SUNDAY BREAKFAST

A WEALTH OF LAUGHS

Glencoe resident and financial planner Mike Walther has co-written a book celebrating the unexpected comedy that families and individuals with disabilities experience every day.

BY BILL MCLEAN
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Mike Walther was a serious collector of sports memorabilia as a youngster growing up in St. Louis. Scoring that autograph from his boyhood idol, future Hockey Hall of Fame goaltender Ken Dryden, still ranks as an all-time "get" in Walther's world.

Looking to hold a 1980s issue of *Sports Illustrated,* reread a Michael Jordan piece in the magazine, and marvel at the exceptional photographs? Glencoe's Walther is your man. He's a worthy keeper of back issues of the iconic publication.

"I still love sports and I'm still into collecting sports memorabilia," says the founder of Oak Wealth Advisors (OAW), a financial planning and wealth management firm with offices in Northbrook and Madison, Wisconsin.

Walther gathered a slew of completely different items for a book, released in the summer, that he co-wrote with colleague Randi Gillespie, OAW's director of special needs services. *It's Okay to Laugh* (Little Creek Press, 107 pages) features funny, often-endearing stories from the families OWA specializes in serving—those with individuals with disabilities.

Walther's brother, Sean, was diagnosed with Asperger's, a form of autism, at the age of 32. He inspired his big brother to start OAW, which operates with a fiduciary standard, in 2008. Mike Walther's career mission is to assist other families with loved ones with disabilities with their financial planning so that they can lead their best lives.

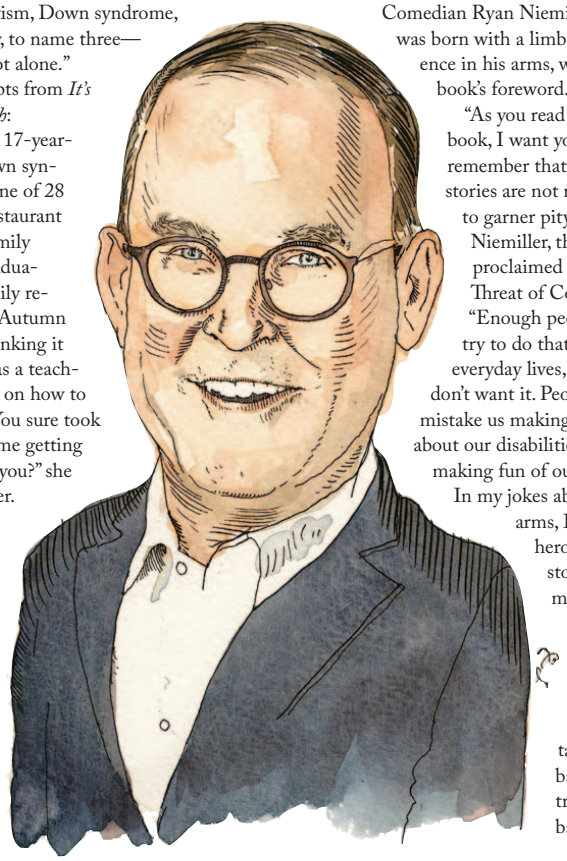
"It took us about three years to complete the book," says Walther. "Initially we asked our clients to write down some of the memorable experiences they had had involving family members with disabilities. The response wasn't great, but it took off when they chose to share their hilarious, heartwarming stories with us on Zoom.

"The purpose of the book," he adds, "is to remind families with individuals with disabilities—autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, to name three—that you're not alone."

Two excerpts from *It's Okay to Laugh*:

Autumn, a 17-year-old with Down syndrome, was one of 28 diners at a restaurant table for a family member's graduation. The family requested that Autumn order last, thinking it would serve as a teachable moment on how to be patient. "You sure took your sweet time getting to me, didn't you?" she told the waiter.

Jeff, a 19-year-old with Down syndrome, was unable to navigate public transportation on his own after landing a job. His parents often got a cab for him. En route to his job in a cab one day, Jeff called home because he thought the cab driver didn't know where he was going. The family member asked Jeff for his location. "In the cab," he responded.



Mike Walther

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Comedian Ryan Niemiller, who was born with a limb difference in his arms, wrote the book's foreword.

"As you read this book, I want you to remember that these stories are not meant to garner pity," writes Niemiller, the self-proclaimed "Cripple Threat of Comedy."

"Enough people will try to do that in our everyday lives, and we don't want it. People often mistake us making jokes about our disabilities as making fun of ourselves. In my jokes about my arms, I am the hero of the story. We make the jokes as an act of empowerment, taking back control of a bad hand that has been dealt to us (pun intended).

"This book," he continues, "is meant to elicit joy and hope and give you a big old belly laugh."

Sean Walther has worked at the St. Louis County Library for more than 25 years. He grew to love golf courses and started collecting golf scorecards as a teenager. Ask him the length of any hole at a golf course—well-known or obscure—and he'd likely give you the exact yardage. Sean has secured more than 17,000 scorecards and counting, says Mike Walther.

Or information about at least 306,000 holes worldwide.

"My brother created a script for calling golf pro shops and requesting that they mail him one of their scorecards," Walther says, adding Sean also has an uncanny ability to remember the length of airport runways and rock songs from a certain era. "That helped him build confidence in communicating with strangers."

Sean would contact golf courses all over the country, prompting his parents to limit such calls to five per month.

"At that time, long-distance calls were much more expensive than making local calls," Mike Walther says.

One monthly phone bill was nearly $500. Sean had called five golf courses that month.

Five Japanese pro shops.

"Sean is happy and funny," says Walther, a Vanderbilt University (VU) graduate and the father of VU students (senior Elizabeth and freshman John) with his wife, Beverly. "He loves to watch golf on TV and he's able to talk at length about the St. Louis Blues. I'm proud of him and his accomplishments."

The National Association of Personal Financial Advisors (NAPFA) recognized Oak Wealth Advisors in 2023 for its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in the financial planning profession.

Each OWA employee is connected with a person with a disability.

"Our job at Oak Wealth is to educate families and to reduce their stress by helping them retire comfortably," Walther says. "But we're also here to help them find joy. The humor in *It's Okay to Laugh* brings joy."

For more information about Oak Wealth Advisors and the book It's Okay to Laugh, visit oakwealth.com.