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Author Shares His Inspiration

By Chris Rubich

Of the Gazette Staff

When Bob Schaller was in third or fourth grade, a writer talked to students at his school, a talk that set the course for Schaller's own career.

That's where I got my idea to write," he says.

An award-winning sports reporter, Schaller moved from his daily newspaper job to freelancing and writing books in the late 1990s. And he hopes to inspire youngsters to write, too.

Through his writing, Schaller has interviewed a number of Olympic athletes, pro sports figures, coaches and NASCAR drivers. He writes both fiction and nonfiction, and his research trips to spots across the nation.

Schaller will visit Billings, Bozeman, Livingston and other Montana cities this week to present free writing workshops for children and teens.

His "X-Country Adventure" series of mysteries for young people features a teenage brother and sister whose family trips to different states lead to stories that blend historical fact with fictional modern adventure.

He has already published "Message in Montana," where the teens solve a riddle linked to the Lewis and Clark Expedition while traversing Montana. His "Adventure in Wyoming" has ties to Yellowstone National Park, while "South Dakota Treaty Search" takes the teens to the Black Hills, where they try to reconstruct a never-enacted treaty.

He just finished "Treasure in Texas" and "Mystery in Massachusetts," both set for release on Oct. 1 By Baker Book House, which handles the adventure series. Due out in 2002 are "California Gold Rush Fever" and "The Great Florida Chase."

Schaller plans to continue the series through all 50 states.

The author visited Montana during a 1997 camping trip with his son, now 7. And he visited Billings, the Little Bighorn Battlefield and other sites while researching his Montana book. For the Wyoming adventure, he used inspiration from fishing and hiking in that state.

“You can see the personality of the state and how it was shaped by history,” he says of his travels.

His Texas book has ties to the Alamo, while the California book is built around a sawmill blade from Sutter’s Mill, site of the gold strike that spurred in the California gold rush of 1849.

His “Crime in a Colorado Cave” is set in the state where he has lived since 1999. Writing that book reminded him of the importance of interest in many areas and the need to properly research elements to be incorporated into stories.

As he wrote about the teens trying to find missing stalactites, he originally planned to describe them as golden. But, during Schaller’s research for the book, a geologist said the spiky formations are created of crystal, saving the author some embarrassment from discerning readers.

In his writing, Schaller may incorporate math and science in the riddles that the teens must solve. And he includes historical notes and resources, along with tidbits about each state at the end of the teen books.

“I’ve always been enraptured by history,” Schaller notes.

On his trips, Schaller and his son often “stop at a small-town café...and listen to the older people” tell about how buildings were built ort the community. He also reads the community newspapers for a taste of the area.

Living in Colorado Springs, Schaller keeps in shape at the Olympic Training Center, where he also sees many athletes, some of whose lives he has captured in print.

He has become acquainted with Olympic gold medalist Rulon Gardner, a Wyoming native who pulled off one of the biggest upsets in Olympic history by beating Aleksandr Karelin in the last Olympics.

Gardner will light the torch and speak during June 20 Opening Ceremonies for the Big Sky State Games in Billings.

Schaller’s “Olympic Dream and Spirit” series of books has stories from athletes including Mary Lou Retton, Dan O’Brien, Dominique Moceanu, Ruthie Bolton-Holified, Kristine Quance-Julian, Chad Carvin, Andre Agassi, Bart Conner, Carla McGhee, Brook Bennett and dozens more. The series is published by Exhusker Press.

A former sports editor for the Scottsbluff (Neb.) Star-Herald, Schaller wanted to be a pro hockey player, but he was too small. He turned to his childhood passion of writing, instead.

He still occasionally does free-lance sports coverage for the Colorado Springs Gazette. And he free-lances for Splash and Skating magazines.

He's produced stories about star skaters Dorothy Hamill, Michelle Kwan and Sarah Hughes, and is working on one about Todd Eldredge.

For his "Top Stars of NASCAR" book series for Cross Training Publishing, Schaller spent time with Jeff Gordon and other big names in the sport. And Schaller is writing "Up to Speed" with Bobby Hamilton about life on the Winston Cup team.

"I like having this professional relationship" with well-known athlete, Schaller says, adding, "Just to have five minutes with them is awesome."

He finds that his newspaper career and books help build contacts and relationships that open doors for new writing opportunities. Individuals whom he has interviewed or co-written books with refer him to others as a potential biographer.

"It's all about building bridges," Schaller explains.

It's also a lesson that he passes on to youngsters at writing workshops or visits to classrooms.

For example, he says, you can't expect to go back to school on good terms in later years if you're remembered as a bully from the past unless you repair or build new bridges. And he says that, if he didn't apply the Golden Rule in his relationships with sources, he would miss many opportunities for new stories.

Schaller is wrapping up a book, "Roar of Silence: Kenny Walker," about the deaf former Denver Broncos football player. Schaller is co-author of the book with Walker for Cross Training Publishing.

Some of Schaller's football books include "More than a ring," Don Beebe (Angel Press Publishing) about the former Green Bay Packer and Buffalo Bill; "Touchdown Tommie: The Story of Tommie Frazier" (Cross Training Publishing); "Movin' On: Bret Clark (Cross Training Publishing) about the former National Football League player; and "Football 101: Fundamentals, Husker Style" (Cross Training Publishing), which was written with George Darlington, Nebraska assistant coach.

In progress is "the First Black Quarterback," co-written with the book's subject, Marlin Briscoe.

Schaller has a number of other books in print. And he's working on a couple of novels for adults, along with his other works.

His first book was published in 1978. Schaller writes from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., while his son is in school, and often resumes after the boy is in bed for the night. This year, he's already written eight books.

Still, many of his neighbors just know him as a stay-at-home dad whose source of income remains a mystery. And his son regards many of the sports stars whom he's met as "just people."

At 35, Schaller continues to learn from other writers – something he recommends for young writers, too. He urges to read, write, to absorb "all the knowledge they get – all of it is power."

When holding workshops for young writers, "I get way more out of it than they do," he says, noting that he leaves "so fired up."

Some youngsters have sent stories to Schaller after the workshops, and he says, "Sometimes I read them, and I'm just in awe."

He says he learns from his correspondence with young people, including seeing how youngsters think and speak – which he can use in his own writing.

Schaller points to his own rapid move from "Small-town sports writer" to making a living as an author as he talks about rejecting limit. And he encourages teens and children to do the same. He says you can reach any goal that you set for yourself as long as you have the work ethic.