Altoona man turns tale told to kids into book

By Taylor Kuether
Leader-Telegram staff

For Jeff Harris' children, "Ginger's Journey" isn't a new children's book. It's a story their father has been telling to them since they were little.

"I used to make up stories for the kids when they were younger, and one day (my wife) just took a couple notes, and she thought it was a cute story, and she said, 'Why don't you write a book?' " said Harris, of Altoona. "And I did."

That conversation four years ago turned into the book "Ginger's Journey," which officially was released last weekend.

"Not being an author or writer by trade, it took me a long time," said Harris, an account manager at Viking Electrical Supply in Eau Claire. "It was fun, but I didn't know anything about the whole process. I just put everything down in a (Microsoft) Word document and hired an editor out of Madison to edit it right from the beginning."

That editor was Mary Ellen Schutz, owner of Gentle Editing, who pared Harris' 2,800-word work to about 1,000.

"I think it's one of those books that will get read over and over and over again," said Schutz, adding that Harris was great to work with. "(He was) very open to taking a look at the words he was crafting, how he was crafting them, the age group he was crafting them for - just a marvelous fellow to work with."

The 48-page book's target audience is ages 3 to 7.

"Each page is only a couple paragraphs, a couple illustrations; it's a pretty thin book, when all is said and done," Harris said.

But the story packs a powerful lesson. Ginger, a puppy, gets permission from her parents to walk by herself to her favorite place, Nanny's Farm. Her father instructs her to stay on the path and go straight
to the farm, but Ginger encounters several animals in need of help along her route. She's faced with a moral dilemma: either aid the ailing animals she meets along the way or obey her father's orders.

Harris' children, Kate, 9, and Dan, 7, are excited about the book. They were editors of sorts, as Harris told and retold them the story.

When he received the first proof copy of the book Friday, Harris came home from work early and gave it to his kids.

"They were looking at the story that I'd literally told them for years, seeing my name ... it was a fun thing," Harris said.

**Challenges, rewards**

In addition to polishing the prose, Harris needed an illustrator. The job went to Hannah Jeffries, a graphic artist and UW-Stout freshman who baby-sat Harris' children for several years.

"It took a great deal of time to put characters together and all that," Harris said.

Harris then sent the book to university professors, librarians and educators to see if "Ginger's Journey" would fit the market. Then came the task of finding a publisher.

"Finding a publisher was a very long challenge," Harris said, noting he received several rejection letters.

The book eventually was published by IUniverse, a Bloomington, Ind.-based self-publishing company.

Harris said he has no plans to publish another book, at least for now.

"I have some other stories I've told the kids that I'd think about doing, but right now, I'm just like, 'OK, I got this done, I'm going to enjoy this moment,'" he said.

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