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NEWS ROUNDS

Words in action: Rush writers score

by Judy Grossman

Julie Benesh began writing a few years ago at the urging of her analyst. Tim Egan pursued a career in journalism because he wanted to be the next Mike Royko.

While they started out in very different ways, both of these Rush employees have parlayed their personal angst, insights and creativity into successful part-time careers as writers.

Good habits

Benesh, assistant director of employee and organizational development, majored in English at Washington University in St. Louis but didn't think about writing in the real world until her analyst challenged her to write short stories or a novel. "He liked my stories, and for six years he kept saying I should write them down. I resisted because I didn't think it would help me," Benesh says. "Finally, I figured what the heck — I'll show him this isn't going to work."

But it *did* work. After keeping a journal on her own for a few months, she started taking writing classes and sending out stories. Her big breakthrough came last fall, when one of her stories, "Habits of Happiness," was published in the literary magazine *Tim House* alongside works by short story masters Richard Ford and Mary Gaitskill. Benesh has since had other stories



Writing in the moment: Julie Benesh of employee and organizational development takes advantage of the balmy February weather to capture a few thoughts while they're still fresh. The fruits of some of her earlier thoughts have found their way into print in the literary magazine Tim House.

published and has been a finalist in several short story contests — currently she's up for a prestigious Pushcart Prize — and she's now working on her first novel.

She also continues to hone her skills by taking writing courses. One of the courses she took last September — called "Wanna Write?" — was offered right here at Rush. Co-sponsored by Employee Wellness and LEAP, the class focused on expressing feelings through writing.

"It was all about the creative process and writing in the moment," Benesh says. "The exercises we did made us pay close attention to details — which is something that doesn't come naturally to me. I got a lot out of simply capturing those little details that go through my mind. Some day, I may be able to weave them together into a story."

This month, Benesh will make the leap from student to instructor. She and Josie Corbett of corporate compliance are teaming up to teach a class at the Newberry Library in which they will focus on one specific aspect of writing: voice. "I didn't want to do just any old writing class," Benesh says. "But voice is something I know a lot about."

Writing from life

Tim Egan also knows a thing or two about voice. A born storyteller — a trait he inherited from his grandfather — he originally intended to make his living in print, graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Superior with dreams of becoming a syndicated columnist. But after four years plugging away at Chicago's *Suburban Life* newspapers — and winning numerous awards — he realized it took more than just talent to succeed in journalism and decided to take a different career path.

Now he is the manager for business development at Rush Corporate Health, and writing is something he does on the side. He writes the newsletter for the Chicago Irish Brotherhood, a charitable group, and has done freelance work for the American Association of Clinical Pathologists. He's also published essays and short stories.

And last July, he published his first novel, *Down Tick*, which he calls "a humor-laced escapade through the world of high finance in Chicago." It's based on a less-than-enjoyable stint working in the stock market. "I decided that whether I made a million dollars or nothing, I was going to write a book about this experience and turn a negative into a positive," Egan says. "It beat going to therapy."

He's now at work on his second book, in which he explores his own Irish heritage. "It's about Irish history and Chicago history in the 1920s," he says. "There was a civil war going on in Ireland, and here it was the 'roaring '20s.' I decided to combine those two pieces of history into one story."

Asked if he has any advice for other aspiring Rush writers, Egan offers this pearl of wisdom: "Just keep writing. As long as it's something you enjoy, keep doing it and don't be discouraged. I've got drawers full of rejection letters, but all it takes is one person who likes your work." ■

Read Benesh's "Habits of Happiness" at www.tinhouse.com/Back_Issues/Issue_9/benesh.html. Egan will discuss his novel, *Down Tick*, with the Rush Book Group on March 21. See calendar on p. 7.