

Better Off Read returns Aug. 31

Continued from Page 1

me to have so many of my favorite movie stars, authors, comedians, musicians and more supporting it. Numerous people have asked me how I've been able to get so many big celebrities to donate. ...

And, well, it's kind of a long story.

OK, so the first thing that I need you all to understand is that just getting to call myself a "writer" is already a massive dream come true for me. I spent my whole life hoping I'd become one, but I don't think I ever believed it would actually happen. For years and years, I just wrote stuff for my friends. Jokes, poems, short stories. I'd write my heart out night after night and then pretty much just post it all on social media. Nobody was paying me to do it, but I honestly still found it incredibly rewarding. Because it made people happy. It felt like every day I'd bump into someone around Lewiston, and they'd just immediately tell me how hard they'd laughed at something I'd written, or how much they'd enjoyed one of my stories.

Before I even knew it, I'd just fallen absolutely in love with the idea of the silly stuff I wrote being sent out into the world and bringing people joy. So, I just kept at it and tried even harder. And, along the way, things I never thought possible started happening. I began gaining thousands of follow-



A scene from a past Better Off Read Summer Book Festival. (Submitted photo)

ers on Twitter – including a few famous people and comedians I idolized. I had a screencap of something I'd written go viral on Reddit and receive over a million views in less than a day. I got invited to be a guest on one of my favorite podcasts. Twice.

And, even though I may have never believed I'd actually become a real writer, it felt like all of my friends in and around Lewiston that I grew up with never doubted for a single second that I was one. So, little by little, people started reaching out and offering me money to write stuff for them. At first, it was friends just looking for help with wedding speeches or presentations for work or school. But it eventually led to a

bunch of local businesses and politicians hiring me to write stuff for their various websites, Facebook pages, newsletters, etc.

But it wasn't just getting paid to write or receiving the extra attention online that made me finally believe that I was a real writer. Those were the big things, but there were so many little things throughout the years, too. Like, when a friend told me she had read one of my stories to her 8-year-old son, and he had enjoyed it so much that he'd tried writing his own version of it afterward. Or, when I discovered my mom had been printing out all of my Facebook posts for years at her office and bringing them home so my dad could read them

at night. Or, just every single time someone I didn't even know stopped me inside Tops or outside Orange Cat to say something nice about my writing.

It was just all of that stuff and more that finally made me realize that I never needed to become a real writer. Because I'd been one all along.

Back in 2019, after a dozen-plus years of just kinda grinding it out, the priest from my former Catholic elementary school reached out to me. He'd been following my writing online for years, and he asked if I'd be interested in helping him out at the nonprofit publishing company he ran out of Stella. I accepted, and it quickly spun into a full-time job working alongside him. About one year later, he announced his plans to retire at the end of 2020. And he asked me if I wanted to take over the company.

And I just couldn't even believe it. I still can't, to be honest with you.

For so long, I really was just a goofball who liked writing stuff that made his friends happy.

But now, all these years later, as the director of a nonprofit publisher, I get to make it part of my actual job to work toward spreading the joys and benefits of reading to the local community and beyond.

So that's why I throw this festival.

It's to encourage reading, promote writing, and celebrate storytelling, because those things changed my entire life.

But, honestly, to me, this event is about so much more than just that. This festival is my way of trying to thank all of my friends and so many members of my community for always encouraging me, supporting me, and believing in me, even when I didn't believe in myself.

My dream came true, and I became a writer.

But it's only because so many people in my life were willing to read.

And so, now, to finally answer the question that we originally started with: How did I get a ton of the biggest celebrities in the entire world to donate to a small-town book festival?

Well, in all sincerity, as silly as it sounds, I just did what I've always done.

I wrote to them.

I really hope you will all consider attending the third annual Better Off Read Summer Book Festival on Saturday, Aug. 31, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Artpark State Park. Please visit our website, www.betteroffreadfestival.com, for more information. This event would never be possible without the help of my incredible assistant and friend, Marlee Jaeger.

IN THE NEWS

'Savory Summer' food contest: Is your restaurant the best?

Niagara Frontier Publications is once again looking for Western New York's top warm-weather places to eat – and their very best foodstuffs. Through Aug. 12, tell us:

- ✓ Which restaurant is "The Best Summer Dining Spot"?
- ✓ Which restaurant has "The Best Frozen Treat"?
- ✓ Which restaurant has "The Best Beef on Weck"?
- ✓ Which restaurant has "The Best Hot Dog"?
- ✓ Which restaurant has "The Best Hamburger"?
- ✓ Which restaurant has "The

Best BBQ (Ribs, Chicken, Pork)?"

✓ Which restaurant has "The Best Fries"?

Vote using the ballot inside the paper, or at www.wnypapers.com.

The "Best Savory Summer" contest is open to all restaurants, bars, street vendors and social clubs headquartered

in Western New York. The place(s) with the most votes will be prominently featured in this paper and at www.wnypapers.com.

Last year's winners included Lumberjack's Patio Grill, The Brickyard Pub & B.B.Q., De Dee's Dairy, Taylor's Tap & Grill and Louie's Hot Dogs. Will they repeat – or will new

titleholders take the crown? You decide! The added bonus: When you cast a vote for your favorite "Savory Summer" contenders, you'll be entered to

win a monthly prize from an area business. Winners will be chosen by random draw and notified by phone or email.

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Savory Summer EATS & TREATS

Voting Has Begun...

EACH MONTH, WE WILL BE GIVING AWAY A GIFT CERTIFICATE FROM AN AREA BUSINESS

From May 24 through Aug. 12, vote for your favorite Summer Eats & Treats by filling out the entry blank below or visiting www.wnypapers.com.

The winner of each category will be featured in the Grand Island PennySaver, Island Dispatch and Niagara County Tribune/Sentinel.

When you cast a vote, you'll be entered to win a monthly prize.

Winners will be selected by random draw and notified by phone or email.

Visit www.wnypapers.com/savorysummer24 for a complete set of rules & to enter online.

NO PHOTOCOPIES WILL BE ACCEPTED

CATEGORIES

1. Best Summer Dining Spot _____
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