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'My Brave Little Man': A survivor's story

By Tanner Kent Free Press Features Editor The Mankato Free Press Thu May 10, 2012, 10:02 AM CDT

MANKATO — Terry Degner was abandoned as a toddler, had been in a children's version of a straightjacket and sedated by authorities by age 4 then looked after his sister while they lived at the orphanage.

"The world," he would come to say some decades later, now the father and grandfather of 15 children himself, "really felt like it was on my shoulders."

Perhaps it's not surprising then that Degner admits that writing portions of his memoir "My Brave Little Man" brought him to tears.

"The times I wrote about my mom especially," said Degner, a Twin Cities resident who is holding a book-signing in Mankato on Saturday. "I would break down and cry. ... She was really a victim of numerous things."

Degner's mother was likely intellectually disabled and his father was an absent and cruel alcoholic. He was adopted out of an orphanage in second grade and was raised by a stern, but loving, rural Minnesota couple.

Plunging into the novels of Charles Dickens and his cast of misery- and woe-addled protagonists, Degner found respite. At age 12, he promised to write his own story.

"When I was adopted, I couldn't read or write," said Degner, crediting a patient second grade teacher in Duluth who took him under her wing, "and I had finished 'Tale of Two Cities' by fourth grade."

After retiring from a career in the communications industry -- including owning his own video production company -- Degner began the process of researching his past (after getting adopted, he went decades without hearing from his birth parents) and detailing its events.

The result is a meticulously crafted survivor's memoir that gives a fairly straightforward, if heart-rending, account of Degner's attempts to find his mother.

“Writing this book is the first time in my life that I've finished something and said, ‘Wow, I’m proud of myself,’” he said.