

Woog's World: Author draws on childhood in Westport for inspiration

By Dan Woog

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Photo: File Photo

Author and Staples High School grad Paul Backalenick.

To set realistic scenes, novelists often research their settings. For his latest work, Paul Backalenick did not have to. The 1968 Staples High School graduate has spent much of his career working in and around psychiatric hospitals. He's got a master's degree in counseling, and worked on the administrative and technology sides too.

But some of his most memorable early years were right here in Westport, at Hall-Brooke Hospital. He has not used any of those occasionally odd, always instructive experiences in "Carrie's Secret," a whodunit about a teenage psychiatric patient with a terrible secret, and the struggles of a 1980s suburban couple as they attempt to help and understand their daughter — at least, not specifically. Yet they opened Backalenick's eyes to the world of mental illness, and the many models of care for the vast number of patients afflicted by it.

Backalenick grew up "pretty sheltered" in what he calls "the lily white, liberal world" of Westport. His father Bill was a commercial artist; his mother Irene was a gifted writer. (Now in her 90s, she still produces poems.) Paul's writing was influenced by Staples teachers like Dick Leonard. He was a psychology concentrator at Brown University. The summer after sophomore year, he got a job at Hall-Brooke.

The facility on Long Lots Road — now St. Vincent's Medical Center — was originally a sanitarium. By the early 1970s it was a psychiatric hospital operating with some non-traditional ideas. Its "community approach to mental health" philosophy meant that non-medical staff members participated in treatment meetings. At one, the head of a unit contrasted Backalenick — the "good Paul" — with a patient who had the same name. He was the "bad Paul."

A custodian "danced with and romanced" female patients, Backalenick says. A schizophrenic boy and very depressed girl socialized with Backalenick at his parents' house. "That was not considered unusual," he notes. He also formed a guitar band with a former Staples classmate, who had had a psychotic break and was in the hospital.

Unlike most psychiatric hospitals, Hall-Brooke admitted patients directly — not after being medicated first in an emergency room. While most patients were "typical

depressed suburban housewives,” Backalenick says that others were “very, very disturbed.” One was more manic and disturbed than a veteran psychologist had ever seen.

Some patients were treated with electroconvulsive therapy. Backalenick saw the stunning effects that had on their behaviors and personalities.

This was the Brown student’s first experience with a psychiatric hospital. When he worked at “better” places — including two private ones in the Boston area — he realized that Hall-Brooke’s philosophy and treatment regimens were not standard.

After more than a decade, Backalenick earned an MBA from Boston College. He moved to the administrative side of healthcare, becoming an IT consultant for Andersen helping hospitals plan their technology investments.

In 2000 — melding his technological and creative sides — he started his own business. Nexxite offered graphic arts, web design, programming, branding, marketing, e-commerce and IT consulting services to clients. In 2018 he sold his internet company. “I know, that makes me sound like Bill Gates,” he laughs.

Backalenick — who had edited a literary magazine at Brown — turned his attention to writing. His first novel, “Development,” was a multi-layer mystery weaving together three stories about hopes, dreams, frustrations, disappointments, love and redemption. Set in Westport in the early 1970s, it told the tale of a man mired in an unhappy marriage, disconnected from his two teenage daughters, paralyzed in a mid-level career, and deep in debt. It earned excellent reviews, and inspired “Carrie’s Secret.”

“Mental health is one of the most complex constellations of problems in human nature,” Backalenick notes. “Brain chemistry, parenting, the environment — they all affect it.” Despite greater attention being paid to mental illness over the years, treatment “still has not come as far as we’d like,” he says. “Look at the advances in heart surgery. But you can’t just do a brain transplant and ‘fix’ someone.”

Still, society has come a long way from when Backalenick entered the field. Some people who were institutionalized in state hospitals were “never heard from again.” However, he worries that too many psychiatric patients have been deinstitutionalized — sent to the streets of cities — without follow-up care.

“It’s a frustrating business,” he admits. “It’s so hard to define ‘success.’”

It may be easier as an author to define the term. Book sales are one measure; so are reviews. “Development” sold well and earned plenty of praise. “Carrie’s Secret” — published on July 4 — seems well on its way to replicating that feat.

Right now, Paul Backalenick is promoting his second novel. The Westport Library has been in touch about an appearance for its mystery book club. If it’s live — not Zoom — perhaps he’ll swing by his old Hall-Brooke stomping grounds on the way over, just for a look.

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