

Former principal writes to recover

September 17, 2019



Billy Hartwick laid on the floor of his hotel room in mid-2018, a gun in his mouth. He thought he wanted his life to end.

Just over a year later, Hartwick has returned to his hometown of Crescent City. He seems a changed man. He sports longer hair, pulls his belt tighter, wears a wide smile.

And he carries with him 1,000 copies of his newly published book, “The Invisible Backpack.” An assortment of rhythmical writing, it details the joys and trials of his life, including his battle with Tourette syndrome, a neurological disorder characterized by involuntary body movements and, often, blurted obscenities.

The book is dedicated to those who have succumbed to suicide.

In May 2018, Hartwick abruptly left his position as principal of Pine Grove Elementary School in Crescent City after a mental breakdown that left him feeling hopeless.

He said he had been unable to deal with the medication he was taking for Tourette’s, especially when mixed with alcohol. Hartwick was spiraling downward, losing his zest for life and acting in ways he regrets.

After three near-suicide attempts and a stay in a psychiatric ward, he checked himself in to a mental health treatment center in New Mexico, where he said he began to heal.

Hartwick said he threw away his Tourette's medications and became a new man. "It's been a long struggle, but I'm happy as hell.

"When the gun is in your mouth three times and no one answers the door, it's up to you at that point," he said. "So, I went on the journey and changed my life."

As part of that journey, Hartwick took his Subaru and a U-Haul and drove for nine months, exploring the countryside, and writing and learning to appreciate life again.

A year later, he returned to Crescent City to make amends, he said, and finish the book he had begun many years before.

"The Invisible Backpack" came out on Amazon nearly a month ago, but Hartwick spent 27 years filling its 200 pages. The book, which has no numbered pages, flows "chronologically backwards," beginning with recent experiences and ending with his early life.

His book's title refers to Hartwick's belief that every person carries emotional baggage from hurts they have experienced. They carry a heavy burden of often-unseen trauma. He said he hopes his book inspires others to offload those "invisible backpacks."

With a sweet forward written by his mom, the book takes a deeply personal look into Hartwick's life, from his love of teaching to the toll of his bouts with suicidal ideation.

In his writings, Hartwick also explains his love of teaching and encouraging youth – a passion he said he carried through his time as principal at Mary Peacock and Pine Grove elementary schools, and a nine-year tenure at Crescent Elk Middle School in Crescent City.

Teaching will always be his passion, he said, although that's now in the form of his writings, rather than standing in a classroom. "Teaching is amazing and I love it," he said. "But I get to teach everyday now... I learn from everybody, and I hope I share something with everybody."

What now, for Hartwick? He said he doesn't know. He plans to hit the road in his Cadillac and promote his book wherever he stops. Beyond that, he can't say.