

The Journal

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NEW ULM - Eden Prairie author and former New Ulm resident Terry A. Degner made a special promise to God a long time ago that someday he would share his life story with others. He is making good on that promise with the publication of a book called "My Brave Little Man" which chronicles the story of the first eight years of his life, a trauma-filled time.

In 1950 a Duluth doctor wrote in his medical file that a four-year-old boy had been admitted to St. Mary's Hospital with a "rather severe behavior problem." "This is," the doctor noted "a broken home, and the mother-child relationship is not good."

That boy was Degner. All of his young life, he had been shuffled between living with his grandparents on their Cook, Minnesota farmstead, his birth mother who was intellectually disabled and his father who was an absent alcoholic. Finally, he stayed with a boorish relative. Then his mother dropped him and his two younger siblings off at an orphanage; then, the real problems began.

A week later, the children ran away to find their mother. Degner ended up in a straight jacket. This was the beginning of Degner's triumph over many misfortunes.

He was eventually adopted in 1953 by a Wendell, Minnesota farm couple. While he was lying on the banks of a river on his adopted parents' farm, he promised God he would tell how he survived despite his early challenges.

He was inspired by the many Charles Dickens' novels he read. When he and his sister, Jean, were adopted together (their younger brother was adopted by someone else), he could not read at all. A teacher in Wendell took the kids aside to work with them to teach them to read. When Degner was in fourth grade, he read "A Tale of Two Cities" by Dickens. Degner could relate to the street urchin character that Dickens wrote about. "I felt akin to them, so to speak," said Degner.

Degner lived in New Ulm from 1974 until about 1984. He once sang with the Concord Singers. He has three daughters, Nicole, Tara and Amber, and nine grandchildren, from his first marriage. He married his second wife, Sally, who has three children and six grandchildren.

In 2004 Degner closed down his business. He had been a scriptwriter for most of his career. For more than 23-years he produced, wrote, directed, and edited hundreds of video, sound and multi-media

productions, including children's shows, documentaries, dramas and training and promotional programs. He owned and managed his own production company for 12 of those years.

Degner also served in the Navy from 1964-1968.

He had a double-major in speech and broadcast journalism and earned a degree from the University of Minnesota.

Creating dialogue came naturally to him, but narrative and structure were a struggle. "I joined a writers' group and went to some classes at The Loft in the Twin Cities," said Degner. His writers' group included five women and him.

He took a part-time job driving school bus. "I found that the kids really inspired me," said Degner, "They gave me energy."

A priority for him was spending about three hours every day working on his writing. He worked on his laptop at a coffee shop. He wrote some fiction and short stories. "When I became comfortable with my voice and who I was and how I was writing and had had a short story published, I really got down to business," said Degner.

He did research for his book. "There was some research I couldn't do until 2006 because there was an uncle still alive ... I felt a little reluctant. He was a very good person, and I didn't want to hurt his feelings," said Degner.

By late 2008 and early 2009 he had completed his book. Five of Degner's friends reviewed the book. He also hired a professional to do the last edit and proofing.

"It was quite a journey (to write the book) and quite an enjoyable journey," said Degner. "Many people have asked me if it was a cathartic journey. Very little of it was." He said some things he had gotten into with his mother were emotional for him, but most of the emotions he had gone through and dealt with a long time ago.

His hope is that people who read his book would take home the message of not giving up despite their struggles in life.

"Children are very resilient. They will go through an awful lot to survive. It's a book about the survival of this little boy," said Degner. "I hope they also say it's a good story. It's an inside-out look at my character."

The majority of the book is about Degner looking at the world attacking him. It is about his reaction to being an abandoned child.

The book also has some historical significance in how people lived then, without plumbing and electricity. He talks about how people preserved food and butchered animals when he was living with his grandparents on their farm.

Degner also writes about the time, he spent with his parents.

His book also tells about the time he spent in a Duluth orphanage with his brother and sister.

The last part of the book is a conclusion of what was really happening behind the scenes during his early years. "Some of it is pretty shocking," said Degner. "Some of it is not only shocking, but sad. Life is about challenges. Any time you have children you are challenged."

Degner said, "maybe parents will realize that they have an important role in giving their children a solid foundation in life." He said, "children are precious. When children are abandoned, they lose their skin and they become extremely sensitive to insults and other children picking on them," said Degner.

He plans to write two additional books.

"My Brave Little Man" is available in the New Ulm Library, at Barnes & Noble in Mankato and at Sven & Ole's Books in downtown New Ulm.