

# THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

**Inspired by his kids' computer obsession, Tustin dad writes adventure book about a world without electronics**



Robert and Caroline Hill, center, pose for a photo with what they say represents their real life: their sons, Conrad, 11, left, and Arthur, 13, glued to their technology in Tustin on Wednesday, June 27, 2018. Robert, who has been a quadriplegic since an accident at twenty-five has just published a book, "Alone Together," about a world where every piece of technology based on electricity stops working. (Photo by Leonard Ortiz, Orange County Register/SCNG)

By SUSAN CHRISTIAN GOULDING | [sgoulding@scng.com](mailto:sgoulding@scng.com) | Orange County Register

Robert Hill is a stereotypical modern-day parent – forever frustrated with his two sons' insatiable screen time.

"I feel like the grumpy old man, always telling my kids to go outside and get some exercise," Hill said.

Conrad, 11, concurred – although, in his opinion, it’s the other guy who’s “a little annoying.”

““Get off the technology! Get off the technology!”” Conrad mimicked his father.

Such banter, familiar in homes everywhere, led Hill to wonder: What would happen if humans suddenly could not access the electronics we have come to depend on – from something as simple as a flashlight to as complex as a hard drive?

So Hill, embarked on a stealth project. Without notifying a soul, for fear this was a passing whim, he started to spin a yarn about a worldwide blackout precipitated by massive solar flares.

“I nibbled away at it whenever I could,” Hill said.

Eventually, his imaginings would take the form of a 250-page book, “Alone Together,” targeting young readers. The story is told through the eyes of 13-year-old Kyle – who, not coincidentally, is growing up in Tustin like Conrad and his big brother, Arthur.

Last Thanksgiving, with family visiting from his native Ontario, Canada, Hill surprised guests with photocopied manuscripts of his first draft. “I don’t think they believed I wrote it,” said Hill, a financial forecaster with Wells Fargo. “I’m a numbers guy in real life.”

Just days before, he had shared the news with his wife, Caroline.

“I thought, ‘How cute. A short story.’ Then it was like, oh, it’s a real book!” Caroline Hill, recalled. “I had just assumed he was in his office all that time doing some work and paying bills.”

Not only was the book unexpected, so, too, was evidence of her husband’s creativity. “I didn’t know he could express himself so well in writing,” she said. “But when he puts his mind to something, he sees it through.”



Both boys give the book a thumbs up, even if it was inspired by their parents' fuddy-duddy concerns. "I recommend it to my friends," said Arthur, 13, soon to be a ninth-grader at Foothill High. "It's fun to read about places in Tustin."

While in the process, Hill studied articles about "how to write dialogue, story arcs, all that basic stuff," he said. He recently self-published the book on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), where it sells for \$12.95.

"I wanted to show how a family of four living in Tustin might cope the first day, the first week, the first month," Hill said. "Nobody comes to the rescue. Water becomes the main issue. People disperse – neighbors head for the mountains on bike or by foot to reach lakes. But Kyle's family decides to shelter in place."

Meanwhile, with no Internet or phones, the cause of the power outage remains mysterious. Rumors abound: nuclear war, space aliens, a computer virus, terrorism.

“It’s about survival, self-reliance and challenges,” Hill said. “But I didn’t want it to be a zombie apocalypse. They’re not killing each other with baseball bats.”

Hill understands overcoming challenges. While in college, he fell off a boat dock while goofing around with friends.

“Somehow, I hit the water wrong and broke my neck,” he said.

Quadriplegic, with limited use of his hands, Hill has forged ahead – enjoying outdoor activities such as skiing and SCUBA diving.

Of course, he also cherishes those two precocious, electronics-obsessed boys who balk at taking a break from their tablets.

“I estimate I spend about five hours a day on computers,” Arthur, unapologetic, said.

“Whoa!” interrupted his mom. “It can’t be that much!”

Yet rather than revise his statement, Arthur doubled down, complaining that Conrad has a desktop computer while he – the injustice of it all – got saddled with his father’s old laptop.

“One time when Dad was in San Francisco, I played games for 12 hours and 30 minutes straight,” boasted Conrad, emphasizing the 30 minutes.

“Sometimes they’re in their separate bedrooms playing a game with each other virtually,” said Hill, rolling his eyes.

Clearly, Arthur and Conrad would loathe living in their father’s book.

“Ugh,” concluded Conrad, “It’d be awful.”