



A SURPRISE ENDING for author by accident

Book project started 'on a whim' for UW-Whitewater prof, first-time novelist

By LISA M. SCHMELZ
FOR WALWORTH COUNTY SUNDAY

MADISON — On a recent brisk Sunday, Ann Wertz Garvin was seated in a mint green canvas chair in the back of A Room of One's Own, an independent bookstore in downtown Madison. Clad in a pair of black jeans, a slightly ruffled white cotton blouse and a long gray cardigan, she was the epitome of calm.

But this wasn't any given Sunday for Garvin. This was the first stop on a nine-city book tour to promote her debut novel, "On Maggie's Watch" (Berkley Penguin, \$15).

A Stoughton resident, licensed nurse and tenured professor who teaches exercise physiology at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, Garvin will be the first person to tell you that becoming a novelist was never on her list of things to do.

"It was just on a whim that all this happened," she said. "Getting my masters and Ph.D. was a little like that, too. On a whim, I took an exercise and physiology class because I loved physiology. And I got an A and did well, and it kept me going."

"It makes me sound a little aimless, like I got on a boat and then got off. That I didn't do any of this by design. But that's kind of what happened."

"I'm open. I'm open to life and where it goes and where it takes me."

Life has taken Garvin to a number of out-of-the-way places. Fluent in American Sign Language, she worked with the

deaf-blind as a camp nurse, with paraplegics at Mayo Clinic, and with veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. She also did some stunts in the theater and even made commercials. But the job she said she could finally get her "head around" was teaching. Along the way, she also got married, had two children and divorced.

In 2004, life took Garvin on another detour when she entered the Wisconsin Book Festival's 24-hour writing contest. Entrants were simply shown a color photograph of two people — lovers perhaps —

standing close to each other inside a kiosk at a drive-in theater. When festival organizers called to her tell her she'd placed second, she didn't believe them at first.

Garvin said that story, which contest rules limited to 2,000 words, was "the first short story I'd ever written, first contest

I'd ever entered."

"No one on earth was more surprised than I was," she said.

She channeled that surprise into writing even more. Six years and many drafts later, the result is "On Maggie's Watch," a book that asks us how well we really know our neighbors, and more importantly, ourselves.

Dubbed "Fresh, ironic and psychologically intense" by Wisconsin author Jacquelyn Mitchard, the novel follows Maggie Finley as she awaits the birth of her baby and tries to resurrect her street's Neighborhood Watch. The plot



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LISA M. SCHMELZ/FOR WALWORTH COUNTY SUNDAY

Author Ann Wertz Garvin prepares to sign a copy of her novel, "On Maggie's Watch," during a book talk and signing recently at a Madison book store. Garvin, of Stoughton, is a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

A little compassion makes a big difference for senior couple

Editor's note: The Time is Now to Help was founded by a local businessman who knew extreme poverty as a child. With the help of donations from the community, The Time is Now is able to help local residents in need.

Dear W.C.,

I find this very hard, but I am writing to see if you can help my wife and me. We are very scared because we are about to become homeless.

We are both seniors and have always worked. I lost my job due to the recession and the factory I worked at for years had to downsize. My wife worked for 52 years. She has recently had



some health trouble and we have no supplemental insurance.

We are renting a small place because we lost our old home. We wanted to sell it but we couldn't. We never had children. We read The Time Is Now to Help column in the newspaper.

Dear Readers,

I called this older couple to find the location where they lived. They were renting a garage apartment on the second

floor and it was difficult to find. When I saw the steep, narrow staircase, I wondered how they went up and down these stairs every day with their health problems. When the door was answered by an older gentleman, I introduced myself. He grasped my hand in a firm handshake and pulled me inside. He said, "My wife cannot wait to meet you, the man from The Time Is Now to Help. She has heard so much about you from people at church." They invited me to sit and talk.

When introduced to his wife, she shuffled over in a hurry to meet me, like I was a long lost relative. As she reached out to

embrace me in a hug, I looked into her eyes and noticed they were filling with tears. I reached out to hug her back and I could hear her whimpering as she cried. I consoled both of them and told them I was on a mission to help them, sent by many other compassionate neighbors who care. As they spoke, I could sense their deep fear of poverty and helplessness.

They were in a bad position due to the fact neither of them worked. They had many outstanding medical bills due to the wife's recent illness. Our fellow Americans are proud and have been instilled with the feeling of duty to pay their debt. Those

bills haunted this senior couple.

They had begun to budget their food, trying to make it with just two small meals a day. I stressed the importance of three meals. I asked them how they negotiated the steps every day. The wife said she went out as little as possible, even though the doctor had also stressed the importance of a daily walk. She said she just couldn't make it up and down the stairs. They said the apartment was the only housing they could afford when they lost their home.

After going over their budget,

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thickens when, thanks to the state's sex offender registry, Maggie uncovers a possible threat to her quiet neighborhood.

Kathleen LaBeau is a former grad student who worked closely with Garvin and has kept in

touch with her over the years. Standing in the back of the bookstore as Garvin read and answered questions from a crowd of nearly three dozen people, she had her infant daughter, Noelle, six months, strapped to her chest.

"I loved it," said LaBeau, her hand resting on Noelle. "I loved the book and really just knowing that this is the first time I could read a book and see it through

the author's eyes. I could see her sitting in her house, writing."

Nancy Geary, one of the co-owners of A Room of One's Own, said there's a special excitement whenever a Wisconsin author stops by, particularly for their first novel.

The fact that Garvin's novel is set in a fictional Wisconsin town that she modeled after Stoughton is just icing on the cake, Geary said.

"We like books that are set in a place that we know," she said. "If you have a connection with the place, or the person writing the book, it adds to the enjoyment of the book."

Should you catch Garvin at a local reading, don't be fooled by her calm exterior.

"I've been doing that happy dance every day on this tour," she said. "I have to say, I'm ecstatic. I'm calm before a read-

'I'm open to life and where it goes and where it takes me.'

— Ann Wertz Garvin
author

ing. I've done stand-up and theater and talked in front of crowds my whole life. But I'm doing the happy dance, too."

HELP

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I could understand their fear.

The wife said, "I worked hard my whole life. I never thought our wonderful country would get in such a mess. We are lucky to just keep a roof over our heads and some food on the table."

So many people are now in the same position, living in fear behind closed doors. Many seniors cannot get by on Social Security.

Then the husband told me about his mother recently passing away at 90. She had lived in the same small house for most of her life. He told me his mother had left the home to him and his brother. I asked why they were not living in the house and he said his brother would not let them live in it. He also said his brother would not allow them to sell the house in order to obtain their half of the home's value.

He was embarrassed to say his brother was well off and did not need the funds from the sale of the house. He had not told his brother how they were suffering in poverty. I asked him if he would allow me to call the brother for him and explain the situation. He agreed to let me try.

The husband called the broth-

YOU CAN HELP

What: The Time is Now can be contacted by mail or online only.

Mail: P.O. Box 70, Pell Lake, WI 53157.

Online: www.timeisnowtohelp.org.

er from my cell phone right there in the kitchen. After a brief conversation with his brother, he handed the phone to me.

The brother was surprised to be talking to a complete stranger about their mother's home. He was upset his brother had even talked to me about the home. I had to explain the position his older brother and sister-in-law were in. I had to tell him how they were unable to eat properly and barely pay their rent.

He was not as sympathetic as I had hoped. He seemed cold and indifferent to their problems. I told him they were not asking for a hand-out. They just wanted to be able to either live in the home or sell it. After some conversation, he agreed to think about it. When we hung up the phone I could see why they had not wanted to confess their problems to the brother. Here was

their own family member, in a position to help them without taking a dime out of his pocket, and he had to think about it.

I told them I would provide them with grocery gift certificates so they could get some food immediately. I also agreed to help them with the past-due rent and utilities.

They were moved to tears. They said no one had ever offered them a helping hand before. Now, complete strangers were helping. I told them we are not strangers, but fellow creations, caring and sharing. We cannot wait for our government; we need to help each other.

The next day, I called the brother to see what he had decided. He said he did not want to sell the house at this time due to the recession. I suggested he let his brother and wife live in the house, paying him half the rent he would normally collect. At first, he was appalled at the idea. When I reminded him it was for his older brother who was out of work and sister-in-law who was extremely sick, he seemed to soften up some.

After more encouragement, he at least agreed to come speak to his brother at his apartment. I met him there the same day. When he saw the stairs, the condition of his sister-in-law and the small run-down apartment, he finally realized what they

were going through. He looked away quickly as I saw tears in his eyes. I asked him if he thought their mother would have helped. The younger brother answered, "Yes, they can move into the house."

At the end of the month they moved into the small house that used to be his mother's. They cleaned it and arranged all their belongings. The husband also had happy news: through Time Is Now networking, he had gotten a job — 30 hours a week, which is just what their budget needed. It was enough to help them with food and pay their low rent. He also reported his wife was now able to walk daily, and due to that and their improved diet, she was feeling much better. She was back to working some light cleaning jobs part time.

The last time I saw them, I received another long hug, this time not in desperation but in heartfelt thanks. The wife told me, "Please tell all the supporters of The Time Is Now to Help thank you for helping."

Thank you for caring and sharing. Together we make a big difference helping our fellow creations of God.

*Health and happiness,
God bless everyone, W.C.*

Please help: Make checks payable to: The Time Is Now to

Help, P.O. Box 70, Pell Lake, WI 53157. The Time Is Now to Help is a federally recognized 501(c)3 charitable organization licensed in Wisconsin and Illinois. You will receive a tax deductible, itemized thank-you receipt showing exactly what every penny of your donation provided for the poverty stricken.

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