

The Joy of the Happy Guide

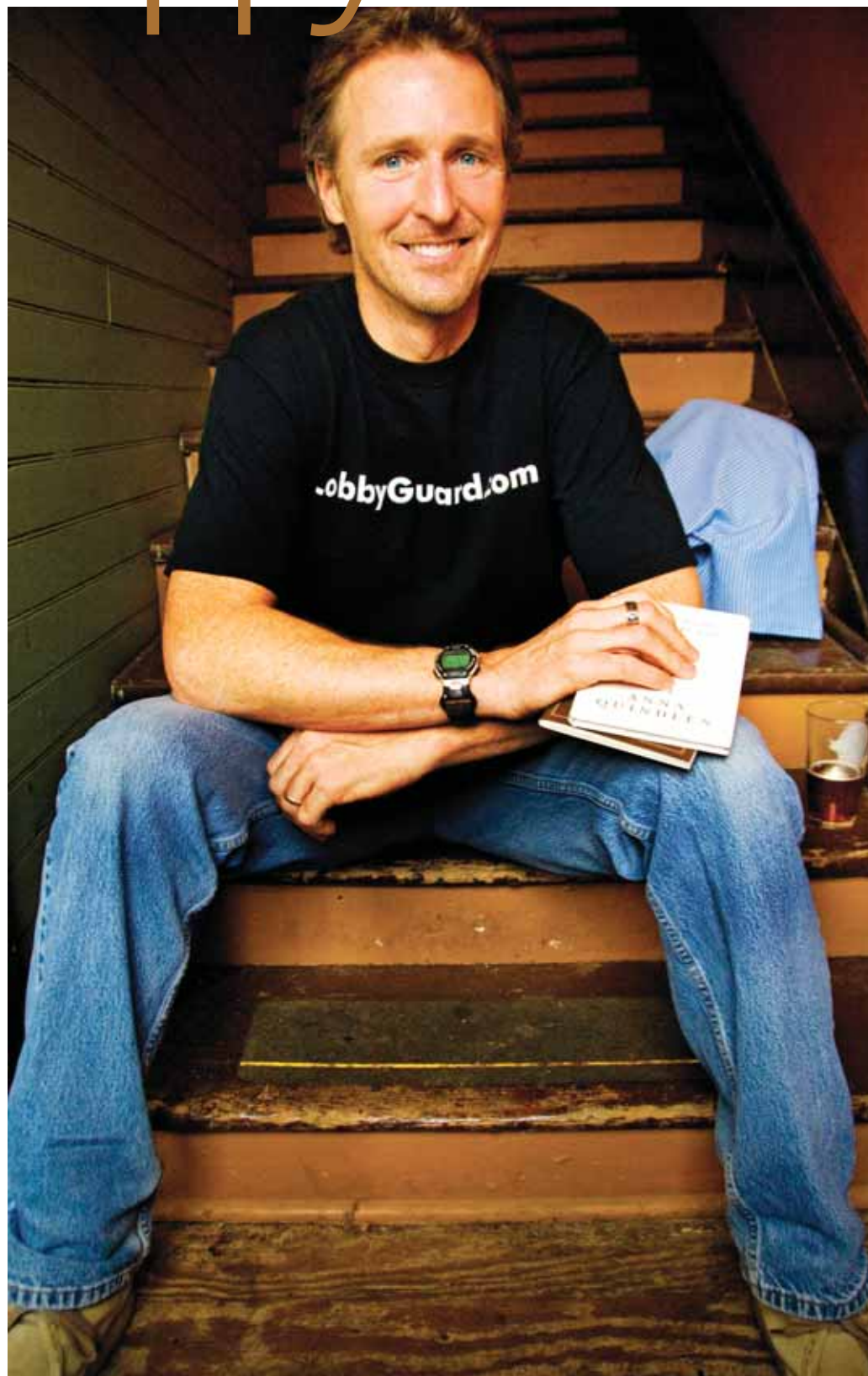
TEXT BY SHERRI OOSTERHOUSE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GERIN CHOINIÈRE

Davidson resident's book about happiness, service, gratitude and love is raising money for charity.

The only difference between Davidson resident Tony Brown and the million or so other people who read Anna Quindlen's book, *A Short Guide to a Happy Life*, is that Brown reacted—in writing. To understand how his word document made its way into a bound book, brilliantly packaged alongside its predecessor on Amazon.com, you have to believe that if you throw something out into the universe, it just might circle back.

Quindlen's book, originally a commencement speech intended to remind college graduates to live deeply each and every day is in contrast to Brown's sage advice, who boldly surmises that Yoggi Berra's quote "when you come to a fork in the road, take it" is both stupid and lazy. Some say Tony Brown's book, *A Happy Guide to a Short Life, A Response to Ms. Quindlen's Fine Book*, reads like a country western song. Others insist it changed their view, or at a minimum forced introspection, about life. One thing's for sure, this fifty-five page spirited debate about happiness, service, gratitude and love is raising money for local and national charities . . . and it's getting attention—even from Anna Quindlen.

What moved you to write a response to Anna Quindlen's book, *Short Guide to a Happy Life*? Truthfully, when I wrote *A Happy Guide to a Short Life, A Response to Ms. Quindlen's Fine Book (Happy Guide)*, I just read a page or paragraph and then put my reactions in the margins of her book. I never thought



“I love this . . . the sentence ‘I love my wife, and I am confused by my obvious lack of sensitivity’ should be put on a trivet.

Millions of women would buy it and hang it next to the stove.” – Anna Quindlen

anyone would ever read them. In her commencement speech in 1999, she hit dead on several issues that late baby boomers were facing in the early 2000s. When I got home, I just typed all my notes into a Word document that was ultimately fabricated, through a series of random encounters, into *Happy Guide*.

Tell me about your exchanges with Anna Quindlen? As I confessed in the front of my book, I didn’t know who Anna Quindlen was when I read her book. When I sent my original draft to my Australian editors, Michael Bogle and Peta Landman, they were very concerned that the

American legal system might frown on my “trading on her good name.” I promised them that we would not proceed without Ms. Quindlen’s approval. A few months later, my father-in-law met Ms. Quindlen at a book signing in the Washington, DC area. He told her about the *Happy Guide* manuscript, and she said she’d like to read it. So, I sent it to her. Her email response was as gracious as one could have hoped, and we put her excerpt on the back of the book. Just to keep her informed, I’ve sent her a couple update emails on our progress with both book sales and fund raising. I told her repeatedly that if she was unhappy with my book, then it would have a short life.

At what point did you decide that proceeds would fuel charitable organizations? As soon as the idea that *Happy Guide* was actually going to print form, there was a collective sense between everyone involved in the book that we needed to continue “making a circle” with this project. Team Australia, my editors and book designer, are family. They reached out to my cousin, Taylor Swift, for those awesome photographs. We all agreed that we’d donate all of our proceeds to charity, and that’s when the “PTA Magazine meets Live Strong” concept was developed. The Community Foundation worked really hard to make sure we could operationally and legally use *Happy Guide* as a “fund raising” tool for a wide-range of non-profit/charitable organizations.

What do you mean by “PTA Magazine meets Live Strong?” *Happy Guide* helps organizations raise serious money for serious needs, but you can only make so much at about six dollars per book. The gift store was created simply to increase the fundraising capacity of *Happy Guide*. We created a campaign that allows non-profits to make money on book sales and gifts. For example, when we helped the Levine Children’s Hospital raise money, we added a circle encrusted diamond ring as an extension of the book and a symbol of shared commitment. As of January, we’ve raised more than fifty-thousand dollars for about twelve organizations, including the Cannon School, Susan G. Komen Foundation and the Ada Jenkins Center.

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What does it mean to “make a circle”? Picture a Venn diagram, where three circles—symbolizing work, play, family and friends overlap. The more they overlap—meaning your work, play, friends and family intersect, the more this single set of priorities come together to create a very bright flicker of happiness. In my experience, when people can draw these circles right on top of each other, they make it impossible for anyone to tell at any single point in time they are at work, play, or doing something for their friends and family.

You said in the book, “I love my wife, and I’m confused by my obvious lack of sensitivity.” Why did you write this, and how did it end up on a kitchen trivet? In Ms. Quindlen’s *Short Guide*, there’s a part of the speech where she itemizes her various roles and relationships. I do the same in *Happy Guide*. So when it came to my role as a husband, I just blurted out my ink blot response to Quindlen’s view of herself as a wife; she says “I am a good friend to my husband . . . I show up, I listen. I try to laugh.” My version was about my lack of sensitivity towards my wife. When Ms. Quindlen read my book, for some

“Make it impossible for anyone to tell at any single point in time if you are at work, play, or doing something for your friends and family.”

reason—maybe she’d just had the one billionth conversation with her husband about something he’d ignored or forgotten—that particular sentence struck a chord with her. When she suggested someone put the “lack of sensitivity” sentence on a trivet, we thought she was right and decided that someone would be us. You can buy it on a BBQ apron, too!

You also said that unlike Quindlen, “I have never been asked to speak to a graduating class of seniors.” Since the publication of the book, have you been asked? Well as a matter of fact I have . . . a gentleman who works for the Computer Science Department at NC State University read *Happy Guide* and wrote me an email. He said that he’d like to give me an opportunity to change my statement in the book and wondered if I’d like to address the graduating class of 2008. He felt like the *Happy Guide* message was in fact something graduating seniors might need to hear. For a variety of unrelated made-up reasons, I politely declined. It was quite an honor to be asked, and I might one day wish I’d done it.

The color photography in the book is amazing . . . Tell me about the pictures . . . and your online gift store. I agree . . . I think the photographs are actually the best part of the book. My cousin, Taylor Adam Swift, took those shots while traveling all across the United States. He’s got an artistic gift that is wrapped up in a very spiritually-evolved ambition. When the editors were trying to select how many and which photos would be used in the book, I told them to use the ones that looked like God had taken them. I’ve had several people come back and say, “Hey I bought your book, and I love it. Those photos are absolutely awesome! Not sure when I’ll have a chance to read it.”

In the book, you talk about death and your experience with those around you who have died. What do you want it to say on your tombstone? Tony McLean Brown, born: October 12, 1960. Here lies a man who loved his family and lived each day as if it were his last. It remains a mystery to him and all who knew him as to why God chose to bestow so many blessings upon this common man. *

Visit www.happyguidetoashortlife.com for more information about the book, charitable assistance and gift items that help worthy causes. Go make a circle!

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