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Alysha Schertz

The Nickname Guy

John Leaf, vice president of business development at Milwaukee-based WTA Architects LLC, has always been fascinated with etymology, the study of word origins. He has taken that passion and developed it into a fascination with the origin of people's nicknames.

Leaf, dubbed The Nickname Guy, despite the fact that he never had a nickname of his own, began an effort in 2008 to collect nickname stories from around the globe for use in a future book, a documentary and perhaps even a daily or monthly calendar.

To date, he has collected more than 400 stories from his website (www.nicknamestories.com), Facebook and Twitter. He has also begun work on a documentary by taking video of people telling their "nickname stories" at local festivals and sporting events.

According to Leaf, he has collected some of the best stories from veterans of war, athletes and some of the other "old-timers." However, he has also collected several stories about children who had acquired negative nicknames throughout their childhood, and plans to start speaking at local public schools about what a hurtful nickname can do to a kid, and how, if you have one, can overcome it.

"I want to be able to tell people's stories and have it be so much more meaningful than just a name," he said.

Transmedia Exposure

Traditional Print & Radio

96.5 WKHL-FM radio
The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
The Ozaukee News Graphic
The Milwaukee BizTimes

Electronic & Social Media

Facebook
Twitter
TweetDeck
GoogleAlerts
HARO – Help A Reporter Out
www.nicknamestories.com
"Actionstalk" web site

Public Speaking

Alverno College
Marquette University
Sprenkler

www.nicknamestories.com

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I have always been fascinated by nicknames. They are everywhere. Always have been, always will be. Nicknames can play a defining role in someone's life. They can heal, inspire, injure, and liberate. From birth on, a nickname can enter our lives swiftly and powerfully. Often it seems innocent enough, but it can take on a life of its own. Nicknames can sometimes consume us, overwhelm us, and define us . . . if we allow them to and give them permission to do so. We can become the names and stories we tell ourselves or allow ourselves to be told by others. These stories can eventually embody not only who we are, but also what we do and how we perceive ourselves.

- John Leaf



**nick
name
stories
.com**

Behind every ‘Toots,’ ‘Rusty’ or ‘Bo’ is a story

There’s a column I’ve been meaning to write about people’s nicknames, especially the colorful and intriguing ones you see in the death notices every day. The adage that you can’t take it with you apparently doesn’t apply to nicknames.

John Leaf shares my fascination, but he’s doing more than just thinking about it. Leaf is collecting nicknames, and he wants to hear about yours. He’s just getting started; ultimately, he hopes to compile his research into a book.

“I have always been fascinated by people’s nicknames. Part of that is wrapped around the intimacy that they communicate. But there’s also a great story behind every nickname,” the Glendale man said. His 9-to-5 job is doing business development for an architectural firm.

Leaf plans to burn some shoe leather by going to VFW halls, nursing homes, firehouses and really anywhere with a tape recorder. “I could grab a Dictaphone and walk around any one square mile of any part of Milwaukee and come up with 200 stories,” he said.

But he also is asking people to visit www.nicknamestories.com, his new Internet site, and share why they’re going through life as Tumpee, Milk Chin, Boots, Digger or any other nickname you can imagine and many you couldn’t.

Here are some of the stories he has collected so far.

Silky: Some guys went to pick up a buddy to watch a football game. He had overslept. “However, to everyone’s surprise, he was wearing full-suit silk pajamas! . . . Chuck is the most regular, everyday, hunting/fishing, factory worker, who happens to wear matching full-suit silk pajamas.”

Maddog: The owner of this nickname had it printed on a T-shirt he wore while working as a camp counselor. “One of the fifth-grade campers asked if I knew what that spelled backwards. After that comment, I didn’t wear it during the rest of that summer.”

Piano Legs: “My parents started calling me Piano Legs, naming and comparing me to their grand piano in the living room. The antique piano as you Many pictures had me . . . can only imagine had very large and very strong legs posing in front of that old piano. On many occasions I chose to wear pants in place of a dress.” The woman cried as she told Leaf that story.

“There’s a cathartic piece to these. They can be very healing. They can be humorous. There’s no end to them. They’re ageless, they’re timeless, they’re genderless,” he said.

Some people are great at giving out nicknames. Nurses have been known to assign nicknames to doctors that the physicians never know about. Nicknames wind up on bowling shirts and on Twitter.

What about people who make up nicknames for themselves? Not as good, Leaf said. “To me the real value of a nickname is something that is beyond you, that somebody gives you.”

Most people can’t tell you Tiger Woods’ real name. Nicknames have always been a part of sports, entertainment and politics.

“You could do a whole thing with nicknames from farm accidents - Lefty, Shorty, Stumpy. There are so many categories. The book publicist said your challenge is going to be to edit all these,” Leaf said.

If you’re wondering, Leaf never really picked up a nickname for himself. No Shaky or Rakey or Bud. “It’s not that I’m trying to resolve some inner conflict through this,” he said.

If there’s a nickname story you’d like to share, send me an e-mail or go directly to Leaf’s Web site.

By Jim Stingl
In My Opinion

Journal Sentinel
JSOnline
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What’s in a nickname? More than you might think, longtime Mequon resident says

Wauwatosa – In a few short months, John Leaf has tapped into some of the complexities and universal truths of the human condition that underlie one of life’s more casual aspects: the nickname.

Leaf, a longtime resident of Mequon, until a recent move to Glendale, is researching people’s nicknames, using the internet to gather information that will some day form a book. With a background in business marketing, public relations and business development, Leaf said he’s always been fascinated by the etymology of words, and the power of names and labels.

“As a kind of subset of that, I’ve always been fascinated by people’s nicknames. If a person is willing to share a nickname with you, there is a certain intimacy to that I’ve always been fascinated by. And No. 2, if a person shares a nickname with you, you get to know them in a way you wouldn’t if they didn’t share the nickname,” he said. “they’re ageless, timeless, genderless and they’ve been around forever and generally, most of the time they are always pretty fun.”

So last spring, Leaf did some internet research and found out no one has really ever wrote a book about the nicknames of the average Joes. He registered internet domain names - www.nicknamestories.com and www.thenicknameguy.com – and set up a web site last fall. Since then, he’s had thousands of hits, from about 20 states. His goal is to get a nickname from all 50 states by July 1.

But in the process, he’s doing something not a lot of people have done; using the internet to write a book – or, in this case, get a book that will practically write itself. Visitors to www.nicknamestories.com are encouraged to leave their own nickname stories, classified under categories of origin, from family nicknames to the playground, to work, physical attributes, nicknames one doesn’t like, military stories and others.

So far, he’s seeing nicknames fall into three basic categories. About 5 to 10 percent of them are what he calls “real show stoppers”; tremendously meaningful, impactful or ironic, the kind that get a “holy cow!” reaction. Another 20 percent of them are “mid-level”

By Brian Huber
News Graphic Staff

Ozaukee News Graphic
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fairly impactful, meaningful and pretty interesting. “The other half of all the stories are equally interesting but less compelling,” he said.

He mentioned a man in Colorado he has told about named Stewart Gordon, who was a World War II fighter pilot and was shot down over Europe. He ejected from his plane, struggled to open his parachute, landed safely and later learned he’d lost his boots in the process. He got them back somehow from an area farmer, and ever since has been known as “Boots”.

Or, there is a Wauwatosa man who had a nice car in high school and was nicknamed “Wheels”. Decades later, he was confined to a wheelchair after falling off his roof while cleaning his gutters. He submitted his nickname to the site as being one of irony. “He’s still ‘Wheels’”, Leaf said. “The beauty of it is, he is not bitter.”

Leaf said of the people who have contacted him, about 10 to 20 percent have more than one nickname. He’s heard of nicknames for people the subjects of which don’t know about; more often than not they are pejorative, Leaf said. About 25 percent to 35 percent tell him they don’t like their nicknames.

“That’s part of this project that’s been so fascinating to me: What if you get a nickname you don’t like?” Leaf said. “They take on a life of their own. That to me gets to the power of labels and how this stuff sticks. You could spend your lifetime being defined by your nickname.”

Leaf – he says he really has no nickname of his own other than being dubbed “The Nickname Guy” because of his project – said nicknames people give themselves, to him, are less credible and valid because they are generally self-serving or ego driven.

Leaf is getting some media attention, both locally and on the internet , but says he’s letting the process run it’s course, as the outcome will take care of itself. He is still collecting his data at this point. “I’ve been trusting my gut this whole time and when the book is ready to be written, I’ll know it,” Leaf said.