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Seafaring Tale



JOHN TALLY

Beth Tally finds a novel way to honor a longtime friend and her family.

“If there is something you really want to do, you better go ahead and do it, because tomorrow may not give you the opportunity,” says Beth Kendrick Tally.

She explores this statement in *The Beacon*, a novel she recently self-published through Rosedog Press. But it’s also a recurring theme in her life, which involves exotic ports-of-call, a stream of new cultures and languages, and no permanent address.

“Life is the only story you need,” she says. “Interactions happen to you every day, so don’t discount them. Pay attention, and be aware of your own life, and you’ll enjoy it so much.” Words of wisdom from a once-reluctant “cruiser” — parlance for “one who lives on an ever-wandering sailboat.”

Tally, a 1970 Furman graduate, is speaking by phone from the Rio Dulce in Guatemala, where she has learned about active volcanoes, explored Mayan ruins and been exposed to 23 different dialects. She’ll soon sail with her husband John to Belize. And after that? “I’m not sure what we’ll do,” she says.

This exciting life was never Tally’s ideal. “The water is not my thing,” she says, chuckling at the irony. “I get seasick.”

So imagine her surprise when John, her husband of 26 years, came home from his law practice one day four years ago and announced that his lifelong dream was to sell everything he owned and live on a boat. “I assumed it was a midlife crisis, but it didn’t go away,” Tally says wryly.

With her two grown daughters heading off on their own, she had been concerned about adapting to an empty nest — and then suddenly, she says, “I didn’t even have a nest!”

But these days, she’s grateful that John convinced her to pursue his dream, which so far has taken them up the eastern seaboard to Maine

and throughout the Caribbean. “It’s a very different perspective,” she says of her new lifestyle. “This mode of travel is slow, so you see a whole different atmosphere that centers around the water.”

On their 38-foot boat, *Up Jinks*, John serves as captain, chief mechanic and photographer for their Web site, www.lifesstory.com. Beth has come to relish her role as first mate, as it allows her plenty of time to pursue her primary passion: writing.

Chronicling their experiences helped her adjust to her new, peripatetic lifestyle, and as the months passed she posted increasingly sophisticated entries on the Web site. “It became my way of adopting cruising as what I wanted to do as well — my way of embracing what we were doing,” she says.

Although she didn’t set out to be a novelist, a random trip to a tiny community on Little Exuma Island in the Bahamas inspired her to take a stab at fiction. When they heard a radio advertisement inviting cruisers to a fund-raising bazaar for a church, she and John leaped at the chance for a closer look at the island.

After a delightful visit, full of conversation and barbecued chicken, the idea for a book came to her, fully formed — the main characters of *The Beacon* and three pivotal chapters. She spent the next year fleshing out her tale of love, loss and redemption, which focuses on the close relationship between Gabriel, a pastor who overcomes a physical disability, and Manuel, his grandson, who survives his own tragedy that challenges his beliefs.

“It’s a simple story about one generation giving the next generation the things it needs in order to manage what life brings, and faith and love are the most powerful of those things,” Tally says. Manuel is able to rely on Gabriel and eventually finds a creative way to repay him for the love and faith he has provided.

BY LEIGH GAUTHIER SAVAGE

After completing her book, Tally realized that its themes kept reminding her of a close Furman friend, Katie Hardaway Burgess '70, and her family. Tally decided to allocate a portion of the proceeds from sales of the book to Family Connection of South Carolina, a statewide organization Burgess helped found that provides parent-to-parent support programs for special-needs children and their families.

Tally and Burgess became neighbors the summer of 1966, when each was preparing for her freshman year at Furman. Tally's father, Schaefer Kendrick, was an attorney and adjunct professor at Furman, and Burgess' father, Eads "Tank" Hardaway, had just become dean of men. Their families built a friendship that has lasted through the decades, complete with births, deaths, triumphs and challenges.

"It's just been one of those special friendships that you almost can't define," says Burgess. "We are forever linked to one another in a very special way, and it's a real blessing to have that kind of love between two families."

After graduation, life took the women in different directions, but they came together again in 1986 when both were living in Columbia, S.C. Shortly thereafter, Katie and her husband, Jim, had a daughter, Bryann, who has Down syndrome. Bryann's birth was "a positively powerful event for them — and for the lives of thousands of other people," says Tally, who was inspired by the way the Burgesses reached out to other families through Family Connection.

One key message in her novel is about overcoming limitations to achieve a fulfilled life, which is what her character Gabriel does. "He uses his convictions to inspire other people," Tally says.

Another theme is that love, faith and family are essential. "It immediately came to me — that's what Jim, Katie and Bryann are all about,"

Tally says. She points to the accomplishments of Bryann, now 19, a singer, pianist and public speaker who is involved in community theatre and her church choir. Bryann has also received a United Way Community Impact Award for her work with Family Connection.

Of Tally's decision to use her book to help raise funds for Family Connection (www.familyconnections.org), Burgess says, "She's supported us every step of the way. It's brought wonderful attention to the organization." And Burgess also sees a parallel between the book's themes and the purpose of her organization: "The love and support of family and friends and community — those are what life is all about."

With book signings behind her and sales chugging along at a rate that she calls "very, very gratifying," Tally is considering her next foray into publishing. She has several manuscripts for children's stories and is thinking about writing a "tongue-in-cheek diary" about how she was coerced into the cruising life and the adventures that have ensued. "We have many

humorous things happen to us," she says. "I've got a lot of stories to tell."

While she misses her former job as executive director of Central South Carolina Habitat for Humanity, as well as easy access to her children — one of whom lives in Washington, D.C., the other in Charleston, S.C. — she says she and John are enjoying their seafaring life and aren't sure when, or if, the adventure will end.

But she emphasizes that at least one event would bring her back to *terra firma* in a hurry. "I don't have grandchildren," Tally says, "but John knows that as soon as I do, my days of being permanently on the boat are over." ❏

The author, a 1994 Furman graduate, is a free-lance writer in Simpsonville, S.C.

