

VOICES

ANYONE CAN WRITE

Nearly 40 years in the business have taught me that readers are bombarded and overwhelmed with facts. What we long for, though, is meaning and a connection at a deeper and more universal level. And that's why The Observer will be running, from time to time, stories from students who are in my writing class, which I've been teaching for the past 10 years in Portland. I take great satisfaction in helping so-called nonwriters find and write stories from their lives and experiences. They walk into my room believing they don't have what it takes to be a writer. I remind them if they follow their hearts, they will discover they are storytellers. As we all are at our core. Some of these stories have nothing to do with La Grande or Union County. They do, however, have everything to do with life. If you are interested in contacting me to tell me your story, I'd like to hear from you.

Tom Hallman Jr., tbhbook@aol.com

Tom Hallman Jr. is a Pulitzer Prize-winning feature writer for the Oregonian newspaper. He's also a writing coach and has an affinity for Union County.

Yo-yo champion of Arroyo Seco playground

By CRAIG CHASTAIN

Special to The Observer

There were not a lot of entertainment options for 11-year-old boys in 1957.

Sure, we were living in Los Angeles (Highland Park, actually), home of Disney, big dreams and Stage 3 smog alerts, but there was not much day-to-day excitement coming from the world's entertainment capital. The music charts were dominated by snoozers like Pat Boone, Paul Anka and Andy Williams. Our black and white TV offered such compelling fare as "Father Knows Best" and "The Real McCoys." Elvis and "American Bandstand" still were down the road, and the Dodgers were playing in Brooklyn.

With so much idle time and so few diversions, it is small wonder I and a cadre of friends chose a seldom-traveled path littered with potential heartbreak, frustration and disappointment.

For us, it was the yo-yo.

The yo-yo of 1957 was just two pieces of rounded wood connected to 3 feet of string, but in the hands of a gifted showman, the results could be spectacular. I watched the "Ed Sullivan Show" with my family as a world-renowned "yo-yo-ist" (which I am still not sure is a word) stunned the audience with a jaw-dropping display of whirling wood and sizzling string.

As an athletically challenged, nearsighted geek (before "geek" was cool or even a word) I thought — "I can do that." I shared my dream with three close friends — Larry Lehigh, Tom Byerly and Danny Hall. The freshly formed quartet immediately traveled to Tanner's Toy Town where we purchased four yo-yos in four different colors.

Within days, we were hooked by the addictive allure of the yo-yo.

The singular hangout in those days was the Arroyo Seco Playground, where young guys from the neighborhood came to partake of such tempting diversions as pingpong, checkers and tetherball. As our shared addiction snowballed for all things yo-yo, the four of us soon focused on little else. Eventually, we took to huddling together behind the handball courts to avoid the stares and scorn of our peers. We became known around the playground as "the yo-yucks."

There were few outlets to express our chosen passion, but all that changed when a representative of the Duncan Yo-Yo Company came to the playground. Duncan was, at the time, the world leader in the "sport," and the company chose the Los Angeles parks and recreation system as the launching pad for what it hoped would be a national competition to find the best young yo-yo-ists in the country.

As we listened for the details, each of us was thinking the same thing: "I am going to win this, even if I have to crush my three best friends in the process." It was a day that would mark the beginning of the end for "the four yo-yucks."

With just three weeks to prepare, each of us dived

into our own training regimen. Larry bulked up on a steady diet of encouragement and sugar cookies. Tom went to his room where no one quite knew if he was practicing or just taking a lot of "naps." Danny temporarily quit bullying fourth graders and threw all his anger into the task.

For myself, I uncharacteristically made a commitment to triumph — a decision, I believe, that has helped to shape me as a grown-up. Over the next 21 days, I became one with my yo-yo, practicing tricks again and again in front of my mirror with a new-found flair I stole from the guy on the "Ed Sullivan Show." I visualized stepping forward to accept my trophy — and the \$10 — in front of my three best friends, each of them humbled in defeat.

The day of the event arrived and the early rounds went pretty much as expected. There were about 20 entrants, but everyone knew it was going to come to a smack-down involving the "four yo-yucks." After an hour of eliminations, it had become a Four-Friend Face-Off.

Larry faltered first, due perhaps to the 7-plus pounds he packed on during training. His attempt at "Walking the Dog" ran away from him and he was too slow to respond. And then there were three.

Tom reinforced our thinking he had napped through his training. His version of "the sleeper" — pretty much a "Yo-Yo 101" trick — went to sleep at the bottom of the string, and Tom was powerless to wake it up. It was down to Danny and me.

Squaring off with yo-yo in hand, it was not lost on me that, if I beat Danny, there was a real possibility he would fall back on old habits and beat me up every day until school started. Making a key life decision, I pushed the fear aside and focused on the prize.

What happened next became the stuff of playground patter for the rest of the summer. Danny and I matched trick for trick, from compulsories like the "creeper" and "rock the cradle" to the challenges of the "breakaway" and "around the world." Finally, I stuck a flawless execution of "the Eiffel Tower" and Danny muffed it, string and yo-yo draping him ingloriously in defeat and despair.

And just like that, I was the "1957 Duncan Yo-Yo Champion of Arroyo Seco Playground."

Regretfully, the four yo-yucks were never friends in the same way again. I claimed my trophy in front of them, but it did not feel as good as I thought it would. I went on to the city championships and was eliminated in the first round, ironically by a bungled "Eiffel Tower." And Danny never beat me up — he just did not speak to me again until high school.

I took away a lot from that day of winning. That persistence, passion and practice can sometimes be rewarded. That victory is sweet but short-lived. And friendships are fragile.

I used the \$10 to pay back Tom.

And I still have the trophy.

Artist tackles a massive project

Joan Gilbert takes on 'Wallowa Lake: 55x55' three-year project

By RONALD BOND
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — Joan Gilbert is stepping outside her comfort zone.

Gilbert, a graphic artist who lives in Enterprise, is seeking to expand her artistic ability while completing a major project that, when done, will be three years in the making.

The project, called "Wallowa Lake: 55x55," will be completed next year and, when done, will be on display at the Josephy Center for Arts and Culture.

"Basically, I started two years ago with a three-year project (that) by the time I turned 55, I will have done 55 pieces of artwork — all pertaining to Wallowa Lake," she said.

That 55th birthday — and with it, the project's deadline — is still a year away, but is fast-approaching, and will be here in August 2022.

The reasons behind the project are many. One of them, she said, is to work with media outside of her comfort zone. Yes, there will be watercolor and acrylic paintings — the ones she knows best — of Wallowa Lake from various angles.

That will be just a taste, though, of what she is trying out.

"Part of the reason I started this project was to give me an excuse to sample all types of media and techniques. I've done illustration before, and children's book illustration," she said.

Dabbling in new media

Pastels. Oil. Cold-wax paintings. Wood carvings. Mosaics. Potentially a



Ronald Bond/Wallowa County Chieftain

Artist Joan Gilbert works on a sculpture of "Wally," the Wallowa Lake monster she intends to have made into a bronze once finished. It is one of the dozens of art pieces she is working on for her "Wallowa Lake: 55x55" project, a task where she intends to make 55 pieces of art featuring Wallowa Lake by her 55th birthday, which falls in August 2022.

monochromatic, black-and-white piece.

"I may even have a bronze in the show, and that is way out of my comfort level," she said. "You name it, I am going to try to experiment."

Wallowa Lake, she said, was chosen as the subject for several "sentimental" reasons.

"My family spent a lot of time up there — it's sentimental," she said. "I spent six years being art director at Wallowology. I learned a lot about the lake and learned how special it is with the moraine and the protections."

One of the pieces, for example, is a pastel of fireworks over the lake. Another is an icy winter scene painted in watercolor.

Yet another has the lake in the background and is focused on a bird nest in the trees.

The bronze piece she is hoping to complete — and currently is in the process of making a clay sculpture

of — is Wally, the Wallowa Lake sea monster.

As to the reasons (in addition to corresponding with her age) for doing such a high volume of pieces?

It gives her plenty of opportunity to experiment, and will help her work through a fear she carries with her artwork.

As a result, she is approaching two-thirds of the way through the project, but many pieces are in this limbo stage of close, but not quite done. She said 18 of the pieces are complete. Several others are at about 75% done.

"Some of them need little pops of color, a little more depth," she said. "I know what to do, and I know I need to get around to it. Some of them, I like it as it is, but I know it's not done. I don't know what to do with it."

She quipped, as a result, that she may be putting final touches on the night before the display is set up.

MORE ONLINE

Those interested in staying updated on the progress of Joan Gilbert's 55x55 project can check out her blog at the website www.joangilbertstudio.com.

A graphic designer by trade

Gilbert, a La Grande native, originally got a degree in economics from what is now Eastern Oregon University and didn't seriously consider art until she was prodded by her parents to take an art class. She finally did her junior year at Eastern, finished the core classes for art, then continued her schooling at Oregon State University to get a degree in graphic design and illustration.

She has turned that into a career as a graphic designer, and has worked with more than 100 businesses since moving to Wallowa County in 2002.

With the additional time being undertaken on the project, she is working on it three days a week from her home studio, and the other two weekdays does graphic design work, including for Wallowology and for prior clients.

"I'm doing what I call maintenance work for my clients in updating ads and stuff like that. That helps me carve out time (for 55x55)," she said.

And while the graphic design work has been rewarding — and could be a fall-back plan — she is hopeful this step outside of her comfort zone could be successful enough to allow her to become a full-time artist.

"Can I actually start a career from this? That is the big question," she said. "I'm hoping by the end I'll have fallen in love with a medium and I'll want to work with that. If I get a gallery representation that would be great."

DAY 15

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