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Folk wisdom

Geno Kennedy offers humor and life-saving advice in his book, *Welcome to the Mountains, Now Behave!*

by Vince Darcangelo

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Geno Kennedy wears a straw hat and speaks with a soft southern drawl. He has a calm, patient demeanor—he's got somewhere to be, and that's right where he is.

We're sitting at a corner table of the Pioneer Inn in Nederland, a popular watering hole in the quiet mountain town. It's a place where Geno is well known, greeted with handshakes. He's on first-name basis with the bartender. He's a self-described "hick," a "tree-hugging carpenter," a "left-handed Leo from New York" and in his book, *Welcome to the Mountains, Now Behave!*, he claims to be "not much of a writer."



That last part's debatable.

Granted, Geno doesn't have a book deal or even an agent. He's done limited speaking engagements. He's not computer savvy and has only a modest online presence. Yet he's sold roughly 2,400 copies of *Welcome to the Mountains, Now Behave!*, a piece of folk literature that combines useful information on mountain survival and etiquette with amusing and poignant anecdotes. Geno's book has been excerpted in Golden's *the Highlander Magazine* and *Colorado Central Magazine*. Copies can be found in all 50 states and 13 countries, including Iraq and Antarctica, and, as Geno points out, on the bookshelves of Kid Rock, James Taylor and members of Hootie and the Blowfish.

The success of Geno's book, which folks in Nederland have taken to calling "The Book," is mostly due to its rough-edged, plain-talk style of writing that's refreshingly easy to read—despite adhering to only the most basic tenets of grammar and structure.

As Geno tells it, he's not so much a writer as a storyteller.

"Throughout the years I've been telling these stories," he says. "People were like, 'Put it in a book, or shut up.'"

So he wrote a book—his way.

"I just sat down and started writing. I messed up some of the words so bad that spell check had no idea what I was talking about," Geno says. "I'm a hick. Read it like you're a hick, too. I don't want it to be refined. I want it to be like Mort and Slim telling a story at the bar."

Welcome to the Mountains, Now Behave! is filled with personal anecdotes from Geno's experiences dating back to when he first came to Colorado 30 years ago. Included are tales of driving New York relatives through a lightning cloud with the windows open, ill-advised driving and wedding adventures, the difference between lawns and yards and one particularly confused tourist who argued with Geno about map directions—because he thought he was in Utah. Some of the best anecdotes are of Geno's own folly. After all, Geno was born as what he affectionately calls a "flat-lander" and came across much of his knowledge of mountain survival through trial and error.

"It's OK for me to cut on people in the book because most of the fools in that book are me," he says.

Geno was born and raised in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., the youngest of five children. He says he always knew he needed to get out of there. Thirty years ago he took his chance when he ran off with a woman from Manitou Springs.

"Her husband wasn't too happy about that," Geno laughs.

For the past 21 years Geno's lived in Rollinsville, where he's raised three kids. He's at home in the relaxed atmosphere of mountain life, and he's weaved himself into the fabric of the local community. He runs a charity called A Different Train of Thought (ADTOT), which raises money for local schools, seniors and indigent care through dances, auctions and proceeds from the sale of Welcome to the Mountains, Now Behave! The forte of ADTOT is art and music programs in schools, and Geno says he's raised \$9,000 in the past two years, quadrupling the budget of a Nederland school's music program. The next fundraiser will be held in Nederland on April 1.

Geno's next book will be a collection of stories about growing up, tentatively titled Words of Wit and Bullshit. Working on the new book has kept Geno from expanding on Welcome to the Mountains, Now Behave!, which has increased in size with every edition.

"I'm still coming up with stories every day," Geno says. "That's why

I've got to quit this book."

But the numerous editions of "The Book" have helped solidify its cult status in the mountains.

"People are saying the earlier ones are collector's items," Geno laughs. "Heck, I'm just a carpenter."

Many of the folks who buy Welcome to the Mountains, Now Behave! are Colorado transplants who send copies back to friends and family in their hometowns. In fact, one couple came all the way from Michigan hoping to run into Geno so he could sign their copies of his book. But despite this popularity, Geno remains humble.

"Success to me is seeing someone on the other end of the bar who doesn't know me cracking up laughing when they read my book," he says.

More importantly, Geno hopes that the advice he offers is helpful to "flat-landers."

"I'll never know, but it'd be nice to know that a life is saved by reading this book," he says. "It'd be great if it saved one life."

Near the end of our interview at the Pioneer Inn, a woman walks up to our table with a closed fist. She lowers it to the rough wood surface, opens her fingers. A pale-blue stone falls onto the table. She extends her now-empty hand for Geno to shake.

"Hi, I'm Laura," she says. "We're going to meet again."

Then she turns and walks out the door.

Geno laughs, studies the odd-colored rock and takes another sip of coffee. He has no idea who the woman is, but he appreciates the encounter.

As we finish up, Geno offers a last piece of advice. It encapsulates why he wrote Welcome to the Mountains, Now Behave! and why he's working on a second book. It's the wisdom of a man who's survived three decades in the high country, where many "flat-landers" are lured by the charm but often hightail it out of town before that first winter breaks.

"Don't wait for someone else to do stuff," Geno says. "Don't wait for someone else to write a book. Don't wait for someone else to throw a fundraiser so your kids have crayons in school. Do it your own self."

Then he joins some friends at a booth, blending in easily with the locals. He's become a celebrity, but his friends just call him Geno.

Welcome to the Mountains, Now Behave! by Geno Kennedy is available at Borders Books, 1600 Pearl St., Boulder, 720-565-8266. It's also available at nearly every store in Nederland. "Come in and just ask for Geno's book. If they don't have it, they'll tell you where

you can get it," says Geno. For more information on Welcome to the Mountains, Now Behave!, Geno and A Different Train of Thought, visit www.nowbehave.com.

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