

Obituary writer finds the good in moments of despair

Sometimes it's nice to be reminded to look for what is good: in one's life, in the community, in the world. Wherever. That reminder could come from the start of a new year. Or from the beauty of a sunny winter day. That reminder even could come from an unlikely source: a newspaper obituary. That is the theme of a new book, "Find the Good: Unexpected Life lessons From a Small-Town Obituary Writer."

Author Heather Lende lives in remote Haines, Alaska (population 2,000). She has written for magazines and authored other bestselling books. As well, Lende has been writing obituaries for 20 years for the local weekly newspaper, the Chilkat Valley News. In her new book she reflects on what she has learned from living in a small town, from raising a



David McConkey

CITIZEN ACTIVE

David McConkey is an active citizen. Contact him and read previous columns: » davidmconkey.com

family and from writing obituaries.

"Find the good." That's the core life lesson she has learned. "Looking for the good may be part nature," she writes, "but it can be nurtured."

There are two kinds of obituaries in the newspaper. One kind is a paid family notice in the classifieds. The

other kind is an obituary in the news. A death will make the news if the deceased was in some way prominent or famous. Most people, however, are not well-known; they live and die in relative obscurity. So, everyday folks are not usually the subject of a news obituary. But when anyone dies in Haines, Alaska, they make the news: Lende writes their obituary. "My 'beat' at our local newspaper," Lende says, "is death."

"I understand why you may think that what I do is depressing," she says about her work, "but compared to front-page news, most obituaries are downright inspirational. People lead all kinds of interesting and fulfilling lives."

After a death, Lende starts with a phone call to the family of the deceased. Then she visits the grieving household to

gather information. In the home in the shadow of death, Lende sips coffee, asks questions, listens, takes notes. And she tries to always look on the bright side of life.

"Finding the good in this situation is often challenging; it is not always obvious," she observes. "If I concentrate and am patient, though, it will reveal itself." This, she adds, "usually involves a lot of caffeine."

Writing about people in a small town presents a special challenge: everyone assumes they already know everything about everyone else.

"I search for those traits or talents that can be hidden for years, even in a small town," Lende says. "I love finding something out while researching a life that surprises everyone when they read the paper."

So, in one obituary, Lende records that a "mild-mannered, soft-spoken sporting goods store clerk" was found to have kept "a vintage, polished Harley Davidson in his living room." And, in another, that a "very proper little old lady" jumped every day on a trampoline.

"Find the Good" is a short, often quietly funny, inspiring book. Lende is a great writer who knows how to weave ordinary facts into interesting stories. (Which is, of course, the essence of a good obit.) In her book we learn about her life not only as an obituary writer, but also as a mother, grandmother, homemaker, gardener and involved citizen.

Hers is the kind of regular existence that builds lives and creates communities. Her husband owns the local lumberyard. They have five children, one of whom was

adopted as an eight-year-old orphan from Bulgaria. Lende serves on the school board, on the library board, and as a hospice volunteer.

Lende writes about the ups and downs of her life, her family and her town. As she does, she draws in her own observations as well as pieces of "obituary wisdom."

How about: "The secret to aging more cheerfully is to play like a child." Or: "My house is getting messier in direct proportion to my growing optimism."

"Writing obituaries is my way of transcending bad news," the author concludes. "It has taught me the value of intentionally trying to find the good in people and situations, and that practice — and I do believe that finding the good can be practised — has made my life more meaningful."