

ARTS & CULTURE

Starting over: Wetterling collaborates with local author on debut memoir

By Brett Blocker
Editor

"When my friend Joy asked me if I wanted to write something on the theme of starting over, my immediate question to her was 'which time?'"

"The last time," she replied. "People want to know how you're doing."

Such was the opening paragraph of Patty Wetterling's personal narrative, recited before a full house in New London's Little Theatre Auditorium last weekend during the annual Story Show.

Hosted by Heather King, writer and owner of Flyleaf Book Shop downtown, the show is a live story-telling event for individuals to share personal narratives around a specific theme – in this year's case, "Starting Over."

And for Patty Wetterling, mother of Jacob Wetterling, starting over is a subject in which she is well acquainted.

As a nationally-known child safety advocate, Patty has spoken countless times before a wide range of audiences. She has even addressed

Congress, helping to pass the "Jacob Wetterling Act" in 1994 which established the National Sex Offender Registry. But, detailing the loss of her son through the lens of an intimate, first-person, written narrative would be a first for Patty. And with the help of New London co-author, Joy Baker, one that will ultimately form the basis of an upcoming memoir.

Cracking the case

A freelance marketing consultant by trade, Baker also authors the eponymous blog "joy.the.curious." on her website "joybaker.com."

Baker started the blog in 2010 with the initial goal of simply honing her writing skills, with particular interest on topics of mysteries. Her first story: chronicling the history of "a run-down ramshackle beach house in Longboat Key, Florida," which caught her eye as being decidedly out of place among all the neighboring mansions and elegant condos.

And from there: The Wetterling Case.

"I was looking for another mystery to write about, something closer to home that would be easier to research, and I started wondering about the Jacob Wetterling case. I hadn't heard anything about it in a while. And just as I was wondering about it, I saw a news story on TV about a big search going on at the Rassier farm, right where Jacob's abduction happened," Baker said. "I took it as a sign, so I started researching the story and writing about it on my blog."

She wrote about the Wetterling case for about three weeks, then decided to move on to a "happier mystery." "I bought a set of old love letters on ebay to see if I could figure out who wrote them. Eventually, I managed to track down the owners and returned the letters to their family. After that, I started being ap-

proached by random people over the internet asking me to help them find their biological birth parents, and that took me down all kinds of interesting paths as well. And I just found out I had a knack for researching and finding people."

That knack would lead her to connect with Russ Newville, whose son Danny who went missing in 2002 after leaving a house party in New London – a case she continues to cover.

Then, in January of 2013, three years after authorities dug up Dan Rassier's property in search of human remains and named him as a person of interest, "Dan contacted me to see if I'd like to hear his side of the story. He was interested in clearing his name. I wasn't sure what I was getting into to be quite honest, but it seemed clear to me that he didn't have anything to do with [Jacob's disappearance.] I realize now that was a pretty bold statement coming from just some mom from in New London... but I wanted to help. I wanted to find the truth about what happened to Jacob."

And find the truth she did... In the summer of 2013, Baker would connect with Jared Scheierl, who, in January, 1989, at age 12, was abducted and assaulted in Cold Spring by an unknown assailant, later proven to be Danny Heinrich. The incident occurred just nine months prior to Jacob's disappearance, and only 10 miles from St. Joseph.

Shortly after meeting Scheierl, Baker was scanning the digital archives of the Paynesville Press and came across an article about several cases of random assaults on young teenage boys by a masked stranger back in the mid 1980s.

"I asked Jared if he'd heard of them, and he said no. He was blown away."

The revelation also was news to the Wetterlings.

"So we brought this to Stearns County, and even the lead investigator on the case said he hadn't heard of those. So it got to be a big deal."

"Patty, Jared and I really connected in 2014, after we began looking into those Paynesville cases," Baker said. "I asked Jared if he was willing to share his story on my blog and he agreed. He had never received any answers on his attack and thought he could help the Wetterlings by getting investigators to take another hard look at his own case."

Ultimately, the lead would cause law enforcement to reopen the case against Heinrich. And although the statute of limitations had expired on the kidnapping and assault charges in Jared's case, a search warrant revealed several binders full of child pornography at Heinrich's residence. He would be arrested on related charges on October 28, 2015.

Ten months later later, as part of a plea bargain, Heinrich would admit to Jacob's abduction and murder and lead investigators to the site of his remains.

And for the most part,



Patty Wetterling and New London co-author Joy Baker pictured working on the manuscript of a new memoir on the Jacob Wetterling case as told from the parent's perspective.

Photos submitted

that's where the story ended. Mystery solved. Case closed..

Well, not quite. At least not for those in the center of it all.

Starting over

"Joy suggested I write about how I'm doing now and starting over after Jacob was found," said Patty in an email to the Lakes Area Review. "Writing the memoir with Joy's help, support, coaching and research, writing and editing has truly been transformational for me. Throughout the nearly 27 years of searching, I never stopped to reflect on anything I had done or worked on. I was constantly looking forward to 'what's next?' 'What do we need to do now?'"

"How can we keep law enforcement engaged?" "How can we keep Jacob's story in the hearts and minds of everyone so they continue helping us look for him and turning in leads?"

But as the search itself took its emotional toll on Patty and Baker, so too, has compiling the memoir. "Patty's a well-known national speaker, and has addressed audiences of thousands, and written speeches, but as far as sharing her own writing, she's never done that before," said Baker.

Patty was starting over – a rough start at that.

"It's been incredibly grueling," said Baker of the co-writing process. When we started this project in 2015, I thought I was just helping Patty get started on a memoir about her life and Jacob's legacy. But with Heinrich's arrest later that year and then, ultimately, finding Jacob, we realized we had a much bigger story to tell."

Up until Heinrich's confession, Patty always held out hope that Jacob would be found alive, Baker said, "So it

was just incredibly traumatic, and trying to write after that was impossible... We ended up putting the brakes on the whole thing for about two years... But when COVID hit, we found it was a really good time to get our act going again and really became committed to trying to get a complete manuscript."

"We wanted to tell a different story; not just Patty's life story, but also the ending to a really big crime that was part of Minnesota's history... How Patty went from this stay-at-home mom, PTA president and soccer coach, to addressing congress and changing laws on Capitol Hill."

The pair would enroll in

prayers and working together to build a better, safer world for children.

"It's not like I'm totally healed, but it is helpful to feel I have made some progress. In starting over, one seldom leaves everything they used to be behind; it is a process of sorting out what is most important in moving forward. I try to do that every day."

As for the book itself, adds Baker, "I would call it a journey of hope."

"The memoir starts out in Patty's normal, everyday world. She was a happy stay-at-home mom in 1989, with all four of her kids in school. She was 39 years old and wondering what to do with the rest of her life. She had met with a career counselor renewed her teaching license, and was ready to go back to work as a part-time math teacher. She was really looking forward to this

next phase of her life. And that was when Jacob was kidnapped."

Ahead of the book's release date, the following is an excerpt from the reading Patty prepared for last Sunday's Story Show.

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...Before anyone had ever heard of me, I was quite happy with my choices. I felt incredibly lucky to be a stay-at-home mom and raise our four children. I was going for a Guinness Book of world records on the number of field trips I attended. Jacob always begged me to go on his but as he got older, he'd totally ignore me most of the time and just hang out with his friends, but it didn't matter. I loved being asked and I loved seeing him laugh and have fun. I even got a sneak peek at a girl, who I think was his first crush. It was so sweet to witness.
Approaching my 40th birthday, I had decided that quite possibly I should be looking

"All I could do was shake my head and try to shake out the scary, dark thoughts. I curled up in bed, pulling the covers over my head stating clearly that I can't do this. It hurts too much, I'm never going to get out of this bed..."

at what I wanted to do next. Our kids were all in school, I had taken classes to renew my teaching certificate but is that what I wanted to do? Teaching junior high math is not something that everyone considers a fun option. I really enjoyed kids and teaching but what else? Become a guidance counselor? Or something new entirely? What do I want to do? Who do I want to be?

It was the fall of 1989 when I got a phone call out of the blue from my friend Kevin.

"How would you like to teach at the Prep School?" he asked me. "They're looking for a part-time geometry teacher, preferably female, who could start soon."

The interview went well and it all felt so right. It ignited a spark in me that I hadn't felt in a very long time. The more I learned about the Benedictine values of "listening with the heart," the more I knew I would fit here. I was ready for my first "starting over" in a very long time.

But, that was never to be. Within two weeks of that interview, Jerry and I were at a friend's house for dinner when we received the phone call from our neighbor telling us that Jacob had been kidnapped at gun point.

Whoever I thought I was and everything that I knew about the world was suddenly gone.

I was terrified. I was in shock. I felt I had been dropped onto an alien planet and I had no idea what anyone was talking about. Who would ever steal a child? Who would ever think of doing sexual things to children? Yet they kept telling me it was a sexually motivated crime.

We met with the Stearns County Sheriff's Investigators, the BCA, the Tri County Major Crime Unit, the St. Joe PD and the FBI. Did any of you even know there was an FBI office in St. Cloud? I didn't. We were interviewed repeatedly, we were polygraphed.

Wetterling

Continued on page 15



Patty reads an excerpt from her memoir during the annual New London Story Show at the Little Theatre Auditorium, Sunday.

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