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Social Study

Greensburg native Todd Gallagher finds success in social experiments.

By Jennifer Brozak

To say that Todd Gallagher has lived an unconventional life is an understatement.

He once returned to high school at the age of 33—as a student. He’s had tennis great Andy Roddick beat him with

a frying pan, and even challenged Michael Phelps to a \$50,000 bet that he could beat him in any sport... outside of swimming, that is.

Gallagher, a native of the Greensburg area, has built a career out of conducting what he calls “social experiments,” in which he places himself in unknown, uncomfortable or outright awkward situations—and then turns his experiences into books or documentaries.

His first book, “Andy Roddick Beat Me with a Frying Pan: Taking the Field with Pro Athletes and Olympic Legends to Answer Sports Fans’ Burning Questions,” was published in 2007. In it, Gallagher conducts a series of experimental athletic tests with some of sports’ most notable athletes. As the title suggests, he wonders what would happen if a regular guy like himself challenged Roddick to a tennis match, with the tennis pro using a frying pan for a racket (Roddick still won). He takes on PGA golfer Rocco Mediate in a game of miniature golf (Mediate also won), and puts a hockey goalie in a fat suit to see if filling up the net with girth would make him more effective (it didn’t). The book became an Amazon best seller.

In 2009, Gallagher enrolled as a student at Trinity Christian School in Forest Hills to film a documentary. The goal of the experience was to help students survive their teen years. The film, entitled “God Only Knows,” is currently in test screenings and is slated for release this year.

“The social experiments really are mostly a form of therapy. I pick things I would

either find miserable, am scared by or want to experience and then do them under the premise of ‘art,’” Gallagher explains. “This goes for saying offensive things as well. That all falls under the category of ‘social experiment.’ I’d highly recommend it to anyone.”

Gallagher lived in Jeannette before moving to Greensburg at the age of 10. He attended the Valley School of Ligonier and then transferred to Greensburg Central Catholic. After high school, he says he “tried college at Pitt and a couple of other places,” but decided that formal education “wasn’t for me after a certain point.”

After leaving college, he moved to Los Angeles and found work as a TV producer and writer for ESPN, a job that he acquired through unusual means.

“There was no real exposure to this kind of life, so it made it harder to figure out how to go about it,” he explains. “And not having gone to college and with this being pre-internet, it was pretty much guesswork. I spent a lot of time making cold calls, trying to get people to talk to me and give me a chance. My job at ESPN came about by calling in and pretending to be my own agent, after about a year of not being able to find work. For most jobs, you needed a referral and, because I didn’t know anyone would refer me anywhere, this was the route I chose. Right or wrong, it was my thought process at the time.”

While growing up in Westmoreland County may have hindered his ability to network, he appreciates the insight the area provided.

“There’s a perspective that comes from being from this area where you get an understanding of a lot of different kinds of people and lifestyles,” he says. “I guess that’s true of anywhere, but it seems western PA has

a lot of the mix that is presented at the center of media discussions.”

While he’s typically considered a comedic writer, he says he’s more interested in pointing out “inconsistencies of thought” that naturally veer into comedy.

“For me it’s mostly a matter of putting small twists of tone or phrasing on my actual thoughts to make things comedic or more palatable,” he explains.

No longer based solely in Los Angeles, Gallagher says he is “traveling around” and is working on the post-production of “Popular,” a documentary starring actor James Franco that explores the role popular culture plays in modern society. Also on deck for this year is the re-release of “Andy Roddick Beat Me With a Frying Pan.”

While his successes in the entertainment field are much appreciated, he also notes the sacrifices and frustrations they entail.

“If you really want to make it, you will. It just depends on the path you choose. The question anyone needs to ask themselves is, ‘Why am I doing this?’ If it’s to make a living, that’s fine, but there are a lot of ways to do that which don’t involve writing or being a part of the entertainment business,” he says.

“I’d like to think that I’ve passed along decent ideas to people that could improve their thought process and logic, but at the same time, what do I know?” he adds. “My hunch from experience and observation is that there’s no chance at happiness and fulfillment from pursuing any kind of material or status goals. Working on the spiritual sickness inside of us and helping others who have problems on the basic human front—food, shelter, sickness—that’s the best we can do.” ■