

*Rick Niece*

Coming home to DeGraff, Ohio, Rick Niece shares life's best lessons, lessons learned from an unlikely teacher.



## **Fanfare for a Hometown Series - Book 1**

### ***Side-Yard Superhero: Life Lessons from An Unlikely Teacher***

*Growing up in small-town DeGraff, Ohio, teaches Dr. Rick Niece that life's best moments are the innocent ones, especially when seen through the eyes of his hero, Bernie Jones. Born with cerebral palsy, Bernie teaches Rickie that the indomitable human spirit can never be confined.*

### **About the Book**

Although life's journey takes him far from his childhood home, Dr. Niece never forgets the people he meets and the lessons he learns as a young man growing up in picturesque DeGraff, Ohio, population 900. A small-town newspaper boy who becomes a lifelong educator, Rick is deeply touched by the endearing residents of DeGraff who shaped his youth — especially a boy named Bernie Jones. With severe cerebral palsy and confined to a wheelchair, Bernie becomes Rickie's friend, inspiration, and superhero, opening a world of compassion, trust, and adventure to them both.

When he leaves DeGraff to attend Ohio State University, Rick promises Bernie that he will visit him again. Unfortunately, when Bernie's parents pass away, Bernie disappears, too, taken in by a distant relative. Forty years later, Rick learns that his boyhood friend is living in a nursing home. Returning to Ohio, he visits the never-to-be-forgotten Bernie Jones of a childhood long past and a promise finally kept.

**Publisher:** Hometown Fanfare Publishing, LLC

**Price:** \$15.95 US (paperback)

**Size:** 6" x 9"

**Pages:** 214

**ISBN (paperback):** 978-0-9984082-0-0

**eISBN:** 978-0-9984082-1-7

**Distributors:** Midpoint Trade Books, Ingram, and Baker & Taylor

### **A Buck a Book!**

One dollar for every copy of *Side-Yard Superhero* sold will go directly to United Cerebral Palsy. More information about United Cerebral Palsy is available at [www.ucp.org](http://www.ucp.org).

## Honors

USA Regional Excellence Book Awards - **Grand Prize Non-Fiction Midwest**

University of Arkansas at Morrilton - **One Book One Community Reading Selection**

Kent State University at Tuscarawas - **One Book One Community Reading Selection**

Readers' Favorites - **Silver Award, Non-Fiction Memoir**

Dan Poynter's Global eBook Award - **Bronze**

Conversations Book Club - **Top 12 Choice**

Cyrus Webb's - **"25 Books Every Man Should Read"**

The Great Southeast Book Festival - **Biography / Autobiography Honorable Mention**

Reader Views Regional Great Lakes - **Reviewers Choice Award Winner New York Book Festival- Honorable Mention**

Eric Hoffer Award - **Finalist**

The Great Northwest Book Festival - **Biography/Autobiography Honorable Mention**

National Indie Excellence Award - **Regional Non-Fiction Finalist**

The Great Southwest Book Festival - **Biography/Autobiography Honorable Mention**

New Mexico-Arizona Book Award - **Biography Finalist**

Royal Dragonfly Book Award - **Newbie Non-Fiction Honorable Mention**

Royal Dragonfly Book Award - **Biography/Memoir Honorable Mention**

## Reviews

**9.5 out of 10**

**Title:** *Side-Yard Superhero*

**Author:** Rick Niece

**Genre:** Nonfiction/Memoir

**Audience:** Adult

**Word Count:** 50,000

**Assessment:**

**Plot:** Niece covers a lot of ground here, but all of it vital to his story. Meticulously plotted, the

memoir will have readers turning pages to find out more about Bernie Jones and the small town of DeGraff.

**Prose:** Told in the first person, Niece excels at dialogue and gives each character a unique voice. Many characters troop through the pages—and many of them appear only once or twice—but Niece infuses each of them with personality and a distinct voice.

**Originality:** There are many memoirs centered around individuals who are sick or have a physical disability, but what sets Niece's work apart is the way he focuses on Bernie as a person, not as a person with cerebral palsy.

**Character Development:** Niece adeptly describes his hometown and all its residents with heart and sensitivity, and his characterization of Bernie is exceptionally well done.

**Score:**

**Plot/Idea:** 9

**Originality:** 10

**Prose:** 10

**Character/Execution:** 9

**Overall:** 9.50

— Critic, The BookLife Prize

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**"Could not put it down!"**

Just finished reading "*Side-Yard Superhero*". Oh, my what an emotional roller coaster ride. I could not put it down. It usually takes 2-3 weeks for me to finish a book...2 days and I was done. My favorite part was when the neighbor asked "if I call your mom would she say what you are doing is ok?" My Mom's friends have asked me the same question when I was younger!

— Alan B.

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"*Side-Yard Superhero* was such an inspiration to my students that they desired to visit a local nursing care facility. I am not able to put into words the emotional, life-changing experience we all had together as we experienced a little patch of Heaven. Special thanks to Rick Niece for touching the lives of so many!"

— Janelle Wollschlager, teacher, Grant-Deuel School, Reville, South Dakota

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**Finalist Win for *Side-Yard Superhero***

*Side-Yard Superhero* is a finalist in Non-Fiction Memoir for Readers' Favorite! From Readers' Favorite:

"If you were chosen as a finalist then congratulations! It was an extremely competitive year and your selection was hard earned."

— Debra Gaynor, Founder, Readers' Favorite

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### **First Place Win for *Side-Yard Superhero***

ReaderViews awarded the Great Lakes Regional First Place Win to *Side-Yard Superhero*.

"...I highly recommend "*Side-Yard Superhero: Life Lessons from an Unlikely Teacher*" by Rick D. Niece, Ph.D., to anyone looking for a "feel-good" story about a young boy and his life experiences growing up in a small town. I have gained a new appreciation for the small things in my own life after reading this inspiring story. My hope is to better recognize the gifts in my life and treasure the experiences like Bernie and Dr. Niece did growing up. Thank you for sharing your story, Dr. Niece!"

— Reviewed by Christine Watson for Reader Views

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**\*\*\*\*\* "*Side-Yard Superhero*" is going on my 'keeper' bookshelf**

Superheroes come in many sizes and shapes. For Rick Niece, his hero came confined in a wheelchair. "*Side-Yard Superhero*" is the coming-of-age tale of the friendship that emerged between a nine-year-old, small town paper boy and the most special of the 72 customers on his route, Bernie Jones. Bernie, crippled with cerebral palsy at birth, sits in the side yard of his home each day (weather permitting) waiting for the newspaper. For nine years, six days a week, Rick Niece stops and reads Dick Tracy to his special customer before refolding the paper and delivering it to Bernie, placing it gently in his lap. The week before he leaves their small town of Degraff, Ohio, for "the big city" and college, Rick promises his now close friend Bernie that he'll be back to visit. But "life happens". Six years later, Rick goes looking for Bernie. But Bernie's house has been torn down, Bernie is gone, and no one in Degraff knows where. "*Side-Yard Superhero*" follows Rick Niece's search for Bernie, culminating in a surprising and sobering reconnection and reunion.

Rick Niece has written a beautiful story beautifully. A few times I laughed out loud. Several times I stopped, closed the book and just remembered - remembered my own growing up. Almost as a 'by the way', "*Side-Yard Superhero*" is sprinkled with poems, also written by Rick Niece, poems that are light yet thoughtful, poems with lines such as "And even if you are both no longer what you were, you are each as you should be remembered." That verse is going into my next love letter to my husband. And "**Side-Yard Superhero**" is going on my 'keeper' bookshelf.

— Jane Allen Petrick, Readers' Favorite Book Reviews

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**Thank you for sharing your story, Dr. Niece!**

*Side-Yard Superhero: Life Lessons from an Unlikely Teacher* by Rick D. Niece, Ph.D., is a charming story about the small town of DeGraff, Ohio and its interesting citizens. Bernie Jones is an inspiration in the story, and those who read this story will not help but be envious of anyone who had the blessing of knowing this young man.

After reading Dr. Niece's book, *The Band Plays On*, I knew this one would be a treasure, and I was correct. In both books, I was drawn in to the welcoming and cozy community of DeGraff, Ohio. Growing up all over the United States, I cannot relate with these stories of growing up in one small town, but I can appreciate the simple joy that comes from having a community that feels like home. Dr. Niece not only brings DeGraff to life but has given me the desire to visit the small town in Ohio and experience the community for myself.

The best part of the story is Bernie Jones, the boy who struggled with cerebral palsy. Bernie had a giant smile and a matching heart, gifts he freely shared with anyone willing to accept them. Dr. Niece put words on each page that allowed me to feel Bernie's genuine love of life and new experiences. His unconditional love of others was apparent, and those who were lucky enough to know him were blessed beyond measure. What is also impressive is how Dr. Niece recognized his special gift of friendship with Bernie at his young age.

I highly recommend *Side-Yard Superhero: Life Lessons from an Unlikely Teacher* by Rick D. Niece, Ph.D., to anyone looking for a "feel-good" story about a young boy and his life experiences growing up in a small town. I have gained a new appreciation for the small things in my own life after reading this inspiring story. My hope is to better recognize the gifts in my life and treasure the experiences like Bernie and Dr. Niece did growing up. Thank you for sharing your story, Dr. Niece!

— Christine Watson, Blog Critics Book Review

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### Top books of the year...

I have the pleasure of reading over 200 books a year, and while 2012 gave birth to some great titles, *SIDE-YARD SUPERHERO* became a favorite of mine from the moment I began devouring it. It's not simply a look at some amazing individuals. It's a look at what all of us can be, and that is what made it one of the top books of the year for me. Simply a joy to read and discuss, and I know others will feel the same way.

— Cyrus Webb, Conversations Book Club

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### Rick Niece's *SIDE-YARD SUPERHERO* Shows That We All Matter

Have you ever felt as though you have nothing to contribute to the world around you? Ever been told what you can't do as opposed to the endless possibilities at your disposal? I think we all know what it feels like to be doubted or to even feel helpless ourselves. The real challenge will be whether we accept those limitations or if we do our best each and every day to exceed them.

In *SIDE-YARD SUPERHERO* by Rick Niece, we are able to see how he not only learned that lesson but where it came from: an "unlikely teacher" named Bernie Jones. The book, which is the first of a series called *FANFARE FOR A HOMETOWN*, chronicles Rick's early years especially along his paper route in his small town. What we also find, though, is his friendship with Bernie was important not only to his understanding of life and what comes with it but what is possible for us all.

There are so many great stories in this book, but I want to definitely focus on two that stood out to

me. One was Bernie's love of Superman and what that meant in relationship to his friendship with Rick. Regardless of what he was going through and the challenges he faced, Bernie was still able to see himself as Superman. That should say a lot to us about how we can look at the obstacles that we face. We are bigger than anything that can come our way. It all begins with our attitude.

Directly regarding Rick there was a conversation that he had on the last day of his paper route which really resonated with him. The Harshbargers were one of the families that he delivered to and their place was on a hill. Mrs. Harshbarger told Rick that her husband thought for sure Rick would quit delivering to them because of where they were. She, however, thought differently about him. "I told Mr. Harshbarger you'd make it, that you would not quit on us. And I was right. Even now you aren't really quitting. You are simply setting this hill aside for bigger ones to climb." What a powerful declaration!

All of us should look at life's experiences as "hills" for us to climb. We can run from them, so it is best to face them and allow them to prepare us for the next one that will be ahead. Rick learned this lesson, and he allowed it to take him forward in life. He never forgot Bernie or those who helped mold him into the person he had become, and that is what we can all learn from this story.

No matter where you're from or who you have become, Rick Niece's *SIDE-YARD SUPERHERO* shows that we all matter.

— **Cyrus Webb, Conversations Book Club**

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### **A Hometown Hero!**

Some writers are natural born story tellers, and Rick Niece is one of those people. No, he doesn't tell graphic tales of horror or suspense, and he doesn't write romance novels. Niece's nonfiction books are simple stories about good people living small town lives, yet each memory hides universal truths about human nature and the lasting impact of those who help us grow...

With a third book in the works, Niece's career as a writer is "looking snappy and cool". In September 2012 Niece will be honored in DeGraff as Grand Marshall of a parade and weekend festival, The DeGraff Country Fair, in his honor.

— **Connie Las Schneider, ABOUT...the River Valley Magazine**

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One of the most relaxing books I've read to review lately would be *Side-Yard Superhero: Life Lessons From an Unlikely Teacher* written by DeGraff, Ohio native, Rick Niece, Ph.D. Rick had promised his wife he'd write down the true stories he had told her about his past growing up in small town DeGraff, Ohio and that promise has been published in "*Side-Yard Superhero*".

Rick's real life "star" in *Side-Yard Superhero* is Bernie, a wheel-chair bound young man with cerebral palsy. The setting is mid 1900's, small-town...Mayberry-like. Rick takes you on his paper route and around town on his adventures with Bernie and Lady. This was a book I took my time reading. It was a refreshing escape into by-gone years.

I accepted to do this review because it was about Ohio and I love the people of Ohio. It's not the kind of book I usually review but I really really enjoyed this book and I know many of you will too!

"*Side-Yard Superhero*" is book one in the series Fanfare for a Hometown about his growing up years in DeGraff. You can visit Rick's website: [RickNieceBooks.com](http://RickNieceBooks.com)

## — Tracy, Hall of Fame Moms

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### "Rick Niece set the bar in my head pretty high..."

"*The Band Plays On*" is a book by Rick D. Niece, Ph.D., and author of "*Side Yard Superhero*". "*Side Yard Superhero*" was an excellent book, it was a chronicle of Rick's childhood, centered around a very special friend. But that is another book, and this review is about "*The Band Plays On*", another book by Dr. Niece.

I had high expectations of this book when I started reading it. Rick Niece set the bar in my head pretty high when I read "*Side Yard Superhero*". His razor-sharp and detailed memory details another book filled with imagery and memories. An ever-so-slight hint of humor lies within each page, making this book an enjoyable read.

The story is warm and touching. The heartfelt words were obviously carefully crafted to say what Rick Niece wants the world to hear and know. It is devotion that drives Mr. Niece, and the world needs more devoted people just like him. Rick's father was an excellent man, and Rick explains why in a detailed and chronological series of events.

This is a great book with an enjoyable read. Rick Niece has the ability to draw in readers thanks to his illustrious writing styles, this book will be no exception as he takes us back to Ohio again.

## — Amber, DragonFly Sweetnest

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### "...this is the book for you!"

Like Rick D. Niece's other book, *Side- Yard Superhero*, *The Band Plays On: Going Home for a Music Man's Encore* is full of his memories of growing up in small town DeGraff, Ohio. However, the one thing that differentiates the two is the central theme of the memories themselves. While *Side-Yard Superhero* was about his friend Bernie Jones, with a little bit of his paper route thrown in for good measure, *The Band Plays On* focuses on the town itself, growing up there, and all of the teachers and other people who helped shape Niece's life.

*The Band Plays On* starts with a phone call from a friend (and former classmate) wanting to start an alumni band. Niece's father, Lewis, served for many years as the high school band director, and to honor him, Lewie's Alumni Band is formed. Niece then dives right into his childhood (and teenage) memories, going on to describe many of his former teachers, the local shops that he frequented, and remembrances of learning (and re-learning for the alumni band) to play the baritone horn. Each shop has a specific memory attached to it, as does each teacher, and the details described as extremely specific. It's amazing what gets remembered and what gets forgotten as the years go by!

If you've ever played in a school band, love small town life or enjoy reading about what life looks like through someone else's eyes (or all three) then this is the book for you. One dollar from each

purchase goes to The Mr. Holland's Opus Foundation. For more information or to purchase either of Rick D. Niece's books, please go to the Five Star Publications Website.

## — Amanda Hevener, *The Random Thoughts of Crazy Mandy*

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### "Takes readers down another lovely memory lane."

Several months ago, I read and reviewed *Side-Yard Superhero*, the first book in the *Fanfare for a Hometown* series by Rick D. Niece, Ph.D. If you remember that review, you know that I loved the chapter-by-chapter peek into DeGraff, Ohio--Dr. Niece's small-town, boyhood community. *Side-Yard Superhero* was one of those books that transported me to another place and time—yet made me feel comfortable and at home. I enjoyed reading about the characters and places of Niece's hometown so much, that I readily accepted the opportunity to review *The Band Plays On*, the second book in the *Fanfare for a Hometown* series. What was my review of *The Band Plays On*?

*The Band Plays On* takes readers down another lovely memory lane. *The Band Plays On: Going Home for a Music Man's Encore* returns readers to Central Ohio's DeGraff for a special music alumni reunion honoring Rick Niece's father—the retired band director from the local DeGraff school district. The reunion opens the door to a new volume of characters and memories from Niece's past in 1950's era DeGraff, Ohio—a small, rural area in the West/Central part of the state. Niece returned to DeGraff and its residents—and he refurbished his old baritone and marching band chops as his thoughts drifted back to places past. Niece's fond memories of the family and personal values of small town America reflect strongly in his words and the poetry dotting the book's chapters.

*The Band Plays On* is another terrific auto mythography. As with *Side-Yard Superhero*, *The Band Plays On* is an "auto mythography", Niece's term which he defines as "a work of nonfiction that looks reflectively at what we think we remember and how we think we remember it; an iridescent memory based upon truth and fact." Having grown up in a small town, much like DeGraff, Niece's books take me home. I was not a small-town fan as a girl—and still prefer the convenience and atmosphere of the city to the rural communities "back home". Today I am able to reflect fondly on the many friends and neighbors that helped form the person I am today—and I am sure that my memories combine a lot of "how I remember things" with the factual places and faces. It is gratifying to look back and smile with Rick Niece in *his Fanfare for a Hometown* series at his hometown—and reflect on my own.

*The Band Plays On* is an easy, enjoyable read—that you will not want to end. I am a mother of three—with a long to-do list and a short attention span. I love short stories and books that offer stand-alone style chapters and little segments. *The Band Plays On* is perfect for me as the reader explores the various areas of DeGraff, meeting its residents in small memorable bursts. While some of the characters—and places—were introduced in the first book of the three-book series — *The Band Plays On* could certainly be read and understood alone. Reading *the Band Plays On* made me want to reread *Side-Yard Superhero* as I learned a few more details about characters introduced in the first volume of the series! It also drew my anticipation for the third book!

A book with a purpose--and a cause. *The Band Plays On* was an easily flowing narrative that paid tribute to small town influences--and the various educators, formal and informal, that formed the community. Music education figured strongly into Rick Niece's family life and upbringing. In appreciation of the rewards of music education, he has pledged a dollar donation from every copy



of *The Band Plays On* sold for the Mr. Holland's Opus Foundation. Music education is so important to me—and disappears in many school districts as budget constraints tighten. This is a fantastic cause that fits perfectly with the values and educational needs of many small towns—in Ohio and beyond.

Final thoughts on *The Band Played On*. I would greatly encourage you to read this book (even if you did not play a musical instrument or grow up in a small town). I look forward to the final book in the *Fanfare for a Hometown* series—and to future works from Dr. Niece.

— **Angela Thompson, A Mama's Corner of the World**

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### **Annual Writer's Digest Book Awards**

Of the 25 books that I read for this year's competition, this was one of the best. What I liked most about *Side-Yard Superhero* is that it is exactly what it sets out to be: an autobiographical coming-of-age story. In reviewing these books, I often find that one aspect of the book, or another, supports the author's purpose, but other aspects do not. Everything about this book supports the author's purpose.

...I see this is the first volume of a three-part autobiography; readers will look forward to more!

— **Judge 30, Writer's Digest Book Awards**

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"You will laugh, you will cry, you will remember, and you will thank Rick Niece for re-opening a window to your childhood."

— **E. Kearney Dietz, President Emeritus, Arkansas Independent Colleges and Universities**

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*Side-Yard Superhero* encourages us to reconnect with the unique faces and places that make childhood worth remembering."

— **Seve Houchin, Managing Partner, International Leadership Associates (and Dr. Niece's boyhood friend)**

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Anyone who has had the good fortune to grow up in a small town will thoroughly enjoy *Side-Yard Superhero* by Rick D. Niece, PhD (\$15.95, Five Star Publications, softcover). In this case it is DeGraff, Ohio and this is a memoir of his life as a newspaper boy whose route included Bernie Jones, confined to a wheelchair with severe cerebral palsy, but with an indomitable spirit that inspired Rick who went on to become an educator, starting as a school teacher and ultimately becoming a university professor, provost, and president of the University of the Ozarks. Everyone's childhood memories are specific to themselves, but the author's memories have universality to them that evoke gentler times and better values than are found in present times. For Rick, his customers on that route were some of his best teachers, but especially Bernie. It's a heartwarming memoir of a time and place I hope will not be lost to the matrix of digital connections to the world outside.

**"I heartily recommend it."**

Some time ago I reviewed Dr. Rick Niece's book *"Side-Yard Superhero"* and gave it high marks. He's back with *The Band Plays On: Going Home for a Music Man's Encore* (\$15.95, Five Star Publications, softcover). It is an autobiography of sorts as the author visits his childhood growing up in DeGraff, Ohio, population 900, and tells the story of the legacy of his father, Lewis Niece who for years was the director of the DeGraff High School's marching band, teaching not just music, but lasting lessons of character. Rick D. Niece, PhD, has been a lifelong educator and, since 1997, he and his wife, Sheree have served as president and first lady of the University of the Ozarks in Clarksville, Arkansas. It is a celebration of America's heartland, of friendship, community, built around the story of an encore performance by "Lewie's Alumni Band." I heartily recommend it.

— Alan Caruba, BookViews.com

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**I am so thankful that this audiobook was brought to my attention because it is a much needed reminder**

I am so thankful that this audiobook was brought to my attention because it is a much-needed reminder of the important things in life. Niece takes us back to a peaceful time, one where children didn't need to fear strangers, communities worked together for the greater good and neighbors helped one another without needing to be asked. It's rather sad how as the story progressed, fear gripped my heart that something terrible would befall Rick when he was out on his own after dark or was invited into a house by adults he didn't know too well, etc. But that just speaks to how different things were back then compared to the every-man-out-for-himself mentality that runs rampant in society today. Niece brings this slice of small-town Americana to life in such vivid detail that you simply refuse to leave at the end.

Niece's fondness for DeGraff and its residents warms your heart, but it's his friendship with Bernie that really does you in. Although Niece often references Bernie's handicap — usually as an obstacle to having a carefree adventure — you don't think of Bernie as an invalid. Instead, you see him for the person he is, a courageous, friendly and determined guy who just happens to be confined to a wheelchair. Not once do you sense Niece befriends Bernie out of guilt or that Niece is embarrassed to be seen with him. They truly enjoy each other's company, and there are no words to express how touching it is to witness.

Actor and award-winning author Alex Cord does a phenomenal job narrating this book. His Midwestern drawl is rugged and unrefined which lends credibility to his role. It's like you're listening to a beloved older relative recall different things from his past. He chuckles over childhood faux-pas, pauses when caught up in emotion and looks for lessons learned in hindsight. It's not so much a narration, but a conversation in which he wishes to impart some wisdom he's learned along the way.

Although I'm not a huge fan of audiobooks, I cannot recommend *"Side-Yard Superhero"* highly enough. It is a feel-good story that will restore your faith in the goodness of people. Whether you opt to read or listen to it (and I strongly urge you to choose the audio version since one dollar from

every audiobook sold will go directly to support United Cerebral Palsy) you'll learn to fully appreciate where you are in every moment.

— **Reading for Pleasure**

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**"You need to go out and pick it up!"**

*Side-Yard Superhero, Life Lessons from an Unlikely Teacher* by Rick D. Niece, Ph.D. If you haven't heard of this book, you need to go out and pick it up! I currently live in Ohio, so it's really nice to read about kids growing up while mentioning landmarks and areas that I am familiar with as well. While reading this, I took my time and enjoyed each adventure, each lesson learned, and each heart-breaking moment that two young boys encountered. This book truly is life lessons from an unlikely teacher, just as the title states. A young child named Rick Niece is curiously drawn to a young boy, Bernie, with cerebral palsy. This curiosity soon turns into a lifelong friendship, with endless adventures and learning. This book is one to relax and enjoy...you will laugh, you will cry, and you will love growing up with Rickie and Bernie. This book truly is a wonderful tribute to Bernie and the struggles children with cerebral palsy must overcome that many people take advantage of. A great read for everyone of all ages to enjoy.

— **Sarah Farris, SARMAMA5**

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"I read *Side-Yard Superhero* from cover-to-cover with a smile on my face and a tear in my eye while chuckles intermittently interrupted the two. Niece penned his memories into a *Tuesdays with Morrie* for kids and adults alike. This is one of those books you'll want to give to your dad and your daughter when you're done relishing in its precious axioms. This memoir is so intrinsically human; I could almost hear it breathing."

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— **Lisa Cerasoli, Award-Winning Author of *as Nora Jo Fades Away* and Filmmaker**

"Rick Niece vividly describes the charms of small-town America, where neighborly friendships develop character, attitude and our responsibility to others."

— **Dr. David L. Warren, President, National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities**