

Siuslaw News
P.O. Box 10
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Opinion

EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE

CATHERINE J. ROURKE
 For the Siuslaw News

Stephen Fowler & Noah Schultz



Their faces look bright, enthusiastic and full of hope. But there was a time seven years ago when those faces appeared lost, lifeless and scared in the police blotter instead of a column that spotlights admirable human qualities.

Stephen Fowler and Noah Schultz have turned their lives completely around as they both turn 24 this week. The two youth offenders from Portland, currently residing at Camp Florence, have done their time as well as their homework in preparation for a promising future. And now they have a story to share about writing their way from detention to redemption to create a new screenplay for their lives.

Like most troubled teens, it all began with difficult childhoods and broken homes.

"I didn't have a father or parents like most people," said Stephen, who was placed in foster care at age 6. "I had no proper guidance."

Noah was just a boy when he first witnessed violence in the street. Feeling alienated and misunderstood like many children with ADHD, he fell in with the wrong crowd. At age 13, he joined a gang.

"It gave me a sense of unity and a safety net in a dangerous neighborhood," Noah said. "But it also led me down a dark road to a lot of mistakes."

The young men didn't know each other at age 17 when they became involved in separate offenses that led them to appear in the same courtroom on the same day. Tried as adults, they were committed to the custody of the Oregon Youth Authority, the state correctional program for rehabilitating youth offenders, and sent to MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility.

"I went from one zoo to another," Stephen said. "But I was more concerned about remaining true to myself. I still had values and vowed to keep them."

Noah made a different vow: to abandon gang life forever. It was at MacLaren that the young men would find a way to uphold their pledge when the Hope Partnership program introduced them to creative writing. Through the power of the written and spoken word, Stephen and Noah discovered the capacity to transform their lives and transcend their circumstances.

"The creative process has no filters and allows you to be yourself," Noah said. "It brought everything to life for me. I found my voice and my self-worth through writing. For the first time, I had something of value to share and felt understood. Creative writing was the place I always returned to whenever I felt angry, or confused. Telling your story puts you back in control."

Stephen found a way to express his values in a poem titled "Foundation."

"Poetry opened up a whole new



PHOTO BY CATHERINE ROURKE

Stephen Fowler, left, and Noah Schultz, right, will present their "Give Youth a Voice" program and poetry at FRAA on Feb. 20.

door," he said. "It gave me clarity about who I was and allowed me to say whatever I wanted. Your voice matters and the world needs to know your story. I always had a desire to love and help others. But you have to love and accept yourself first and writing helped me do that."

After the pitfalls of broken homes and broken lives, Noah and Stephen began picking up the pieces to build a future. They earned college degrees in human development and hosted a "Verbal Escape" poetry event in 2013, finding freedom through the written and spoken word.

They arrived last year at Camp Florence, a work-study program, to prepare for their final transition into the community. Now the two have

teamed up to develop "Verbal Escape" into a curriculum to help juvenile delinquents discover their voices.

"We want to give back by helping youths with adverse childhood experiences," Noah said. "The earlier they tell their stories, the greater the potential for their personal development."

With a mission to prevent all teens from falling into drugs, gangs and lives of crime, Stephen and Noah plan to teach "Verbal Escape" at schools and youth facilities across the state and the nation. They will be introducing it at Siuslaw High School with a program called "Give Youth a Voice," in which students will learn how to tell their stories through poetry and music.

"Young people really need to develop their voices and discover who they are through creative writing," said Noah, who has published a book of poems titled "Morse Code Kisses." "The written and spoken word is huge in developing a strong positive personal narrative as a way to identify yourself."

The men are applying for grants and seeking sponsorships for their program, which has gained the support of several local businesses, community organizations and individuals. Meanwhile, they will present their message and poetry on Saturday, Feb. 20, at the Florence Regional Arts Alliance.

Instead of focusing on their sordid past, Stephen and Noah created a positive vision that holds a vital key about the human capacity to overcome adversity. In writing their way from despair and difficulty to hope and opportunity, they have discovered a tool more powerful than drugs and guns, a therapy more potent than any remedy in a bottle and a way to serve others. Their story represents a triumph that will inspire people of all ages to tell one of their own.

For more info about the "Give Youth a Voice" program and events, call 503-910-3625.

Catherine J. Rourke is an award-winning writer, journalist and book editor who teaches creative writing at the Florence Regional Arts Alliance. She may be contacted at CJReditor@gmail.com.

LETTERS

Thank you for recycling

Thank you to those who are recycling ink jet cartridges and old cell phones.

The Siuslaw Genealogy Society uses the money from these to pay for family history websites, which are then offered for free to the public at the Siuslaw Public Library.

The society's meetings are open to all and held the third Wednesday of each month at 7 p.m. at the library.

Call 541-991-0885 for questions.

Pat Ronney
 Florence

Tribute to Bob

It's been some time since Bob Jackson sold his "mini-marina" at Westlake on Siltcoos Lake, where I keep a small sailboat for part of each year. But even after Bob and his wife Peggy sold their home and marina and moved to Greentrees in Florence, I couldn't walk the docks down to my boat without thinking of him. And now because of his recent passing, it will be no different, except the memories of him will become more poignant.

He was a little banty rooster of a man with a crooked smile and a warmth about him that made you feel when talking to him that he had been a lifelong pal. On sailing days, I used to head out to the sailboat to catch the wind when it was just right — enough to push the boat along at a good clip, but not so blustery that it became overpowering. But I soon learned that when planning my departure, I needed to factor some "Bob" time.

For inevitably, we would end up leaning against the masonry wall by his driveway shoot-

ing the breeze. Mostly it was him talking and me listening. About the old days when he was growing up in Westlake, putting together his first car, adventures with his Uncle Dewey the moonshiner, rowing across the lake to work at the Booth mill, and harrowing speed runs over gravel roads that gave him the adrenaline rush he seemed to crave as a young man.

Or he might talk about his World War II days in the Navy, his time on the USS Indianapolis, a cruiser sunk by Japanese torpedoes in the Pacific in 1945 after Bob was transferred to become an "airdale" crewman on amphibious aircraft in the South Pacific.

During our visits he might break out some of his latest drawings — mostly of the sleek-looking historic cars with which he had a lifelong love affair. Often he would tell stories about his days working in the Booth veneer plant or around the barge-mounted "whirley-cranes" on the Umpqua River.

If I was lucky, he would invite me into the house for coffee and some of his gentle wife

Peggy's home-made goodies, and tell me about some of his latest writing projects that resulted in three books of his memories and drawings. I was honored to write the preface for one of the books.

With Bob's death, the central coast has lost a great source of local history and tales about the rough and tumble early days of this place. But we're lucky that with his artwork and writing, he documented so much for us and future generations.

Even as he breezed through his 70s, 80s and into his 90s he remained active, physically strong, with a creative mind always curious about the world he lived in. I can remember him standing on the dock swinging a huge scythe underwater to cut aquatic weeds, work that didn't seem to faze him but would wear out men decades younger than him. For years, he took it as his personal responsibility to take a boat down the Siltcoos Outlet and saw up fallen trees that blocked the waterway.

In my mind, he was the admiral of the

"Siltcoos Navy," once towing me back to the dock when my motor conked out just as it was getting dark. He told me once how he took his "party boat" out once to gather up Boy Scouts from Camp Baker after howling winds came up and blew them all over the lake while on a kayaking excursion.

The memories of Bob will endure, along with his writing and drawings. Many Florence old-timers probably still have paper napkins tucked away with cartoonish images of themselves drawn by Bob, who liked to doodle on napkins at local coffee shops. Somehow, I can't get the thought out of my mind that as Bob approached St. Peter at the Pearly Gates, he asked a favor before Bob passed through.

"Make one more drawing — of me," maybe St. Peter asked. "Here's a pen and a napkin."

And of course, Bob would have been happy to oblige.

Larry Bacon
 Florence

Perish or flee

In response to Mr. Cavarno's letter of Jan. 16 ("Terrorist-Free Nation"), I hold to all I said in my previous letter.

The fearful in the audience should consider that, since 9/11, only 47 people in the United States have died as the result of terrorist violence, while in one recent year alone, there were 30,000 homicides.

The crux of my letter remains the question: If you were in a deeply war-torn nation and were faced either with perishing or fleeing, what would be your choice?

Curt Buttko
 Florence

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR POLICY

The Siuslaw News welcomes letters to the editor concerning issues affecting the Florence area and Lane County. Emailed letters are preferred. Handwritten or typed letters must be signed. All letters should be limited to about 300 words and must include the writer's full name, address and phone number for verification.

Letters are subject to editing for length, grammar and clarity. Publication of any letter is not guaranteed and depends on space available and the volume of letters received. Libelous and anonymous letters as well as poetry will not be published. All submissions become the property of Siuslaw News and will not be returned.

Write to: Editor@TheSiuslawNews.com

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