

inner city kids, taking them out to the beach, far away from the stifling heat and shattered surroundings.

And Sr. McNiff persuaded Settleholm to go back to school -- she graduated from Loyola Marymount university last spring, with a degree in theology. Next month, she'll begin work on her graduate divinity degree at New York's Union Theological Seminary.

I know: this can't be true. Somebody must be making this up. If it wasn't from Steve Lopez, I'd have trouble accepting this myself.

I mean, if you sent this around to Hollywood studios as a script, it would bounce back into your mailbox so fast the sound barrier would break. Too far-out; hardly likely; the audience would never buy it.

But, I guess, that's just how it is with miracles.

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