

Editorial

A true picture

I take pictures, but my daughter is a photographer. When I take a picture, I aim and shoot. The people I'm photographing look at me or at least at my camera. Sometimes they smile. They pose and arrange themselves. They present themselves as they want to be seen.

When Saranac takes a picture — and I'm not really sure how she does this — she captures people doing whatever it is they do, being whoever it is they are. She also sees things that I don't see, even if they are right in front of me.

Saranac was in town last week, so she covered the Altamont Fair for our newspaper. I have covered the fair for years and never once seen the World of Wonders, a sideshow on the midway, although it has been there for all the years I have.

Our newspaper and the other media, year in and year out, have covered the fair's beauty pageant, its carnival rides, its agricultural displays, its foods, its music, its art — but never this. Looking at Saranac's



The Enterprise — Saranac Hale Spencer

photographs made me want to find out more. Who was that hard-bitten man with a fistful of cash and a too-long cigarette ash? He had dirt under his fingernails yet fancy embroidery on the cuff of his shirt.

And what about the dwarf who was eating fire? He looked old. But what was the meaning of that expression on his face?

I decided to visit the sideshow to find out more and to write a story about it.

I stood with the rest of the gathering crowd Saturday night, listening to an old man pitch "The Strangest Show on Earth" that was going on behind the garish posters as two performers worked the bally, the stage in front. I started feeling angry.

The old man dressed in white with a red-sequined jacket was calling the fire-eating dwarf "Poobah the Pygmy." How demeaning, I thought. How wrong to make a show of someone who is born looking different than most. How exploitive.

I was gearing up to do battle in an editorial, to set the world right. But then a strange thing happened.

As most of the crowd lined up to pay two bucks for admission to the show, I tried to talk to the little man. He was hard of hearing and gestured to the man in the sequined jacket, indicating I should talk to him.

I waited until the line had disappeared. Then I started in with questions that were too aggressive — like pointing a camera and not getting a true image. I was aiming and shooting.

My subject came back with a pose, a verbal pose. "There's one great big freak show drawing 100 million a year in Orlando, Florida. They go to see a half mouse-half woman and a half mouse-half man..."

I tried to be more open, to just observe what was before me. As the midway strollers had been reeled into the World of Wonders sideshow, I found myself being invited into the home of its owner.

"Let's go someplace quiet where we can talk," said the man in the sequined jacket. The sounds of the fair pounded around us.

His small, white trailer was parked next to his show. I stepped inside and spent over an hour listening to Ward Hall's life story.

Born in Nebraska, he got his first job with the circus at 13. He learned "by pain and error" to be a fire-eater in a sideshow. He's been with sideshows ever since, and owned the World of Wonders with his partner, Chris Christ, for 40 years.

Christ was the hard-bitten man in Saranac's picture and I found out why he looked that way. Hall and Christ had both retired but went back on the road this year to repay a debt, Hall said.

"My partner don't like it. I like it," said Hall. Hall, who is 75, went on, "It will take us 25 years to get out of debt again, so, when I'm 100, I'll retire for good."

I began to think of Hall as a latter-day Mark Twain, who had himself donned a white suit and gone on the lecture circuit in his old age to pay back a debt.

But still, when I got back to the news office, I spent hours checking facts. After all, it was Hall's life-long job to talk people into believing the unbelievable.

Yes, his show had been at the Smithsonian Institute in recent years, as he'd said. And, yes, he had performed at Carnegie Hall on April 22, 1994 with well-known blues singers. The obituary of one of them described Hall as the "ringmaster" at that show.

Hall described "Circus Blues" this way: "They had four black people, very old, all of them born into poverty in the South. One of them was blind. They had picked cotton in the fields where they would sing... It kept their mind off the pain... They left home, each of them, to join a carnival or a circus."

Some progress has been made, I thought, although we need more. While minstrel shows might once have offered an escape from the confines of crushing poverty and racism, those singers who have made it now perform at Carnegie Hall, and minstrel shows are a thing of the past.

Another important fact checked out, too: The community that Hall had described, where he lives now, in Gibsonton, Florida, on the banks of the Alafia River, is real. He had told me how it was founded by Al Tomaini, a giant, and his wife, Jeanie, whom Hall described as "a half-lady, cut right through the waist."

I found poignant pieces on-line written by the Tomainis' daughter, Judy Tomaini Rock. She is proud that her grandson, Alex Zander, is following herself and her parents "into the business."

Her mother, born with Amniotic Bands Syndrome, had no legs, not even stumps, Rock writes. She describes how a neighbor asked the girl's mother what she thought when she first saw "that baby."

"The answer her mother gave," Rock writes, "was the one thing that would always be with her, and helped to shape her entire life: 'That is the cutest baby I have ever seen.'"

It was family love that sustained her through difficult years and that again brought her joy after her marriage as she raised her own children.

She met the man who would become her husband — 8 foot, 4 inch Al Tomaini — when they were both in the same sideshow. Together they built a restaurant and campground called Giant's Camp in Gibsonton.

"Others came and their people came with them," said Hall. "It became known as a sideshow town. Even the United States Post Office there built a special low desk for the little people."

Hall described the people he called "human oddities" in blunt terms: the Seal Boy, whose hands grew from his shoulders; the Ossified Woman, who was turning to stone; the Lobster Boy, whose hands were shaped like lobster claws.

As I recoiled, he described people who took pride in their work, were paid good money, and shared a sense of community in traveling and living together.

One fact that didn't check out was Hall's claim that the dwarf whose stage name is Poobah had been a munchkin in *The Wizard of Oz*. A list of even the uncredited actors in that 1939 film didn't include his name — Norbert Terhurne.

Terhurne himself told me he played a lollipop in *Oz*. What was genuine, though, was the affection between the two old friends. Hall said he met Terhurne — his friends call him Pete — when Terhurne was a young man. Hall's show came to Terhurne's hometown, Breckenridge, Minn. Terhurne wanted to join the show and so was dressed as a clown to collect tickets. The townsfolk recognized him despite the costume.

He stayed with the show and has worked for Hall ever since — for 52 years. He shares a trailer with Hall on the road and a home with him in Gibsonton, Fla. in the off season.

The "new talent" with the show are kids looking for a year or two of adventure, says Hall. They create their own oddities — one puts hooks in his eyes from which he hangs weights. They are, for the most part, college graduates who move on to other lives.

But for the old-timers, like Terhurne, the sideshow was their life — both their livelihood and their community.

In the best of all worlds, people would be accepted for who they are, not judged by how they look. But for now, in the World of Wonders, it looks like Terhurne has a life that satisfies him, and Hall is a large part of that.

"I never missed having a family," Hall told me when I asked him about it. "I have been surrounded by people I care about — the human oddities. We all became very close, like a family."

What is family after all? It is made up of the people for whom we most care and who care about us in return; family is what sustains us and defines us. Family is where we belong.

Judy Rock is proud of her sideshow heritage — the parents who nurtured her and in whose footsteps her grandson is following — just as I am proud of my daughter who takes photographs for the newspaper I edit.

"Little Pete lives in here with me," said Hall as he sat at the kitchen table of his small trailer.

I said good-bye and entered the rush and dazzle of the midway. I had a shouted conversation with Terhurne who stood on the bally. I shook his hand and left, feeling I had a truer picture.

— Melissa Hale-Spencer

Opinion

A mother's Page
Bullying isn't
always a bloody nose

By Barbara A. Page

This summer, all the buzz was about the new Harry Potter book. Harry was so excited to be going back to Hogwarts School for Wizards.

There are children who read this book who wish they were as eager as Harry to go back to school. They know there are no wizards or magic wands to take away the bully that tormented them last year.

Harry had a wand to ward off his bully. There are no wands for ordinary children.

These children are often sick on their first day of school. They are made sick by the thoughts of what the bully has in store for them this September.

There are signs up all over the Guilderland schools stating, "Bullying is not okay." Bullies don't carry signs announcing that they are bullies.

The victim of the abuse watches the bully charm the adults with a sinking heart. No one will believe the vile things that come out of the charmer's mouth when the adults aren't around.

The bully, still smiling, grabs his victim's arm and escorts him to quiet corner to tell him how stupid and ugly he is. The adults watch them, thinking how nice it is that these two boys get along so well.

The victim keeps on smiling, figuring as long as there is no physical pain involved that life is good. There are all kinds of bullying.

There is the physical bullying, which leaves bloody noses and bruises. There is verbal abuse that doesn't leave any physical evidence.

There doesn't seem to be any logical reason for this but children make fun of other children.

My twins are short. It's just a fact. I didn't give it much thought when their educational career began.

I was more worried about getting the right school supplies and their getting good grades

introduce ourselves. There was silence in the room as each of us struggled with our names.

None of us could say our names because we all stuttered. Eventually all of us said our names.

What a feeling of relief! We all knew each other's names and we also knew that there were other people in the world who stuttered. My mother asked me after the meeting how it went. I replied that it was great being in a room full of people who were just like me.

Two things are still the same 30-some odd years later. Kids are still making fun of kids with any kind of speech impediment. The other is Sister Charleen is still at Saint Rose making children, teens, and adults feel less alone about stuttering.

Bullies love people who stutter. A person who stutters won't even try to lash out verbally. If they lash out physically, they, not the bully, ends up in detention.

The bully shrugs, as he nurses his wounds, and says he never laid a hand on him. The child who was verbally abused goes back to his silence because look where defending himself got him.

Children who have speech impediments suffer in silence and alone.

Do you have a silent child?

My personal opinion, as the mother of a child who stutters, is that children who stutter are often misdiagnosed with everything from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) to autism. Sometimes undiagnosed stutters appear to jump from thought to thought when they are in fact jumping from word to word, trying to find a word that they can say.

Stuttering often leads to the label that they don't organize their thoughts or have ADHD.

They may not approach people. They may not make eye contact at all, giving the impression that they are caught up in their own private world, which is termed as autism.

Do you have a silent child?

than their physical stature. But one day, by chance, I patted one of them on the head.

He bristled and glared at me then growled something about people do that to him all the time. I noticed that their friends seemed very large, whether they were tall or well built.

I think they surrounded themselves with nice big people so the mean big people would stay away. Their shortness made them a target for bullying and they found a way around it.

Some people are teased for reasons that are not physical. I was teased all through my own grade school and high school career because I stutter. The more the teasing went on, the quieter I became in school and outside of it.

My mother told me one night, when I was 13 or 14 that we were going some place. I remember walking into a room at The College of Saint Rose and being greeted by a woman named Sister Charleen Bloom.

She brought me into a room with other teens. She asked us to

My son was diagnosed with everything that I've just mentioned. I decided he needed to be with other people who stutter. His reaction was the same as mine was 30 years ago; he wasn't alone anymore.

Call Sister Charleen Bloom at the College of Saint Rose. Her phone number is 454-5122. Sister Char and her team of speech therapy students break the silence that stuttering creates.

As a parent, you may be thinking your child only stutters sometimes or that your child may outgrow it. You may hear it sometimes. Your child hears it all the time.

If your child hasn't outgrown it by now, there's a good chance that your child needs help breaking his or her silence.

Sister and her therapists don't have a magic wand or a potion that will cure stuttering. The magic is that for an hour every Monday night your child will feel like everyone else. Peace, love, and rock and roll, and hope to hear you there at Saint Rose.