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Inspiration through laughter

I told my daughter Erin to kiss the plush toy llama I held. She replied, "I don't want to kiss a llama!" Thus was born a poem and book that has brought laughter to thousands of families. I am always amazed at the inspiration that comes my way from people, animals, dreams and nature. We need to learn to laugh again after this year of pandemic. I hope to help!

How I became a poet and storyteller

Words have always been fun for me! I remember making people groan when I made puns as a boy. In 2002 when I began writing poems on a regular basis, I found that a punch line is much more fun when paired with rhyme. The outcome is often surprising to me, and that surprise translates to others as well. And when the poems are of a more serious nature, I find that rhythm and rhyme combined can put words together that lead to an element of truth that might otherwise have been missed. Most of the time I present my poems orally, so talks and book signings have been a regular part of my schedule. If there's anything I enjoy as much as writing a poem, it is watching the wonder on the faces of children and adults when I get to tell it to them. I began going to Branson in 2003 and the St. Louis Zoo in 2004. Then, in 2006, I started book signing at Grant's Farm. There I became a weekend regular for storytelling and absolutely loved it! I have been a part of the daily program at the farm since 2016 when I retired from full-time employment elsewhere.

. . . and then an illustrator!

Someone had to illustrate my children's book *I Don't Want to Kiss a Llama!* and, being a poet, I couldn't afford anyone else but me! I love matching drawings or photographs with poems because it helps me reach the audience in a whole new way. With the pandemic and the lack of a live

audience, I have posted some of the pictures and photographs to my website, to my Facebook account, and to other social media sites.

Not just children's books!

I first knew I had discovered something special when the teenage boys in my Scout troop laughed at and looked forward to my original "Scoutmaster Minutes", i.e., my poems, in 2002. After all, how many teenage boys like poetry? I also remember reciting "Chubby Dinosaur" poems to two brothers, a high school and a college student, at the Storybook Sweets store at Grant's Farm. We talked so long that they were late to meet their parents elsewhere in the park! And I have shared my stories with civic groups, retirees, and with schools in urban, rural and suburban areas. It's fun to make people laugh!

Books are a big family!

I am author of 19 children's and poetry books with a circulation somewhere upwards of 60,000. (I stopped counting after 40,000.) About a dozen of those are currently available at www.idontwanttokissallama.com/shop. I am the copyright owner of all my writings and write almost every day, pretty much whenever the words want to come and play. I've performed some of my poems so many times that my muscles remember what to do, what to say, and when to turn pages! I am a better person because of the power of poetry. With it, I hope to help others find their own unique voices.

Recognition

For me, the biggest recognition has always been the light in the eyes of children and their loved ones as they hear and laugh with a story. There was the legally blind boy who put his face to the pages of *Dale the Uniclyde* as I recited it by memory and as his mother watched and cried with happiness. And there was the nine-year-old shy and reluctant reader who laughed and learned with her teacher as they read *I Don't Want to Kiss a Llama!* over and over again. She recited it with me to one class, then by herself in front of another one! Life changed that day for her, and also for me. I often use puppets with the books to connect with the children. It sometimes helps with the adults, too!

Grant's Farm has invited me back for storytelling and book signings every year since I started in 2006 although the season was cancelled last year due to the pandemic. I have greeted thousands of guests and sent my books all around Missouri, the United States, and the world. I consider it a great recognition that Grant's Farm thinks enough of me to find me a place there every year!

It was experiences like these that caught the attention of the mayor of Byrnes Mill here in Jefferson County. In 2011, I was awarded the title of *poet laureate* of Byrnes Mill, Missouri. I wrote a poem for the new playground and it was inscribed on a plaque that stands there to this day. It is a small thing in a big world and yet through this I learned that such recognition helps people see their own good qualities.

For example, in *The Wizard of Oz*, the Cowardly Lion is brave long before he receives his medal. But the recognition he receives causes HIM to realize that he is brave. He literally becomes bigger as he puffs up his chest! I hope I would grow in similar fashion as Missouri's *poet laureate* and give our children and their families reason to smile and laugh again! Actually, I know I would. I just don't know the exact manifestations of that growth. But I'd love to find out!

Previous Work Experience

As a community organizer, sales representative and territory manager for the Boy Scouts of America for 32 years, I consistently helped the program grow wherever I was called to serve. Accomplishments that still make me smile include the acquisition of land for a camp in Laredo, TX and funding of minority outreach programs for councils in both Corpus Christi and Wichita Falls, TX. Those made a positive difference that continues to this very day. We moved to Byrnes Mill in 2000 and I retired here in 2016.

Formal Education

Valedictorian*, Isidore Newman High School, New Orleans, LA in 1975
B.S. in Chemical Engineering, University of Tulsa in 1979 with 4.0 GPA*
M.S. in Human Services, Murray State University in 1996 with 4.0 GPA*

*I followed well the path laid out for me until I found my own.

Publicly Accessible Works

Many of my poems are available for free on my website at www.idontwanttokissallama.com including video presentations on the “Pig and Poet” page and illustrated poems in the “Portfolio” section. Links to my social media sites can also be found on the website.

Work samples follow below and on the next ten pages.

(All of the poems that follow have been published by Red Mountain Creations in one of the books now available on my website, www.idontwanttokissallama.com/shop. Each has been performed, and some of them written, at Grant’s Farm, at the St. Louis Zoo, in schools and at various clubs and organizations.)

I DON’T WANT TO KISS A LLAMA!

**I don’t want to kiss a llama
Though they’re cute I must admit
But when they pucker up
It’s ’cause they’re going to spit!
I don’t want to kiss a giraffe!
They stand much too tall, you see.
I’d have to stand on tiptoes
Just to kiss one on the knee!
I’d never kiss an elephant!
Its skin is much too tough.
Besides, its trunk gets in the way
And my lips aren’t long enough!
I wouldn’t kiss a penguin
On its orange-colored beak!
I’m afraid it might take out an eye
When it pecked me on the cheek!
BUT . . . I would kiss a llama,
Penguin, or giraffe!
I’d even kiss an elephant
If it would make you laugh.
Yes, I would give a kiss
To each animal at the zoo
But I’d rather save them all
And give every one to you!**

**Half of my book sales carry this title which makes it my personal best seller!
I am always happy to recite it. Always!**

TREED OFF

I don't think she'd ever been outside.
It's a place she never goes,
But there she was high in a tree!
How she got there no one knows.
That cat was wailing wildly!
It broke my heart to hear her cry.
Before I called the firemen
I thought I'd give it one good try.
I went and got a ladder,
Set it up against the tree,
Whispered softly to the cat,
"Don't worry now, it's me."
But the cat who'd warmed my lap
One many a winter's night
Somehow saw a snarling bear
And clawed at me in fright!
I drew my hand back quickly
But it was badly tattered!
I lost my balance, grabbed a branch,
For I was now "unladdered".
And now just like the frightened cat
I could not get down.
The phone was in the house
And 'twas an hour's drive from town.
When the firemen finally came
The cat was calm and mellow,
But I was bleeding pretty bad
And my underwear was yellow!
Yes, I, too, can laugh about it now
But it surely wasn't fun,
And next time my cat gets in the tree
I'm calling nine-one-one!

A kindergarten teacher told me her students "all know about yellow underwear"
so this one gets my personal "Kindergarteners' Loudest-Laughter Award".
The next one hits closer to home though.

ETERNITY FOR AN OLD MAN

It's a moment that gets longer even as it nears
'cause the bathroom's always further than it first appears.

CURSE OF THE CAMEL

**I had a dream this morning
attacked by hungry goats
which led me to write this,
one of my oddest anecdotes.
They were munching on my clothes
as goats all tend to do
when one of them began to talk
instead of chew.
"What'cha doin' here?"
it asked in Rural-ese.
"Don't 'cha know we bite
and you could catch our fleas?
This here is a dream
so I'll turn into a camel!"
and right away it grew a hump
and spat just like that mammal!
I shook my head and wiped my face
and hollered, "Go away!"
but the camel said, "Not a chance!
You have school today!"
"What an awful nightmare!"
I grumbled and I groaned.
"Worse if you don't get up now!"
the camel then intoned.
I was so confused
I opened up my eyes
and standing there was - My Mom! -
much to my surprise,
and in her hand a bucket,
a lunch bag and my books
and on her face the worst I've seen
of her "You're in trouble!" looks.
So I struggled to my feet
and put my clothes on - Quick!
I didn't tell my mom
but I really did feel sick.**

SHE TURNED INTO A CAMEL!

**What an awful curse
but I had to go to school
and that's a whole lot worse!**

**The camels, goats and school-age guests at Grant's Farm combined to inspire me
with this poem one busy day at Storybook Sweets. I'll give it my
"Written on the Spot (or is that Spit?) Award".**

IVAN THE TERRIER AND THE ROLL OF TOILET PAPER

**I have often said
That Ivan is determined.
He is ever eager
To ensure the yard's "de-vermined".
Now I have always kept
The bathroom closed up tight
But I did not this morning
And Ivan saw the light.
I had several errands
So I left him all alone.
Thus Ivan the Inquisitor
Went exploring on his own.
I know not why he chose the paper
Hanging on the spool
But he had to chase it to the end.
That's a terrier's rule.
His task was just completed
When I got back home
And it was pretty easy
To see where that dog did roam.
I could tell by his expression
That he was very proud
And though I was quite angry
I had to laugh out loud.
I picked up all the paper
As Ivan wagged his stub
And because he is so cute
Gave his head a rub.
I know I should have punished him
But for this reason I could not:
For love and trust he's just about
The best friend that I've got.**

Check out my Facebook page for many stories about our rat terrier Neko, aka Ivan the Terrier. It's the moniker I gave her in my poems after a dream one morning in 2003.

DIAPERS AND HOMEWORK

**To me are the same.
Nothing is different save for the name.
What's in a diaper? I'm thinking you knew
And when I'm done with my homework
It will be full of it, too!**

My revenge as I always had to do my homework as soon as I got home from school.

THINKING UPSIDE DOWN

**I had a dream this morning
And I think I was a bat
'casue I was hanging upside down!
How can they think like that?
“Keep your feet off of the ceiling!”
That’s what my mother said.
“If you put your feet up
Your blood all rushes to your head!”
So how is it that mother bats
Have this lesson switched about?
For when you think upside down
It creates odd looks and doubt!
We say that bats are “batty”,
Their flight so unpredictable.
It’s names like that we people use
To make others’ thoughts “constrictable”.
Yet a bat can catch ten thousand bugs
And I can’t swat a fly
And if I’m thinking for myself
I can figure out just why.
Yes, anyone who’s different
Is called a freak or clown
But sometimes great advancements come
From thinking upside down!**

**I was lying on the couch and felt dizzy like I was hanging upside down.
Somehow it doesn’t feel like I should get an award for being lazy! (I didn’t.)
But I love the poem and sold over 4,000 books with that title.**

**The Chubby Dinosaur is a series of silly poems, word plays, and puns.
Chubby is a harmless T-Rex who only wants to make you laugh, not make you lunch!
With that in mind, I hope you get a chuckle from him.**

THE CHUBBY DINOSAUR

**I saw a chubby dinosaur at the restaurant today
Talking to the manager. Here’s what I heard them say.
“I’ve come to talk with you about the waiter you just ate!”
“Oh, yes!” said the chubby dinosaur. “Do I get the employee rate?”**

**I saw a chubby dinosaur at the theater today
Talking to the manager. Here’s what I heard them say.
“I hope you can explain why you ate the whole ballet!”
“Oh, my!” said the chubby dinosaur. “I thought it said, ‘Buffet!’”**

There are more on the website if you think you can stand it!

TEN THOUSAND MONKEYS

We'd buy ten thousand monkeys
If that would make you glad
If just to hear you say
You love your Mom and Dad.
We'd feed them every one
And every single day
But we'd have to each take second jobs
And third ones for more pay.
There's nothing that we wouldn't give
To hear your happy laughter
But wouldn't for the jabbering
And all the cleaning after.
We'd buy ten thousand monkeys
For just a single kiss
But if we're afraid that if we did
There'd be so much we'd all miss.
That would be your growing up
Because we'd be so busy
So today we're only getting one.
More would make us dizzy!
We want to be your heroes!
It's what parents long to do
Which means our most important job
Is spending time with you!

Trauma can lead to poems, even funny ones. The one above came to me after a dad and daughter had a "discussion" about the number of stuffed toy monkeys they could buy.

The poem helps children understand financial limits, but they still want the ten thousand monkeys! Now for another lesson with . . .

THE CAVEMAN AND THE PILLAR OF ICE

The caveman never listened to his mom's advice
And licked and stuck his tongue to a pillar made of ice.
He talked back to his mother and now he's paid the price
But this one thing is certain: He'll never do it twice!

But I did it twice! Mom nixed the next TWO poems, but "King Louie" (next page) won honorable mention at a poetry contest in Chesterfield years ago. I got a certificate!

THE CHUBBY DINOSAUR

I saw a chubby dinosaur in medieval Florence today
Talking to a baker. Here's what I heard them say.
"Why did you want sugar when you ate the rulers of our town?"
"Heard it in a song," said the chubby dinosaur.
"A spoonful of sugar helps 'de 'Medici' go down!"

KING LOUIE'S HORSE'S BUTT: A LOVE STORY

**An art museum for the fair,
St Louie in ought-four,
And a statue of his highness
Like he's riding out the door!
The museum's full of treasures
From the Louvre and old King Tut
But as I leave I come face-to-face with King Louie's horse's butt!**

**It doesn't seem appropriate
At his big tail to stare
And I wonder what they did
To get it so high up in the air.
A girl came up behind me.
She smiled so I said, "What?"
She said, "I think that yours is cuter than King Louie's horse's butt."**

**I was quite astounded
But I kind of liked the line
And when I got to know her
I vowed to make her mine.
We two think so much alike
As from one stone we're cut
So the two of us got married under King Louie's horse's butt!**

**We still visit the museum
And walk in Forest Park
And at night we hold each other's hands
And kiss there in the dark.
If I tell you where we like to kiss
You'll think that I'm a nut.
We stand in moonlit shadows of King Louie's horse's butt!**

**I know the statue will be there
When we are old and gray
For our love, like that old horse's butt,
Will never go away.
And on our anniversary
Up museum steps I'll strut
To kiss my wife and wave at King Louie's horse's butt!**

**I wonder what we look like
From that pedestal above
And where our tale would rank
In the history of love.
But you would be quite lucky
Before life's book is shut
If you could have a love like ours and King Louie's horse's butt.**

**(I based this one on the statue and the unusual courtship my wife and I shared.
We did not meet there, but if we had this is what would have happened!)**

I didn't even bother to ask my Mom about this next poem! But I jumped out of a helicopter into a lake once, too, and didn't ask permission. Luckily, I only got wet!

THE DINOSAUR'S LINGERIE

**The dino's wife told him to buy her lingerie
But he didn't have a clue and knew not what to say.
Instead he chose to ask her, "Dear, what do you weigh?"
Which is the reason dinosaurs are extinct today!**

**It is this different kind of thinking that my Mom's sister, Winnifred Laubach, inspired.
This poem is dedicated to her and was included in the *Goose River Anthology* in 2011.**

ADVICE FROM MY AUNT WINNIE

**The advice from my Aunt Winnie
When my ears were turning red
Was clear, concise, and firm:
"Put that cap back on your head!"
But it wasn't only practical.
She was kind and wise
And the words she said could often
Take you by surprise.
There was the time I lost
My very favorite toy
And she knew just what to say
To help that little boy.
"I've looked everywhere," I said,
"That it could ever be!"
"Then look somewhere it couldn't!"
And her words helped me to see
Not only just the toy I found
But other things as well:
Ideas, dreams and meaning
In the stories I now tell.
"Dare to think and dare to dream
And seek out your own way!"
Advice from my Aunt Winnie
I've followed to this day.**

Aunt Winnie would have liked the next poem. I only brought the hippos home in my imagination, however. Good thing, too!

HIPPOS AT HOME

**I only brought one hippo home when the zoo had three
So I don't understand why Mom's mad at me.
She says it will be lonely but I don't think that's true
Because I saw my brother get the other two!**

**This will NOT be the poem I'll submit to the state about Missouri.
Read the poem and guess if I grew up in the city or was a country kid!**

MULES IN MISSOURI

**I have a stubborn mule that hasn't got a clue.
It won't pull my plow like the horses do.
I push and pull and push and pull but its feet are stuck like glue
And it's a very stupid mule 'cause it keeps saying, "MOO!"**

My mom grew up liking pigs. I grew up liking buffets!

A PIG IS A PIG

**It can be little or it can be big.
No matter the size a pig is a pig.
And people are people be they tiny or tall
But serve the buffet and we're pigs one and all!**

My wife Sharon really like the poem below. And she loves the flowers, too!

ROSES

**Soft and velvet to the touch, a beauty to the eye,
A fragrance sweetly gentle with thorns that make you cry.
"Just so much like life," the philosopher supposes.
"I can live with thorns but not without the roses."**

**My brother once texted to ask me what I was doing. I texted back, "Old man sleeping."
Then I wrote this. Inspiration is everywhere. Be ready for it!**

OLD MAN SLEEPING

**Old man sleeping. Dangerous.
His mind's filled up with dreams.
Too weak to hold them back
they spill out through its seams.
He whispers them to children
in a story or a tale
whose hands and hearts renew
what long were weak and frail.
The man keeps telling stories.
He knows 'tis not too late
for a parable is precious
and its power truly great.
Old man speaking. Passionate.
Puts everyone to sleep
and as they dream the children
decide which ones to keep.**

I have presented my poems to the third graders at Blevins Elementary School in Eureka, Missouri, every year since 2010. In 2014 I compared reading to riding a horse in a ring and writing your own work to it galloping across the prairie. Two girls suggested I write a poem with that theme and "The Sunset Stallion" is the result. It was accepted for the *Goose River Anthology* in 2017. It is also the title of one of my books of poetry.

THE SUNSET STALLION

**The broken horse would never
test the paddock gate
for it would surely fear
an undirected fate.
The bridle and the saddle
are the only world it knows
and guided by the fence
round and round it goes.
I have never seen it
lift its head to look
nor shown inclination
to cross the shallow brook.
It never would have wondered
how it felt to race the wind
nor e'er aspired to be
imagination's friend.
Slow and sure the easy path
to shelter and its feed,
its spirit's insignificant
and easy to concede.
And so I left the gate unlatched
just by happenstance
unconcerned the plodding horse
would dare to take the chance.
But there! The open gate
tells me I was wrong.
A stallion in the sunset
gallops – bold and strong!
Nostrils flared and ears laid back
it scarcely touches ground.
Freedom it desired
and freedom it has found!
The gate is now wide open
to nevermore be closed.
The stallion craved that freedom
more than I supposed.
And as I watch I wonder
if I let my fancy run
if it would pass the racing horse
and catch the setting sun.**

Teachers frequently ask me to give writing advice to their students. My best answers almost always come as a poem. Here is mine. I hope you get a chance to read more at www.idontwanttokissallama.com/portfolio. Thank you for reading, and for writing!

A POOR POET'S ADVICE

**Study. Practice. Read.
If you're going to be a writer
there are several things you'll need.
Grow imagination.
What's it like to be a bird?
Listen to your grandma.
There is wisdom in each word.
Learn vocabulary.
Know each grammar rule
and don't forget to have some fun
even while at school.
Take a walk on sunny days
and sometimes in the rain.
Let your mind explore
things you can't explain.
Watch for inspiration
and catch it when it comes.
Find it in the whispering wind
or the beat of distant drums.
Write when you're inspired
and write when you are not.
If you want to be a writer
you have to write a lot!
Find a place that's special
and likewise time to spend
so writing is as natural
as meeting an old friend.
Find someone you can read to
who loves you just enough
to tell you when your story's good
and when it's kind of rough.
When you get a chance
read it to a crowd.
There's nothing like an author
who dares to read out loud.
Do you remember taking books
to your mom when you were three?
Loving books and writing them
sets ideas free.
And while it might be nice to have
money, fame and glory
the greatest joy a writer gets
is discovering a story.**