

BOOKS

EDITOR: TERESA BUJASI | e-mail: book@suntimes.com



Schwegel Caldwell Hellman

EVENT OF THE WEEK

TRIPLE THREAT | Local authors Theresa Schwegel (*Last Known Address*), Laura Caldwell (*Red Hot* series) and Libby Fischer Hellman (*Doubleback*) will sign copies of their books, 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Book Stall at Chestnut Court, 511 Elm St., Wrentham. For a list of upcoming literary events: www.suntimes.com/entertainment/books/index.html.

CHICAGO LIT | A father's salute to his son is helping to write the book on digital publishing

BY MIKE THOMAS
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Dusty Sang and his wife could not bear to see their 24-year-old son, Ryan, buried. So they sat in their car, numb with grief, while scores of Ryan's friends paid him graveside homage.

"My wife turned to me and she said, 'You know, we have to do something so other people don't have to be like Ryan and us,'" Sang recalls of that dark day in 2004.

Spurred to action, they began the Ryan Lachit Sang Bipolar Foundation the following October, embarking thereafter on a two-year tour of the country to meet with and assemble a top-notch team of physicians and scientists who might develop an empirical test for early detection of the affliction borne by their artistically gifted only child: bipolar disorder.

Less than a year later, yet another endeavor inspired by Ryan's creative spirit was launched: "Thirty," an on-line "rock 'n' roll magazine found on-line at www.thirty.com. It has a Web presence in 170 countries and, according to Sang, has put out 28 consecutive monthly issues. The name is derived from Ryan's mantra, "stay thirty" — for art, for life. It's even etched into a sidewalk slab at the southeast corner of Schiller and Wells in Old Town, near Sang's home. Ryan discovered it about a year before his death, while he was working on a novel, and adopted its sentiment as his life's philosophy.

Five of Ryan's close friends helped Sang start the site, using the handle "Stay Thirty" in tribute to their fallen comrade. Each owns part of the business, courtesy of Sang.

"We have no other children, so what greater gift can I [give] than to get these kids into an extraordinary business where they have a piece of it and a lifestyle," he says.

E-books gaining popularity

In March, Stay Thirty began publishing e-books under a division called Stay Thirty Press. Sang believes he's surfing a wave that's bound to get bigger — a lot bigger — in the months and years ahead. And he might be right. Amazon has so far sold more than 1.7 million Kindles (the newest model, Kindle 2, retails for \$259) and now offers a Kindle application for PCs. One for Macs will follow soon thereafter. Moreover, a sliver of what Time magazine dubbed "Kindle killers" are coming to market shortly. Perhaps most telling, former HarperCollins honcho Jane Friedman recently began a well-funded e-books venture called Open Road Integrated Media. It will re-publish titles by such known authors as Pat Conroy and release works by new as they come electronically.

Stay Thirty, in line with Sang's vision, already is on that bandwagon. A new imprint, Schiller & Wells LLC, was recently set up to publish works by scholars and first-time authors.

"The economic times have created this moment where there's not going to be so digital," says Sang, an attorney who for years practiced entertainment law. "Books are now 100 percent guaranteed return. So

all the books that are in bookstores all over the country aren't really sold. When they finally come back with the returns, then you'll know how many really stuck. But ultimately, when you go digital, you don't have the manufacturing or the shipping. That's why we do a 50/50 gross deal with the authors."

One of those authors is James Polster. Like the three hand-picked others in Stay Thirty's stable, he'll find his publishing contract and was searching for another outlet. But it was Sang's backstory — of his son's vital life and untimely death and the charitable foundation set up in his memory — that captured Polster's attention before they ever talked about books.

When they finally got around to discussing things literary, Polster agreed to give e-books a shot. A veteran of print, Polster (a former journalist and past Publisher's Weekly favorite who was once likened to Kurt Vonnegut) had found himself in a tough spot after his American agent retired and his rep in London died. An acquaintance told him about Sang and they hooked up.

"It wasn't [the idea of] e-books so much as I was sold on this particular publisher," Polster says. "Because, yeah, I would rather have a book to hold in my hand. And when I do an interview like this one, I'd like people to be able to go to a bookstore. But I basically trust Stay Thirty and the people behind it."

His third novel, *The Graduate Student*, Stay Thirty's fourth release, came out in August.

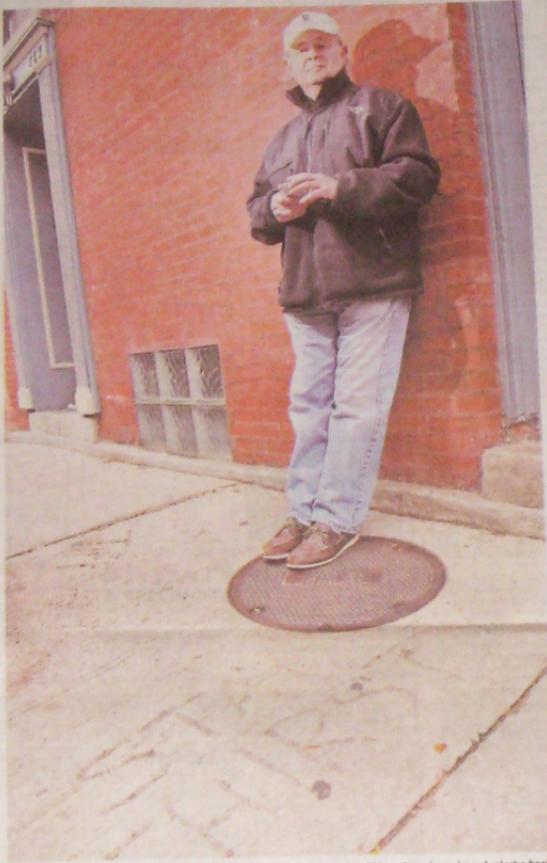
Happily ever after

Pamela Ditchoff brought her latest book to Stay Thirty, as well, and has already seen revenues from sales. Titled *Mrs. Bezer* — an adult-themed exploration of what happened to famous fairy tale princesses when they were always told lived happily ever after (FYI: Sleeping Beauty is an opium addict) — it's her third effort, one she says agents and editors loved but publishers wouldn't buy.

At this stage of her career, the prospect of turning to e-books gave her no pause. The most appealing part of it, she says, is that the reading public alone decides a book's merits — not editors, agents, reviewers or bookstores that will "accept payment for placement."

"I do not know anyone who is as well-educated on the subject of digital books as Dusty Sang," she says via e-mail, "and that means every angle of digital book publishing: an eye for quality literature; the most effective means of promotion; a global understanding of networking; a finger on the pulse of the electronic world. And he is an all-around terrific guy. I mean that. I have dealt with many editors, publishers and agents, and he has been the best, by far, to work with. He is not New York-minute harrier. He is precise, courteous, accessible by phone and e-mail, and he keeps his authors up to date on every aspect of their Stay Thirty work."

Here's the obvious catch: only owners of Amazon Kindles, Kindle software for PCs, iPhones and iPad Touches can buy the book of Stay Thirty's scribes via download. And



Dusty Sang is pointing writers in the new direction of publishing, as his Stay Thirty Press has released select e-books as it plans to add scholars and first-time authors to its stable. | ECH HENNING/STL

because e-books remain a very small slice of the publishing marketplace, because they veer from the time-honored traditional print model, they still carry a stigma for some.

"Some of the agents don't want this because they're afraid of it," Sang says. "There was one author we were talking to in Los Angeles. She'd written 13 books, she was a columnist for the New York Times. Great writer, smart. And [she] wanted to give us two books, which she had written, and her agent killed the deal."

No MBAs needed

While Sang won't say which Stay Thirty author has the most downloads, he is convinced that the pros of e-books outweigh the cons. Sure, they might not look as pretty, and they're difficult to autograph, but they'll be around forever.

"How many copies [of a new release] will Barnes & Noble have in six months?" Sang asks. "Go try to find a book that was popular six months ago, today. Your Kindle edition will always be there. So I'm looking at this just like the Food Channel. You find a group of

great chefs and then you launch them and then you slowly begin to market them through Stay Thirty Press."

All the while keeping Ryan's memory alive.

"We show up and do the best we can," he says of his team's approach. "All the MBA models and everything — forget it. Deal with wonderful people doing great stuff and highlight great creativity from all over the world."

Mike Thomas is a Sun-Times features writer who doesn't read e-books. Yet.

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E is for evolution

CHICAGO LIT | A father's salute to his son is helping to write the book on digital publishing

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November 15, 2009

BY MIKE THOMAS Staff Reporter

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