

Sequim author, educator releases 'A Work in Progress'

Still recovering from brain injury, Eekhoff offers collection of short stories, poems, memoirs

BY MICHAEL DASHIELL
Sequim Gazette

Months removed from that fateful fall all those months ago, Jon Eekhoff said he can walk and talk and smile, an outward show of how much he has recovered.

And yet sometimes the words — ones he could so readily bring to his lips as a high school teacher and author — sometimes still seem elusive. Poring over pages of a favorite book becomes a two-step process, with the audio version augmenting his reading. Instead of a litany of sentences coming forth from the ideas swirling in his mind, he has to resolve to patiently write one thought at a time.

"Most people can assume I speak pretty well (now)," Eekhoff said. "Most people see me and think, 'He looks normal.' They don't realize how challenging it is."

Eekhoff shares a bit of his journey in the foreword to his soon-to-be-released "A Work in Progress," a new anthology of stories, poems and memoirs written prior to his life-threatening fall and his ensuing battle with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).

Edited by local authors Heidi Hansen and Linda B. Myers, Eekhoff's "A Work in Progress" features a "quirky, loving collection" of short stories and poems that linked with a corresponding memory.

"The memoirs are all based on places I've traveled," Eekhoff said. "Most of them are making fun of me ... like the pants I couldn't open."

On July 15, Eekhoff hosts a "drive-by" sale and signing of "A Work in Progress."

'Drive-by' book launch for 'A Work in Progress'

What: Collection of stories, poems, memoirs from Sequim author Jon Eekhoff

When: 1-3 p.m. Wednesday, July 15

Where: Sequim High School parking lot, 601 N. Sequim Ave.

Cost (book): \$15 for signed/unsigned copies; exact cash, no credit

Between 1-3 p.m. on Wednesday, July 15, book buyers can purchase a copy of the anthology at one COVID-19-protected stop, and pick up a copy from Eekhoff himself at a second. (The book is also available at amazon.com in print or ebook format.)

Some of his favorite, typically off-beat short stories are in the collection, Eekhoff said, from "The Land Baron" (a Sequim-based story of a man who buys and hangs out at a cemetery plot) to "Friday Night Fever" (a tale of youthful awkwardness as a middle school-aged boy asking a girl to dance) and a story about the Icelandic Phallogical Museum, likely the world's only venue dedicated to "phallic specimens" that Eekhoff has visited himself.

Eekhoff had penned a trio of novels and had high hopes that a publisher would want to pick up "Summers in Paris" — his debut of famous American writers and artists playing baseball in 1920s Paris that ranked high in an Amazon contest — or his other novels, "Laid Law University," about a basketball coach's drive for wins based on "Moby Dick, and "California Stories," centered around a series of odd characters and set in California missions.

That dream fell in sharp relief a little more than two years ago, however.

"That's what I've found with a brain injury — most people quit. Me, I'm going to work."

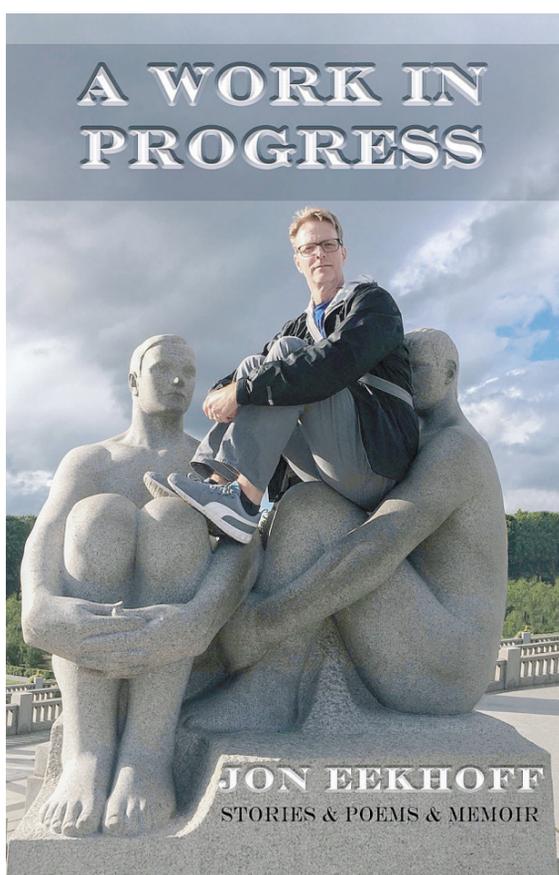
Jon Eekhoff

The world as Eekhoff and his family knew it altered in a matter of seconds on March 17, 2018, when Eekhoff, cleaning moss from the roof of his home, slipped from a ladder and fell 20 feet onto the sidewalk.

Airlifted to Harborview Medical Center, Eekhoff — a literature teacher at Sequim High School — was treated for bleeding on the left side of his brain and a broken leg, along with other aches and pains. Doctors removed portions of his skull, and the ensuing recovery spelled weeks of physical rehabilitation.

"When I started (the rehabbing), I just figured it would be like problems with my knees; I just assumed that (it) would get better over time. With a brain injury it's been a little bit different.

"One month after injury, I wouldn't be able to say much; I'd think I was saying words, but they wouldn't come out. I'd see words (and) know what they are but I couldn't



say them."

Eekhoff and his wife Cheryl, also a teacher at Sequim High, took the remainder of the year off. The community rallied to help the Eekhoffs with medical expenses, for which Jon and Cheryl were abundantly grateful.

Said Cheryl, in an August 2018 interview, "It's humbled our entire family and helped us realize what's really important. It isn't test scores, or all of those lofty goals we have to reach, but more relationships and taking care of each other."

On initial advice from a physician, Jon Eekhoff worked to come back and teach at Sequim High for the 2018-2019 school year. He drew on his basketball playing days — with an at-

titude of ignore the pain, fight through the adversity, etc. — to try to overcome the effects of TBI.

"Basically ... I lied for about a month; I could not do anything I used to do ... (and) I couldn't remember names," Eekhoff said.

He found himself frustrated he hadn't been receiving emails ... until he realized he'd been pressing a wrong computer key, and found he'd had something in the vicinity of 1,000 when he got access to his email inbox.

"My head would hurt; I'd start to have headaches (and) it'd hurt like crazy for days," he said.

A followup with a University of Washington physician put Eekhoff back on track, setting him up with twice-

a-week reading and writing exercises; he still keeps this up in the days of COVID-19 with online routines.

Eekhoff said he knows a number of people dealing with aphasia — a loss of ability to understand or speak caused by some form of brain damage — often give up because it requires work.

"That's what I've found with a brain injury — most people quit," he said. "Me, I'm going to work."

Hopefully, he said, that will come in a classroom.

"I do want to teach again. I don't know if that's ever going to happen," Eekhoff said. If the TBI limits him to some one-on-one student tutoring, he said, "I'd be perfectly happy with that."

One perspective his injury produced came as a bit of a surprise, Eekhoff said: previously he had assumed students in his classroom who performed poorly were simply not working hard enough. Now he realizes that many of them didn't understand the assignment and instead of asking for help they cover up their ignorance and turn negative in attitude.

The simplified, patient approach to learning Eekhoff had to practice in his rehabilitation could work in getting academically wayward students back on track.

"(I want to) work with kids who are really struggling," he said. "You pull them out and you say, 'Let's work on this and don't work on anything else.'"

In the meantime, Eekhoff is considering what books to self-publish. Hansen and Myers, fellow writers and critiquers, knew the Sequim educators for a couple years prior to the injury and connected with him in recent months to help him focus his writing efforts.

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