

Catching YOUR Memories

THE PODCAST

WITH DIANE ATWOOD

**An interview with Gary Chalk, author of Living Retired
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Diane Atwood: Hey everyone, this is Diane Atwood, and you are listening to the Catching Your Memories podcast. Everybody has an inspiring story, a memory, or an experience to share if only someone would ask. That's where I come in. In this episode, I have a conversation with Gary Chalk who hails from Canada. Gary has had a long and winding career, actually several successful careers. Not bad for a guy who barely made it through high school. He's now retired, but I don't think he quite got that message. He spends a lot of time and creative energy on writing a weekly humor column, called appropriately, Living Retired. He had about 3000 readers at one time but had to take a break for a few years. He's now back at it and just as funny as ever. He's got one of those minds that sees the humor in just about everything.

Well, hi there, and welcome Gary Chalk all the way from Canada. Where exactly in Canada are you?

Gary Chalk: Good morning, Diane. Yes, I'm living in, uh, a city of 100,000 people, just about an hour west of Toronto. So, if where you are in Maine, just drive south to Boston, turn right, head west and eight hours later you'll be where I am.

Diane Atwood: Only eight hours?

Gary Chalk: Eight hours from bo? Yes, only, only. But we've, uh, traveling to Maine for so many years, it's a trip that we sort of enjoy and always look forward to.

Diane Atwood: And how is it that you happen to come to Maine every year?

Gary Chalk: Many years ago, we had friends who, they every summer, would go to a place called Kennebunkport, Maine. We hadn't heard of it. And they

always raved about it and it got to the point they were spending two and three weeks at a time in Kennebunkport and they said, you should go some time. We were actually the first time we went down to Baltimore visiting my sister-in-law and from there we drove up and uh, well we fell in love with the place. And from then on, every year, at least once a year, we would go to Kennebunkport. And from there we sort of expanded our interest of Maine. So anywhere from about Kittery, when you cross the bridge and the sign says Maine, the way life should be and that it is, up to Portland, up to, uh, to Freeport, to LL Bean. I'm wearing my LL Bean shirt here today. Oh, good for you. Yes. That's the area of Maine that we really enjoy, and we've gone at least once a year for the past 30 years until COVID.

Diane Atwood: Oh, yeah. Changed everything. For those listeners who don't know, I am based in Maine, near Portland, and so the next time you and your wife come to Maine, you're gonna have to send me a text and maybe we can meet in Portland down in the Old Port area. I'm sure that's where you hang out.

Gary Chalk: Exactly. Exactly. We've been to many of the restaurants through that area, and still to this day, I subscribe to the Portland Press Herald, which I read online every day. I enjoy watching Channel six, your old television station where you worked, and watching 207 and so I know a lot about that area. It's a second home that sometimes I wish was our first.

Diane Atwood: Well, you could do something about that. Did you know that Pat Callahan, the lead anchor, was retiring?

Gary Chalk: Yes, I saw that.

Diane Atwood: And you're retired, too. Now, you were in the communications field. I don't think you did any television, right? You were mostly radio?

Gary Chalk: Pretty well virtually radio. At the odd time I did a little bit of appearance work where I was interviewed for television, but never, I was on air as a host or anything, but a radio broadcaster on air. All my life wanted to be a radio announcer growing up and managed to do it. And started where every radio announcer starts at a very, very small radio station where I made lots of mistakes and terrible, embarrassing on air, guffaws, goffs, and things. And so then, managed to get to a larger station where I worked the graveyard shift overnight and eventually made it to afternoon drive and some morning drive. And that was all in a period of 12 years. And after 12 years, this was back in, uh, 1980, the business changed and it was going from a personality radio, which I really enjoyed and wanted to be a part of, to format. Play the music, turning the microphone off. I wanted to play less music and turn the microphone on.

Diane Atwood: To really engage with people. That's what you like to do?

Gary Chalk: Exactly, yes. Create a nice rapport with listeners and, uh, it's really theater of the mind, and I quite enjoy that. So after, uh, that I, that which all that took place in a compressed amount of time, 12 years. I wanted to do something more entrepreneurial, and a friend of my wife and myself called me on a Sunday evening and he said, Gary, because I had confided in him I was potentially looking at leaving radio. And he said, Gary, there's the advertising agency that I use. They've been around a long time. They're bringing in some young blood and would like some new partners potentially. You should talk to them. So, I went to the agency and joined, and it was a small company. I was the fifth employee and I stayed there again, that magic 12, 12 years. And for 12 years enjoyed myself. We grew the business from five employees up to pretty well 30. And, there was a lot of expertise and knowledge that I gained and I enjoyed that business as well.

Diane Atwood: Can you tell us a little bit more about what you did there?

Gary Chalk: Yes. I was, initially, an account executive handling a couple of their smaller accounts, but my background has always been sort of the creative end. So ultimately, as we grew and we admitted more partners, including myself, my responsibility became that of securing new business. And we had a bit of a novel approach to do it. And frequently in my life, I've always sort of thought outside of the box and done things a little bit differently. Instead of trying the usual routine of getting on a list or, uh, to be shortlisted to pick up an account, we would come up with ideas and then go present it to a client. So for example, I remember once, for a back-to-school campaign here in Canada, there were three at the time, very large national chains. There was a bookstore which had about 240 locations. There was a shoe store that had about 300 locations and there was a photography store. This was back when everybody bought cameras and took photos and took the film in, et cetera. And they had about 300 locations and I discovered that the vast majority, probably 90% plus of these three separate entities, they were all in shopping malls all across Canada. So we developed what we called the ABCs of back to school. A stood for the name of the national shoe organization, which was Agnew. B was Black's Photography, and C was Cole's bookstores. And so that was the ABCs. And we developed a campaign that we pitched to them that basically said all your customers are in the store at school time. And that is a tremendous busy time at those times for certainly, the shoe business, kids going back to school and certainly for the bookstore Cole's and what we discovered that for Black's Photography at that time, the number two period of most active business for them was after summer when people had been away on vacation, they'd come back and they'd have all these rolls of film that they would take in to have, put into pictures. We sort of put that all together and got that campaign. And then after that came, then the campaign concluded was successful. Those companies frequently would come on board as a client of ours. So, that's sort of how we grew our business and got very successful.

Diane Atwood: So, you would come up with an advertising campaign that in those days would probably include television and radio. That's changed these days, not so much, right?

Gary Chalk: Yes, exactly. Online didn't exist back then.

Diane Atwood: Yeah. Whole new ballgame. Yes. I do remember when I left television, I went to be the manager of marketing and public relations for a local hospital. And I worked with one ad agency in particular. And I have to say that I loved going over to their office when they were going to present their ideas to me. Because it was just a whole team full of creative people. You had the people who crunched the numbers and showed the value that way of the campaign. But then there was all those visuals, they would kind of hide them behind their back and bring one out.

Gary Chalk: That reminds me of a funny story. We were, uh, doing a presentation. We had done some work for a company that was in the cable TV industry, the largest provider in Canada, and they invited us to go to pitch for their annual business. We were nowhere close to being in that league, but we had done some minor projects. So we went, and I can always remember we got in the, they were located in downtown Toronto. 26th floor of this skyscraper, we get off and there's this beautiful boardroom, all glass windows. And I was doing the presentation and I was relaxed and calm, but you mentioned somebody holding the props behind their back. One of my other partners had this prop behind his back and it was a large, probably a poster size of this brochure that was gonna be part of the campaign. And he held it up and at the appropriate time and I'm looking at the audience, the members, and they're sort of looking a little quizzical. And I turn and look at my partner. He's so nervous. He's holding this brochure, this large poster, and they can't read it cuz it's shaking so hard. So I remember those presentations well.

Diane Atwood: Well did, him showing his true humanity, showing his nervousness, help you in any way?

Gary Chalk: We got not that account. I think they realized we were way out of our league, but they recognized our creative and our want to dive in and think outside of the box. And so, they became our largest client, quite honestly. We were doing all their print work all across the country.

Diane Atwood: But it took a while?

Gary Chalk: It took a while. It took a while. And when I still see some of those people, we still chuckle about the presentation of the boardroom and everybody trying to read this poster that was shaking like there's an earthquake or something.

Diane Atwood: Well, you know, some people want those slick presentations and some people appreciate when you're revealing your true self, even if it's nervousness.

Gary Chalk: Yes, exactly. We did it that day in spades.

Diane Atwood: Well, so you were there for 12 years doing that.

Gary Chalk: Yeah, I was there for 12 years doing that. Enjoying it. It began to be a lot of travel. You know, we're located say about an hour west of Toronto, a city of about a hundred thousand people and there weren't an awful lot of national accounts after our type of services locally. So it was mostly travel to and from Toronto three days a week, and then some other national travel on top of that. It was going well, but I was getting a little burned out from it, but enjoying it. And then in, uh, it would've been 1992, I got a phone call in the middle of the night and my mother had said that my father had had an emergency. I lived nearby and, I went over, he had been, uh, receiving treatment for cancer and he woke up in the middle of the night and fell and was unconscious. And, um, 24 hours later he passed away. I went back. It shocked me. And, um, went back to work in a few days and for the next month or so, my mother was just having a lot of difficulty with her grief and trying to, you know, meet with lawyers and accountants and everything you have to do and life insurance people thing. And she wasn't doing well. So I went to my partners and I said, guys, I wanna take a month off. I'm not getting much done here these days cause I'm helping my mother so much. I'll take a month off and I will tend to her needs, which I did. At this point of the story, I guess, Diane, I should backtrack and say that after I joined the advertising agency, the gentleman who had called me on that Sunday evening to indicate that perhaps I should talk to the agency, he announced his retirement. And at that time he was 55 years old. Now, I don't know whether it happened in the states or not, but here in Canada, there was a life insurance company, which was called Mutual Life. It's now Sun Life, which I believe is part of TD in your area. But they're a Canadian company. They had a campaign called Freedom at 55 back in those days, and they promoted investments and proper planning, and you do it well you retire at 50. And well, George retired at 55, and my wife and I were invited to his retirement party. He was a vice president of a large insurance company, not Mutual Life, mind you. Driving home, my wife and I, and we were in our young thirties at the time. Jan said, wouldn't it be interesting to be able to, when, when we're at whatever age, not necessarily 55, be able to retire and defining retirement as doing what we want to do. We'd still need to have income and work, but we have enough resources behind us, investments that we don't have to necessarily work the job with all the pressure and, and the dollars. And we thought that's interesting. Well, we, we got home, we started to think about it and we lined ourselves up with a financial advisor and we had some good luck with the markets and we had a lot of effort that we put into it and saved money. And so, when I was 42 when my father passed away and I took that month off, I started to think and talked with my wife and Jan and I said, you know, maybe

this is the time to make that change. She, about a year previously, had already made it. She was in the IT business at a large international packaged goods company, doing a lot of traveling. We had a son and we were juggling, there's no doubt about that. But everybody was doing well and she had the opportunity for a buyout and she took it. And what she did, as we said, going back to that strategy that we would need to do work, but we'll pick the job we want to do. So, what Jan did was she always had an interest in the Special Olympics. So, she made some contacts and eventually found herself as the coordinator of a set of Winter Olympics for Special Olympians. And then a year and a half later the, uh, Summer Olympics for Special Olympians. She absolutely loved it and that was sort of her calling. And so I decided, yes. So I went back and I left the agency and took two years off. I did some minor consulting out of the house. I had maybe two or three clients. And my approach was, I'm only available mornings Monday to Friday. If you ever think it's gonna be an afternoon, I'm not your guy. It worked. I had a couple of clients and made a little bit of money and that was it. Well, along that time those two or three years after I retired and sold my shares in the agency, a friend of ours we had met. Was the chief of emergency medicine at a local hospital. And we'd met him socially, and he mentioned one time we were together, Gary, this hospital, a two-hospital site system here in Branford, they're revamping their public affairs division. You should apply for the job. And I, I didn't want it and I didn't bother, but, unbeknownst to me, Jean, the physician, and Jan, my wife, sort of kept talking in the background and eventually said, you gotta apply. So, I did. One thing led to another, and I was hired. It was interesting because I didn't want the job. So, I had no pressure going through the interviews, and there was a series of five interviews culminating with the fifth interview, uh, meeting with members of the board of the hospital and members of the foundation and the senior administration. And still at that point, I just, I wasn't flippant, but, uh, I was polite and answered the questions. But I guess perhaps partly because I was under no stress for the interviews, they gave me the job and I worked there for 17 years. Absolutely enjoyed it. It was an opportunity to work with a very eclectic group of individuals from medicine, from the non medicine side and a terrific leadership team that I worked alongside. And I actually got to bring some of my, uh, creative skills. And, as I say, we approached communications in healthcare a little bit outside of the box, the way most organizations always have done it.

Diane Atwood: So it wasn't the marketing department, they called it the communications department. So how might that be different?

Gary Chalk: I believe in the United States, well, I know you have a different system. There's a lot of for-profit, healthcare, that's not the case, private, it's not the case here in Canada. We have, uh, public healthcare, which some people think can be improved upon. It can, but it really is a remarkable system. You pay through your taxes, so when you go to the hospital or your doctor, you quote don't pay. So it was more of communications talking about what was going on. For example, at the organization I was at, we built a large parking

garage, indoor parking garage, an eight-story tower. There was some moving of between hospitals. There was a lot of communication. So, where I got to use my creative skills, for instance, in them building this large tower. This was back at the time I recall Boston was going through their Big Dig and so we had the Big Build and we had this two-year build of a new hospital. We had all sorts of communications activities about that. And then after the Big Build, we had the Big Move and we had to move patients between areas of the hospital and things of that nature. So, it was mostly on the communication side, and then it expanded into communications, with donors and potential donors.

Diane Atwood: Okay. So you have to consider donors as well in Canada?

Gary Chalk: Correct. Yes, yes. Yeah. There's never enough money.

Diane Atwood: Never for anything. No, exactly. Which is a whole other conversation. But, what was your position? What was your title?

Gary Chalk: Director of Communications and Development. That was it. Oversaw a staff of about 10 people.

Diane Atwood: Okay. And did you reach a point where you knew that it was time to transition out of that work?

Gary Chalk: Yes. As with all things I always considered myself a person who embraces change. I like that. But the healthcare business was changing. We'd had a change in senior leadership at the hospital, and my job was certainly protected. I reported directly to the president and the chair of the board and that was fine. But You know, I was 62, and I decided, you know what, let's try something different. And something different meant retiring and not knowing what I was going to do. I remember that the new president came in and he said, Gary said, when you, and I told him what I met, I said, I, I'm not gonna be here forever, but, I certainly am planning on continuing. He said, well, I just want five months' notice when you leave. And I said, oh, sure, not a problem. Because I had a lot of the institutional knowledge in the background in the community. He came from another province, et cetera. I instantly agreed. You know, it's funny. Two days afterward, I found myself sitting in my office. I'd go in early in the morning and I'd sit at my desk and I'm thinking, my head's not into this anymore. I went to him and he was very gracious and they hurried up the hiring process and got somebody in and I did some onboarding and May 1st of, uh, Well, that would be 11 years ago now. May 1st, well that would be 11 years ago now, I was out the door.

Diane Atwood: But you didn't totally disconnect, did you? You maintained a connection with them.

Gary Chalk: Correct. Yes. there's been another subsequent change in leadership at that hospital. A new president came in about, uh, three or four years ago, and he had heard of me and contacted me and wanted to know if I would help with what he called strategic communications, which primarily was developing a communication plan to help them through some issues that they were having. And part of that communication plan I had recommended and he agreed to was something I called the Hospital Insider. For 12 years at the hospital, I wrote a weekly column in the local newspaper called Hospital Insider. And it was all about things that were going on in the hospital and I always like to put the person in the story and it seems to come alive. So, um, I wrote that for every week. So for the past four years, I've been writing Hospital Insider once again. And, uh, but it's only every second week now, and it, uh, keeps my finger back in an area that I have a lot of interest in. And it's our community's hospital, so it's nice to be associated with it.

Diane Atwood: Well, that's nice. And also, I have to say, it keeps your brain sharp.

Gary Chalk: Exactly. You got that.

Diane Atwood: Keeps you engaged on many levels. Um, so at what point did you start writing this humor column?

Gary Chalk: Well, there's a story in itself. The column is called Living Retired. When I retired, I remember it was the 1st of May, 11 years ago. And I sent out an email to about six close friends on that first day, the Monday. I said I'm now living retired. And I made a joke about something and I sent it to four or five close friends. A couple of 'em wrote back and said that was really funny. Really quite enjoyed that. It was a nice way to start our Monday. And something twigged in my mind and I thought, well, I'll write something next Monday. And I sent it out and it just grew from there. And, it's about a 600 to an 800-word humor column that I write every week. I have a website now, and it started to grow. And it got to the point there were over 3000 readers who registered for this by email. And every Monday morning I would send this out by email to people all over, mostly in Canada and the United States and some people in other areas, uh, throughout the world, in Europe mostly. What I discovered was that I was talking to people who had like interests, but I was talking totally in humor and I involve myself, I involve my wife. They're sort of first-person stories usually, and people started to relate to that. Hmm. And they'd look forward to it. And as I said, it was over 3000 readers every week. And I did that for five or six years. By that point in time, and I'm not a techy person, but sometimes the management of the distribution list of emails changing and things, it just got to be too much for me. But also at the same time, my mother was mid-nineties, in deteriorating health. My mother-in-law, Jan's mother, was in her mid-nineties and was going through some health issues. And it was to the point that we needed to provide more care for them, which was totally acceptable. So I stopped writing the column and for the next year and a half or

two years, we cared for our two mothers. And about two years ago, they passed away and my wife said, you know, Gary, you really enjoyed doing that Living Retired column. Why don't you start it up again? So I did. But instead of going back to those 3000 people that were on this mailing list, and also there was a baby boomer's website, the leading one apparently in North America, they carried the column as well. I just started to grow the mailing list, and it's about 200 people that I send it out to right now. And it, uh, continues to grow. People are coming back and sometimes I look back at some of those initial couple years of columns and my writing has certainly changed and hopefully, I think it's improved since that point in time.

Diane Atwood: Did you take lessons on writing? I mean, a humor column has its own special touch to it. You're naturally funny, but then you have to translate your natural humor into words that tell a story.

Gary Chalk: You're right. And it's interesting, what one person finds funny, others do not. The column that I sent out this week I thought was one of my funniest. I always run them past Jan before I send them out, and she'll chuckle or she'll tell me where things need to improve or it doesn't flow, et cetera. I thought this one was one of my funniest ones, and Jan actually, when she read it before I finished it, she howled and I get lots of feedback every week. I have not got an awful lot of feedback from this column this week. I did get a, I got an email from a reader just 10 minutes before we started recording this podcast and said, Gary, that's your funniest, I've got tears in my eyes, laugh out loud.

Diane Atwood: I haven't read that one yet, so I will read it and, and comment.

Gary Chalk: it's all about getting your needles, all the vaccines, and the flu shot and things of that nature.

Diane Atwood: Jan is always in your column. Sometimes she's, um, like the butt of your joke, and she's good with that?

Gary Chalk: Yes, she's good with that. Although her mother, who was even in her late nineties, an absolutely brilliant individual had it all together. She was on my late mailing list and sometimes she didn't like the column because that was something about Jan. I think when people read enough of the columns week in, week out and that's again, part of, I think why it's successful. People get used to starting their week on Monday and getting the email, uh, they start to realize that, obviously a lot of the stuff I make humor about is, is made up. I try to take shots of myself as well. You do? And, yep. And I try to write about life experiences and going back to when I wrote for the Hospital Insider column, it was putting the person in the story.

Diane Atwood: You definitely do that. And I remember the first time I read one or two, I did have that feeling, my gosh, did, did this really happen? Or has he taken, you know, a kernel and woven it into this fantasmagorical story?

Gary Chalk: You nailed that, Diane. I still chuckle. It happened even last night. We've been redoing our basement family room and we got in the bed last night and Jan said I think we should have some people over. Because I've turned our basement family room into a reading room and we'll have some people over. And I found that funny. I said we're gonna invite them over to read? Don't bring, don't bring a bottle of wine, bring your Stephen King novel. I just sort of made a note of it and many of the ideas come from conversations Jan and I have around the house, but they are certainly embellished.

Diane Atwood: Okay. So you and Jan are in a conversation. She says something and you get this kernel of an idea. Do you tune her out at that point, not even listening to the rest of what she has to say because your brain is busy writing the story in your head?

Gary Chalk: Yes. I frequently say to her, Jan, please, when you say these things, let's do it earlier in the day. Cuz last night we're in bed, I'm trying to fall asleep now my brain is engaged and I want to get up and start writing. And if I do that, I'll be up half the night. That's for sure.

Diane Atwood: But you find inspiration in a lot of things?

Gary Chalk: I, I do, they're, they're mostly life circumstances, and I observe things different. I think that's where it comes from, quite honestly. Some people sort of see, see the glass half full or half empty. I typically see the scenario as that's strange, that's odd, that's funny. And perhaps some others don't.

Diane Atwood: And everything you see, you could make a story about. Doesn't even have to be Jan or something that she said?

Gary Chalk: Exactly. I'm reaching behind me. I have a book here, it's called The Official Dictionary of Sarcasm, and they go through all the letters of the alphabet, and they will give their sarcastic definition of that word. I just open here, right, right now. Oven, they say a home appliance that is more successfully powered with electricity as opposed to gas. Not so much of the interest of the energy efficiency, but so that there will be one less thing around you to use in the event that you decide to end it all.

Diane Atwood: I did not, I didn't expect that.

Gary Chalk: That's just the one. So when I challenge my brain sometimes, I'll open up that book and I'll, I won't read their definition of oven. I'll see oven and I will think in my mind, what funny things do I see about oven? And just

opening that right now, what I see funny about oven is what happened yesterday. We had quite a windstorm here and all our digital clocks were, the power was lost. And I had to go setting all these digital clocks, one of which is on the oven. And I try to coordinate the oven digital clock with the digital clock in the microwave oven, which is right above it, with the digital clock on our phone, which is three steps away. And I set them all for the same time. But then I have to press start for all three. For all three. So, that's how I would've defined oven today.

Diane Atwood: That's funny.

Gary Chalk: Sometimes I think I have a great story. It'll be a great column. And I have three or four in my file right now. I've got about 150 words. I think it's some of the best 150 words of humor I've written, but I don't have any more than 150 words. Well, you know, it doesn't make a column.

Diane Atwood: But you don't always have to have the very lengthy column.

Gary Chalk: You know, you're right. You're exactly right. My wife, as I said, she often will come across ideas, what I consider an idea for a column. Gary, just let the experience be the experience. You don't have to translate it into something funny.

Diane Atwood: But you know, it's in your blood, right? You can't help yourself. It's how your brain works.

Gary Chalk: Yes. My mother was a very funny lady from the perspective of, recognizing things that were humorous in life and she had a big laugh and that's probably where I got my sense of humor from. Back when I was a child. My father would laugh and laugh and just my mother, just finding certain things funny.

Diane Atwood: I love that. I love that. Yeah. Because there's often so many things to be worried about these days.

Gary Chalk: Oh yeah, exactly. Yeah. We all need humor, don't we?

Diane Atwood: Yes, we do. How do you think writing these columns has influenced you as a human being, as a person who is getting older and who is in retirement?

Gary Chalk: That's an interesting question, Diane. I think for sure, as you suggested earlier, you have to keep your brain engaged and I've always been a person who's embraced change, but as we grow older, I don't know whether I want more change. You know, more change means health issues, loss of friends, concerns about your family, how well they're doing. Things of that nature. So I

guess in some regards, writing this column is a distraction to me. I can sit down to write and I frequently. I write on my iPad because I'll sit in a comfortable chair during the summertime. I'll sit out on our deck and if we go on vacation, I'll take it with me and I just right away at the iPad and I can lose myself. And as you know, as a writer, there's so much editing. It's edit, edit, edit, edit, edit. And then edit some more. So, it takes, I don't know, probably 20, 25 hours every week just to write my bit of what I think is funny. So I think it's important that you have something to do. I know when I first retired, I would go to a, I've always been a person who gets up in the morning and has to go somewhere. I've always been that way. So when I retired, I would get up in the morning and I'd drive to a local coffee shop. I'd probably pass six or seven before I got to the one I got to because I just wanted to make a trip out of it. And so I would get there and I can still remember seeing a group of, I don't know, six or eight men sitting at a table. They were obviously retired and they'd be chatting and they'd be there every day and I would be there for 20 minutes reading the paper, having my coffee or whatever. And it was near a gym that I belonged to at the time. And I remember once I went after the gym, I went back to meet somebody or something at the coffee shop, and this same group of men were at that table. And it's at that point that I sort of thought, you know what? I think this is their retirement. They get outta bed and they come and have a coffee with each other and share some camaraderie, but it's 11:30. They're still there. And I'm not so sure they have something else in their life to do. Yeah. So I think passion is something that helps us as we grow older. And as I said, you have other concerns that enter your mind as you age. But I think if you have a passion for something else, it fills the void.

Diane Atwood: I think also a passion for wanting to learn new things, for still having that spark of interest. you read about something and, oh, I wanna learn more, or...

Gary Chalk: Yes, I'm, I'm very much self-taught. I never went to college or university. I barely made it through high school, but I'm very much a self-taught person and when I started writing this column, over the years I've actually reached out to different humor writers. And at times I found I was sort of like, Dave Berry to me is just one of the most funny humor writers you'd come across. At some point in time. I was trying to write for him, like write in his style. That wasn't me, but I've reached out. There's a woman in Connecticut, Laverne Bardi, she's a syndicated columnist throughout the States in humor. She helped me a lot and others as well have, I've always sort of reached out to people and said, hey, here's my work. What do you think about it? I'm not afraid for you to beat me up and I'll, I'll learn from your criticism. It's been a good process. That's my way of learning.

Diane Atwood: That's brave because so many of us are afraid of looking stupid or failing or whatever, you know?

Gary Chalk: Maybe it's just that I'm silly enough to think that my stuff is good enough to be critiqued. I dunno.

Diane Atwood: It does show a level of self-awareness as well as self-confidence. True. So good for you. I'm gonna tuck that away in my brain. I'm curious about how when you had the 3000 readers and you also had all those technical things that you had to worry about. Right? So this time around, you've got a smaller audience. It may build, it is building. So who's gonna take care of the technical aspects? Or do you have somebody that's doing that?

Gary Chalk: Well, no. I write it on my iPad and I just send it out by a blind carbon copy, though every week I enter a couple hundred names in it and send it out. What I was using before when I had so many readers was an app that I had downloaded, and it was difficult, mostly because of my inability to do anything technical. I always say when it comes time to change a light bulb, the first thing I do is go get my hammer, because I'm just not a technical person. And that app allowed me to send it out to a lot of people, but it created a lot of grief. So now I'm just down putting in people's names in the secure blind copy area of the email and send it out. And it is starting to grow. It's up to a couple hundred again now. People find it funny and they recommend it over to this person or whatever, and it's starting to grow. And who knows, maybe Jan will be retiring soon. She's back doing a consulting project for a university. Maybe she'll retire soon and she can become my IT department.

Diane Atwood: That sounds wonderful. I do wanna go back to the beginning of Gary Chalk. that momentous occasion on the day that he was born. Were you born funny? Hmm. Glib?

Gary Chalk: I think I was, to tell you the truth. And I think part of my humor, Diane, came about because I was not a good student in school, and that's no fault to the teachers, the education system. My parents, they tried hard, they had tutors for me through high school. I did not enjoy going to school. So I think what I did was I developed a sense of humor. Got me in a fair amount of trouble. In grade 10, I failed. I was constantly getting detentions. some of it was for silly things I was doing. Some of it I thought was humorous. I remember in grade 10, a science class, and I can't remember what it was about. You would think it was math, but it was science and had something to do with, we had all these parallelograms and the teacher was up there and he was, instead of labeling them A, B, C, D, he had P and Q or whatever. And I just sort of thought, that's sort of funny. Why wouldn't you use A and B or something? And I remember some student acted up and he said something to the student and then I said, yeah, mind your Ps and Qs. Well, the entire class howled because it was relevant with what he was teaching. But I ended up down in the office and serving a detention that evening. So I think humor was an escape, was an outlet to make me enjoy school, I guess. I think I was a square peg in a round hole through all of school. I didn't enjoy it. I talk openly about the fact that I failed grade 10. I probably should have failed before, but they always pushed me on,

pushed me on. And now Gary is in grade 10, and in the second year, because I knew a little bit of the content of what was being taught. And again, I wasn't a rude person, I don't think, but I was a little off the center, I guess. In grade 10 we had to write and deliver a speech. And it was to be a 10-minute presentation. And I can still remember the teacher, Mr. Campbell, a tall gentleman, and there were about 35 students in our class. For some reason, I was towards the end. So for a couple of months, every English class, another student would get up and deliver their presentation. They talked about things like the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway, communism, NASA, things of this nature. Very serious topics that they had researched and they would get up and we were all given presentation skills of how to write little brief notes and have them hidden in your hand. And this type of thing. Came time for my presentation. I put it together the night before and they had spent months doing this and I did mine the night before. And Mr. Campbell got up and he said, our presenter today is Gary Chalk and I got up and walked to the front of the class and stood behind the podium. I said good afternoon students and Mr. Campbell, the topic I have selected to talk about today is Tiddly Winks and everybody just howled. Well, I didn't know whether to look at Mr. Campbell or not, because I didn't know how he would react to that. So I thought, well, I'm into it now. So I said, uh, you know, we have to know, do you tiddle your wink or do you wink your tiddle? This was pre-online times. I just made it up. I just made everything up about, I knew nothing about Tiddly Winks and I talked about the National Tiddly Wink League. I went on for 10 minutes and I drew on the board you had to have a six-foot circumference and the shot glass in the middle. And I, it was total fabrication. People howled. And I remember at the end thinking, well, that's it. Um, I don't know whether he's gonna throw me out of the class or whatever. He stood up. Mr. Campbell, and said, uh, Gary, you earned a perfect 10. Wow. Wow. So I felt good.

Diane Atwood: And you secured your place in the world.

Gary Chalk: Not so sure where, but yes.

Diane Atwood: Well, for having trouble in school, you certainly have had a successful life since. You did make it through college?

Gary Chalk: No, no. In Canada, in Ontario specific back then we had in high school, secondary school, was grade nine through 13. So you went 9, 10, 11, 12, and even 13. Some people would stop after grade 12, but I did go through grade 13. To make it through grade 13, in grade 12, I ran for president of the students' council, which I was fortunate to be elected. So I attended grade 13. But I remember in grade 13, the guidance department calling me down and they knew me because I was president of the students' council. And they also knew me because I was continually getting into trouble and serving detentions. And they called me down, they said, Gary, my gosh, you don't have anything to get you into a college or a university. In grade 13 I took a home economics course. What was I doing there? I love to cook. I do admit that, but not a home economics

course. I also took an art course. I don't know how to sharpen a pencil, so I'd taken all these courses, and plus I'd failed all these other courses. And they said, there's nothing here to, you can't get into a college or university anywhere. And so I said, don't worry, I'm, I'm gonna be a radio announcer. And my thinking of a radio announcer was, you have to know a little bit about something, but not a heck of a lot about anything. You want to be able to at least engage in a conversation with your listeners or the person you're chatting with or interviewing and to be able to hold your own. And so after high school, Jan, who I was dating at the time, she went away to take mathematics at university. All my friends studied at university and I got a job at a sunrise-sundown radio station that had 200 Watts, and I was in my glory.

Diane Atwood: Well, I'm really happy for you. You are a true success story, I think. You're somebody who it feels like you understood yourself, what you're capable of doing, and you are not still afraid, as you call it, to think outside the box, to try something that might be challenging. You certainly have been successful and I think are an inspiration.

Gary Chalk: Oh, thank you. That's very kind of you, Diane. I've always said, you put your toe in the water and it creates ripples. And when I left jobs, they were all in communications, mind you, from radio broadcasting to the advertising agency to healthcare, and now into this living retired humor column. I've always said you close a door, but you automatically open a door, and don't be afraid to put your toe in the water.

Diane Atwood: That's right. And you wanna be careful about those transitions. And you don't burn any bridges.

Gary Chalk: You're exactly right. And I'm sure I upset people. I know teachers, they just would shake their heads at me. I know my parents were probably, I don't know whether disappointed is too strong of a word that I didn't succeed in education, but I remember when I eventually got a job and this is no disrespect. I recall when I got a job in a medium-sized market, which was a radio station here in my hometown in Branford. I was coming home and I can remember my dad — I was on the air from noon till three at the start — and I remember my father once saying something people at his office where he worked, they said, hey, I listened to your son on the radio today. So I think I made them proud then.

Diane Atwood: Oh, I'm sure they were proud of you. Absolutely. I think so. Well, you bring a lot of joy.

Gary Chalk: Well, joy. I always say when you point a finger, there's three or four fingers pointing back at yourself and just make sure you do it in the right way. My most fun is and I've realized I write this every, it takes me a week to write, but every Monday morning when I hit send with that column, I look

forward to what I get back and there's probably six or 10 people that respond after every column. But some other weeks there'll be somebody totally outta the blue. Most time I don't even know them. Somehow they listed for the column and they'll send back, you made my day, or whatever. And that's what makes my day.

Diane Atwood: Well, you've made me laugh, that's for sure. And, and you've made this interview fun. I appreciate that. We should let people know how, how can they get on your email list?

Gary Chalk: Sure. Email me. That's the easiest way G C H A L K@me.com. G chalk@me.com. Or they can go on my website and I post all the columns right there. And that website is www.livingretired.press.

Diane Atwood: Dot.press. That's Canadian? That's just how they do it in Canada?

Gary Chalk: I just had a friend. Again, I change light bulbs with hammers. I have a friend who does websites and he came up with that domain and that's what I use. I don't know where it's from, but it's been working and it grows and I'm always interested in adding more people. I'm at that stage where I know the feedback I'm getting, and particularly from a couple of humor writers who've supported me over the years, it's, it's ready to grow. I'm not in it for money. I don't wanna make any money. I know the industry has changed, but if I could get it in the Portland Press Herald, boy, I would love that. That would be the feather in my cap, that's for sure. I send the column to the publisher of the newspaper. She gets it every week, so hopefully, sometime she may read it and say, hey, it's time to get you into print. We'll see.

Diane Atwood: Okay. Well, I hope so. And you know what? There's a lot of community newspapers too, here in Maine that are really good.

Gary Chalk: Excellent. I'm open. I'm all ears.

Diane Atwood: All right. Well, this has been a supreme pleasure. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us and for making me laugh, and I'm sure a few other people will laugh and will immediately sign up.

Gary Chalk: That would be great. It's been an honor to be with you, Diane. It really truly has. And it's nice to put a, a real live person to a name and somebody I followed. It's been a thrill. Thank you, Diane.

Diane Atwood: Wow. Thank you. I've enjoyed it very, very much.