

Professional publisher picks up life story of former Crescent City principal

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BROOKINGS — Billy Hartwick has found his next step.

In the past year, he's been stopped on the street multiple times. People know him for his very visible backpack — it's got bright green and purple shapes all over — and for the book he wrote about his “Invisible Backpack.”

A year ago, the former Crescent City teacher and principal self-published the book, a collection of rhythmical writings telling his life's story. Since then, he'd been traveling around the west, promoting it.

At the time he launched the book on Amazon, he didn't quite know what his next step would be.

But one of those people who stopped him, recognizing his backpack and gave him the inspiration to find it. After she'd stopped him and shown him that she was carrying a copy of the book, he decided to send the book to six name publishers and asked them to publish and market it professionally.

Within days, he got multiple offers — and one from the publishing house he was most excited about, Page Publishing.

Now, Hartwick's splitting his time between Brookings — a place he says feels like home — and San Diego — a place he says he loves — as the book gets published and he launches a handful of other projects.

Once it's re-published by the professional publisher in March, Hartwick hopes his life experiences will encourage readers to be confident in themselves and to stop judging people they don't know.

"When we judge people, we're hurting them," Hartwick said.

He would know — he's been judged for a long time, he said. His Tourette's syndrome, with involuntary body movements, means people have sometimes assumed he was intoxicated or otherwise disruptive.

That judgement he felt in many areas of his life made it a challenge, he said. For years, that, coupled with reactions to his Tourette's medication, left him with depression and anxiety, which culminated in numerous near-attempts to take his own life.

Those painful memories are the kinds of things Hartwick carries in his "invisible backpack." Everyone has one, filled with the pain and trauma that we collect through life, he said.

But that's the past, Hartwick said.

"Am I going to continue to be judged? No, I'm going to look at the seagulls going in and out," he said, watching a flock of gulls land in the mouth of the Chetco River.

He hopes the book will help readers recognize what's in their backpacks and try to take things out along the way.

"If you take something out of your backpack, and you don't like it, you can crawl back in," he said.

Now, he lives in Brookings with a friend, who's helping him promote the book and launch several other projects they hope will help the community. Together, alongside an artist and other team members, they're launching a not-for-profit, so the proceeds from the book are shared with organizations like the Tourette Association of America.

There are other plans in the works, too: The group plans to sell custom-designed backpacks, and Hartwick's developing an app to track and report police misconduct, inspired by times when he was profiled by police because of his mannerisms, he said.

Above all, Hartwick says he plans to keep teaching. Though he's no longer in a school as a teacher or principal, he hopes he can teach kids in the community his story and how he kept going through deeply challenging times.

He points to an important lesson he's learned through his life as an example.

"If you're alive, keep doing it," he said.

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a hotline for individuals in crisis or for those looking to help someone else. If you are a loved one are in need of help, it can be contacted by calling 1-800-273-8255.