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Professor's eighth book shares stories of women struggling as adjuncts

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By **SHANNON O. WELLS**

As the award-winning author of eight books, and dozens of essays, stories, poems and reviews, Dave Newman could easily draw from his own creative process, publishing experiences, and encouraging reviews to inspire and impress students in his Pitt-Greensburg classroom.

That, however, is not Newman's style.

"I never even talk about my own work," the assistant professor of creative and professional writing says. "I had a teacher when I was an undergraduate who taught one of his books, and it was the most uncomfortable class I'd ever been in. What do you say? 'Great! Good job!' You know? It was uncomfortable."

Sure, students in the know occasionally ask about his creations and how they came to life.

"I always tell them, 'You can have a book (of mine) when you graduate. I'll give you a copy, because my books are pretty ... rated 'R', working class, kind of gritty,'" Newman explains. "A lot of the students, they've never seen grit on the page, and it's probably better they don't see it from their teacher and then come to class with that experience: 'Like, Is this guy a scum bucket? I don't know?'"

"So I tamp that down."

This year, it's been increasingly difficult for Newman to keep attention and accolades at bay. In July, Newman published his eighth book, "She Throws Herself Forward to Stop the Fall," described as the "last in a trilogy about working-class people trying to better themselves through education."

In late September, Newman received the 2024 Alumnus of Distinction Award from the Pitt-Greensburg Alumni Association. The award acknowledges excellence among Pitt-Greensburg alumni, with candidates evaluated on their "outstanding level of professional achievement, service to the community, service to the University of Pittsburgh, special recognition or honors, and any other special efforts or success."

The association calls the award the highest honor it bestows annually on an individual alumnus/alumna.

The recognition caught Newman completely unaware. "It's funny. My speech was basically about how much I hate to give speeches. But thank you, Pitt-Greensburg, for giving me a public speaking class 30 years ago," he quips. "It's really paying off now."

The Western Pennsylvania native shared a more reverent take in September with on the Pitt-Greensburg website. "I'm really honored," he says. "Pitt-Greensburg people go out into the world and do great stuff. One alumnus, Austin Davis, is the lieutenant governor of Pennsylvania. Another alumnus, Justin Merriman, is a brilliant photographer whose work I constantly follow. I'm proud to have graduated from here and feel even better about coming back to teach."

That said, the genial, unassuming Newman, who graduated from the Greensburg campus in 1993 with a bachelor's degree in English writing, comes across as one who writes and teaches simply for the joy and satisfaction of doing it.

'Tough gig'

That outlook is reflected in "She Throws Herself Forward to Stop the Fall." The collection of fictional stories focuses on women working as adjunct professors "while augmenting their meager earnings in malls, bars and restaurants," as described by publisher Roadside Press.

"They are middle-aged and live at home. They want to be writers. They want to be cops. Their boyfriends smoke crack and get lost. Their dads work in factories," the description reads. "Their grandfathers die without warning. Nothing is safe but everything will be fine. Go to class. Grab a cigarette. Pick up a broom. These are the stories of dreams and the endless work people do to survive."

While not blaming any particular institution, Newman makes no bones about his belief that adjunct instructors are treated pretty poorly for the valuable service they provide.

"I have very strong feelings about it. I think it's terrible the way they treat adjuncts," he says. "Adjuncts are often super invested, because they believe that at the end of adjuncting, they're going to get an opportunity for a full-time, permanent job. And unfortunately, that's almost never the case. In my experience, I very seldom see that."

One of the characters in the book has strong credentials, "and she just doesn't understand how people that don't have credentials, who maybe got hired 28 years ago, are doing so well, and she has all these credentials and can't pay her bills and worries about putting gas in her car."

Newman believes the structure that leaves adjuncts toiling in the academic shadows has existed for the past two or three decades.

"It's a tough gig," he says. "Originally, I don't think it was set up like that. I think it's actually getting a little bit better, certainly at Pitt. On one hand, we've got a union," which doubled the pay rate for adjunct instructors, "which is awesome ... but then they got rid of a lot of adjuncts.

"(Pitt-Greensburg) got rid of a journalism professor 10 days before the semester started," he adds. "So that was disappointing."

Showing the way

Newman, who grew up in Irwin and now lives nine miles away, in Trafford, highlights his geographic roots in his stories.

"So I've been in the whole place, Western PA, my whole life. And everything I've written is set here," he says. "It's either in Pittsburgh or Greensburg or Pitcairn, or east Pittsburgh, Forest Hills, Braddock, all the little mill towns kind of east of the city. I just thought it'd be cool to put one more ding into a book."

While Newman doesn't draw from his own writing in class, he says he likes to "teach from the places that I do write, and I try to teach the books that I love. You know, teach a wide variety of books to the students, because I teach mostly creative writing classes.

"I'm usually doing fiction or poetry or some combination of the two," he adds. "The teaching is definitely an extension of the writing and the reading, for sure. You know, figuring out things for myself and then showing the students a simpler way to get to it."

Newman strives to help students avoid the obstacles he experienced in pursuing the joys of literature and writing.

"I'm from a really working-class background, and I had a hard time in grad school," he recalls. "I was, like, the only straight white guy in there, which was definitely not a cool thing to be at that particular moment. So it was tough for me to find my way."

After the Westmoreland Volkswagen plant closed in the 1980s, Newman's father struggled to find reliable employment in Western Pennsylvania. He eventually moved to Detroit for a job at a Ford Motors plant.

"We weren't a family of readers or anything like that, but I was very conscious of how blue-collar life could be upturned so easily," Newman says. "I think that's definitely something that has gone into my work over the years. You know, even my character in one of my books, who's a professor at the community college, he's a former welder who got a welding degree from the community college.

"Most of my characters have kind of blue collar or poorly paid white collar jobs," he adds, "and when they're going to school, they're trying to educate themselves into a better life."

Eyes on the prize

Early reviews of "She Throws Herself Forward to Stop the Fall" are encouraging, though Newman is realistic about the challenges in connecting with an audience juggling hyper-busy lives with all manner of visual media to keep them entertained.

"It's been good so far," he says. "It's kind of a weird time to be a writer. I mean, just everybody is so busy. So it's multitasking. I think it's really hard for a lot of people who used to go to a book at the end of the night, they just go to a (digital streaming) series now, or something like that.

"It's definitely harder to get people's attention with smaller books that don't have big bombs going off or anything like that," he adds. "But it's the stuff I love to read, so it's the stuff I write."

Most published reviews of his work are delivered courtesy of Newman's wife, Lori Jakiela, a professor of English and creative writing at Pitt-Greensburg.

"I don't pay too much attention to the criticism or praise," Newman says. "Sometimes my wife will read reviews and give me a synopsis of them and stuff. I just try to kind of keep an even keel."

Of her husband's writing style, Jakiela says she loves his "fearlessness and ability to tell the truth."

"In 'She Throws Herself Forward,' I love his ability to embody female characters in ways that ring absolutely, heart-wrenchingly true," she says. "I love the way he writes about the struggles of working-class people."

Noting that her father was a steelworker and Newman's an auto worker and electrician, while her mother a part-time nurse and Newman's worked for Head Start, they both grew up "knowing the odds were stacked against people like us," she says, "but we pushed against the odds anyway. Newman writes characters that do just that. Sometimes they beat the odds, sometimes not, but the characters and their struggles always feel authentic ...

"It's important for me, and maybe other people like me, to see the experiences of my life reflected back in art, in books," Jakiela adds. "It says our lives, as messy as they are, are worthy of art. Newman writes those lives."

While happy to hear positive words about his work, Newman admits that what readers — including family members — think is well beyond his control once a book is released.

"Usually by the time a book's out, I'm on to the next thing," he says. "I'm really trying to focus on what's next."

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