

- [Announcer] Welcome to The Wrighter's Way Podcast where we celebrate writers who have completed their books and inspire writers who haven't. Join Laurie and her guests as they talk about writing books and life in-between chapters.

- Sponsored by the I Can Handle It, I'm the Dad T-shirt. Find it at lauriewrighter.com. Hello, everybody, welcome to The Wrighter's Way Podcast. I am here with Mike Suarez.

Laurie: Hi, Mike, thank you for doing this with me.

Mike: Hi, Laurie, thanks for having me.

Laurie: Let's start off with your background. So like what do you do when you're not authoring?

Mike: All right, well, I guess to start, I'm a software developer by trade. I lead software development teams for a consulting company. So I did all the writing kind of on my own time, on trains rides to and from the office, at night during rare times where everybody was asleep but me, and outside of that, I'm also a father of two kids, Maggie and Andrew, a husband to my wife, Leah, and I've got a dog and two cats. And as it turns out, all of those people and animals are actually, can be seen in my book, so.

Laurie: Yeah, yeah, I ended up doing that, too. I had to name the dog after my dog, yeah. So do you have one book out so far?

Mike: Yeah, just released my first book just in December. So it's been out for about a month now, and this is my first-ever book. It's called Year One with Type One: A True Story of a Boy with Type 1 Diabetes. It's based on my son, Andrew.

Laurie: Okay, and so that was your motivation behind writing it?

Mike: Yeah, I mean, I was motivated by a few things. I mean, wanting to get a book with my son, for my son, I thought would be cool for him to kind of recap the events of the last year, have some way of giving him a way to remember it because he is young, he is on the young side for being diagnosed, so being able to recall it, not just all of the technical stuff, but the fun things that were worth remembering as well, but also figured that this could be a good thing for the community. There aren't really a whole lot of books around type 1 diabetes for kids his age.

Laurie: Yep.

Mike: Generally, kids are diagnosed, I shouldn't say kids are diagnosed, 'cause you could be diagnosed really at any age, but generally in like the pre-teen years is when they're diagnosed, so maybe a little bit outside of where they're still reading picture books--

Laurie: Yep.

Mike: Before bed every night. So as a result, I don't think there's a whole lot out there, so I figured I could just throw one more in the mix.

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: And hopefully reach other families that are going through the same thing or recently diagnosed and things like that.

Laurie: And be a great resource, 'cause that's what people do any sort of new life event, right? They google it

Mike: Yeah.

Laurie: You know. Yeah, looking for help.

Mike: Yeah.

Laurie: That's for sure.

Mike: Yeah, and that's what we did.

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: So I'm sure there's other people looking to do the same. And not just looking for books for themselves but for their friends and family and classmates. I know that for a while, I was looking for a good book to send my sister so that she could read it to her similar-age kids, you know, Andrew's cousins.

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: I was looking for a good book to bring to school, and while there are a couple good books out there, I really wanted one that really spoke to me, and so I went out and made my own, so.

Laurie: There you go, oh, I love that. I just went out and made my own.

Mike: Yep.

Laurie: And how long did the process take? So you decided to do this.

Mike: Yeah.

Laurie: How long, published last month, so about how long did it take?

Mike: You know, it took about two months probably, all said and done. You know, it kinda just started as a oh, wouldn't it be cool if I did this, and I just started penning some note on my iPhone, on the Notes app on my iPhone, trying to come up with some good clever rhymes to describe what he went through and in the process kinda thinking of what the pictures might look like. And it was just kind of on a whim that I did it, but I got to a certain point where I had enough lines and I felt like, hey, there's actually something to this, I should go seek out an illustrator and learn a little bit about how books are made. I think nowadays with the internet and with printing on demand, these things are made very, they make it very easy for you, they make it very accessible where there's really not much risk up front outside of the cost of paying an illustrator, paying for a copyright, paying for editing, but these are all things you can figure out how to do on a budget.

Laurie: Yep.

Mike: So yeah, once I kinda figured all that out, I just kinda kept going along with it. And from the time that I kind of probably wrote my first note 'til I actually hit the publish button on the KDP platform, it was probably about two months altogether.

Laurie: Wow, I think that's the fastest I've heard.

Mike: Yeah, boy.

Laurie: So where did you, that's good, though.

Mike: Yeah, yeah, I mean--

Laurie: I think.

Mike: The thing is, it sounds fast, I guess, when I think about it, but it was all so, when I'm into a project, it's just kinda all I think about. You know, that goes for work, renovation projects in the house. And even though I have a full-time job and I have a family to take care of, the words of the book were just constantly cycling in my head. I'd be sitting on my ride-on lawnmower picking up leaves, and I might've repeated the words in my head 10, 20 times just while I was riding there, and there would be times where I'd have to kind of stop the lawnmower, hop off, pick up my phone and just make the change right there so I wouldn't forget it. So it was two months, but it was a very intense--

Laurie: Yes.

Mike: Two months. There were nights my wife would go to sleep, I'd be up 'til one in the morning, and she'd kinda be like, "What are you working on?" 'Cause that's the other thing, too, is I wanted to do this is secret. I wanted to--

Laurie: Oh!

Mike: Present my family with a finished product and surprise them with it. So it not only, there was not only the challenge of finding the time to do it, but finding the time to do it in such a way that I didn't let on that I was doing this, so.

Laurie: So how did you surprise them with it?

Mike: So I basically, the goal was that I would have a printed draft in front of me and that I would present it to my wife and son and read it to them and like kinda let them figure out over the course of me reading it that it was a book about Andrew and a book about our family. But just with the delays and when you order drafts from KDP, it just kept getting delayed and delayed. And I had a timeline in mind, I wanted to release it in time for Christmas and things like that, that at some point, I just, while I was still waiting for it to be delivered, pulled out my laptop, and I had, I waited for my daughter to nap just 'cause sometimes with everybody, she'd be running around, I wanted their full attention. So I had my wife sitting to my right, my son sitting to my left, and I just said, hey, I'm gonna read this book I found online, it's pretty cool, didn't like set it up any sorta way, I let them figure it out. But I said, you know, don't say anything until the very end, because you might have some comments throughout. And so, you know, the thing is, it's very obvious by the time you get to the second page, because I set, the illustrator, I sent him pictures of the rooms of my house, so it's very obvious when you look at the pictures that this is our house. So by the second page, I mean, my wife was like, "Oh, gee, funny how that picture "looks kinda like our house, and you know, things like that.

Laurie: Yeah, yeah.

Mike: My son, you know, being just a little guy, I don't think he was as perceptive, you know, figuring that out, but he definitely liked it, because when I was done reading the book, he pointed to my computer, and he was like, "You have to get that, you have to buy that book." And so I was like, don't worry, there's probably gonna be 20 copies in our house next week.

Laurie: Yeah, yeah.

Mike: So you'll have plenty to pick from, but--

Laurie: Oh, that's awesome. Wow, good for you.

Mike: Yeah, thank you.

Laurie: That made me tear up a little bit. Did your wife cry when she realized?

Mike: She's not one--

Laurie: She's not a cryer?

Mike: She's not one to cry. I was just happy that she was, you know, that she liked it enough to let me release it into the world. You know, that was part of my other motivation for waiting until it was in a perfect state, 'cause she's the type that if I try to leave the house with a shirt that used to be a nice-fitting, new-looking shirt, but it's now faded or stretched from being washed a bunch of times, she'll make me go back upstairs and change it.

Laurie: Okay.

Mike: So the fact, you know, she allowed me to release this to all of our friends and family, and I mean, she even said afterwards, she was like, "You know, that just goes to show "how much I like the book, 'cause otherwise, "I might've had you go back and change "the release," so.

Laurie: Had you redo it. Right, and how has it been received?

Mike: It's been received very well. I mean, and that was kinda, you know, one of my insecurities before I released it was are people gonna think this is lame, and furthermore, and they gonna not wanna tell me it's lame just because of the sensitive subject matter. And I think that my mindset was that way because I had just gone through so many rounds of editing and beta readers. And you know, beta readers, their job is to point out mistakes, and after doing 20 rounds of it or so, it wears on you. You really, it brings out those insecurities, which is a good thing because it allows you to fix them.

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: But you still kinda like, you know, is this as good as I think it is, or is it not so good? But then once I finally released it, the feedback has been overwhelmingly good, and not just from friends and family but from people in the T1D community. I put this out there on a lotta Facebook groups, and one of the things I didn't get from the beta readers, while all the beta readers were fellow writers, none of the beta readers were medically trained. They don't have family and friends that lived through this.

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: So they really couldn't comment on that stuff, so.

Laurie: Yeah, and then, so once it was into the T1D community, did they have good things, like you really captured the feelings and the process and the--

Mike: Yeah, I was really pleased with the feedback that I got. You know, there were parents saying, I read this and thought this coulda been about my kid, there were people that said that, you know, people telling me that they teared up as they read it which, you know, not that I wanna make anyone cry, but you know, it's nice--

Laurie: No, but you want it to be meaningful.

Mike: It's nice that it could bring out that emotion.

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: You know, I got actually a couple people that live in Massachusetts, 'cause that's where I'm from, and there are very specific scenes from Boston Children's Hospital in here. There was one father who said, you know, that him and his son had spent hours on those same stairs, running up and down those same stairs that make the musical sounds. So that was cool to hear that I'd reached somebody, especially when these Facebook groups are on a global level.

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: But it was really good, and especially because one of my, there were many challenges in writing this and getting it to rhyme, being accessible to children, being as medically accurate as somebody who's not medically trained can be, but probably the biggest concern I had, the biggest challenge in writing, was I wanted to give due credit to the people that live this. I didn't wanna make it seem like it was easy. I didn't wanna make it so fun that it seemed easy, but I also didn't wanna make it seem so hard that it's impossible. I want people to walk away from this feeling like yes, I've got a challenge in front of me, but it's doable, and it was a hard line to walk. So you know, I was very pleased when all of the feedback I got was that I really captured what it's like to live with T1D but also that the overall message was positive and inspiring, and that's exactly what I was going for, so to hear it told to me in those terms was very, very satisfying.

Laurie: Yeah, wow, good for you. Okay, so let's talk technically just a little bit for people watching who say, okay, but, how did you find the illustrator?

Mike: Sure.

Laurie: How did you find one that could get it done in two months? Kinda hustling.

Mike: Yeah, so, so just doing little side projects in software development and stuff, I had realized that there's this website called Fiverr, which for anybody who's unaware of it, it's a website where you could basically pay anybody to do anything within reason that somebody on the internet would be willing to get paid for, and legal, I should say, but you know. You're laughing.

Laurie: I'm only giggling 'cause yeah.

Mike: But basically, and I think it started because when the website was first launched, all the gigs were \$5. They've since expanded it to give the sellers a little bit more credit, so I think that's where the name

Fiverr comes from. But you can go there and you can find, if you wanted to record somebody singing happy birthday in a celebrity's voice or something stupid like that, you could pay somebody five bucks to do it. Really, anything you could think of.

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: So I figured there must be people out there willing to draw picture books. And there was a brief moment where I considered doing it myself, and then I pulled out a pencil and paper, and just the number of times I was erasing, I was like, I just don't have the time. Somebody else out there can definitely do a better job and do it quicker and do it cheaper, so why put myself through this. It's the writing that I really want the control over. So looking through these gigs, they vary in price. Obviously I'm on a budget, you know, I'm not trying to break the bank. I'm not looking for a huge return on my investment. This is a very thin market that my book appeals to. You know, it's not gonna be the next Little Blue Truck because there's just, you know, not that many kids with diabetes, and you know--

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: Knock on wood, hopefully there are never that many. So yeah, so I went on Fiverr, I looked up many illustrators. I saw a few that I liked, and I figured why don't I just order the cheapest gig that they offer and find four or five of 'em that I like and give them all the same picture each, and then when they come back, hopefully one will emerge as the clear winner. And that's exactly what happened. I found Olsi Tola, who just blew me away. I remember, the other thing is a lotta these illustrators, they're overseas, so I think I got the beep at like three in the morning, my phone went off that I'd gotten it, and I picked it up, and I was like, did a double-take 'cause I couldn't believe how much it was the picture of Andrew at the sink in the bathroom. I was like, that's my bathroom exactly, and the instruction was I want a boy who's like the thirstiest boy ever, like you know, just at the sink trying to chug down glasses of water. And he nailed it, so.

Laurie: So cool. And he just, he was fast.

Mike: Yeah, he was fast, I mean, they all got back to me fast. So and I think that the fact that I mentioned that this is just one image, potentially of many.

Laurie: Yep, ah.

Mike: Because I've got a whole book that I'm writing.

Laurie: Yep.

Mike: Kind of, you know, incentivizes them to put their best foot forward and say I want this job.

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: And you know, working with Olsi was really a pleasure, 'cause I had very specific things in mind that I wanted to draw, and he took my direction very well, but he also brought his own ideas, and I think the end result was really better than I even imagined it would be.

Laurie: Oh, that's what you want. That's the ideal, right?

Mike: Yep, yep.

Laurie: You mentioned beta readers. So for somebody watching or listening that doesn't know what that is, could you tell us what that is and how you found some?

Mike: Yeah, sure, so my, so a beta reader is, I guess it's familiar to me because I'm used to beta testers in the software world, but for somebody that doesn't know, the term beta, it's basically somebody who's gonna test drive something. So in the software world, you might have beta testers going into your software and looking for holes, looking for bugs. In the world of writing, beta readers are gonna read your work, and they're gonna comment on it. They're gonna critique the writing, they're gonna critique the story, everything. So you know, it's something that, it's a challenge to open yourself up to criticism. It's probably one of the more important things that I've learned throughout this process is how to accept and encourage criticism on yourself, but it's necessary, because I look at where it started before I had shown it to a single soul to where it had finished--

Laurie: Yep.

Mike: And it's night and day. There's just, you know, there were so many things pointed out that I definitely needed to fix that I wouldn't have recognized without the help of beta readers. So that's your first question, I think, what is a beta reader.

Laurie: Yep.

Mike: So that's that. And then where do you find them? Well, I was already kind of into the Fiverr world just having found my illustrator, so that was where I first went. And I hired about four of 'em for five bucks each, and they all gave great feedback, but then I realized I got a couple little suggestions here, a couple little suggestions there. I don't wanna break the bank doing this, there's gotta be another way.

Laurie: Yep.

Mike: So that's when I joined the Facebook group, the one that we're both on, and I don't know if I asked the question or I saw somebody else ask the question, but someone had suggested another Facebook group for, it's called like Kidlit Manuscript, I don't know the exact name offhand, but it's a place where writers can go, and basically you give them your story, and they give you theirs, so.

Laurie: Okay.

Mike: And it kinda, you know, they can be as mean as they want because they've got your work in your hands, you know, you've got their work in their hands.

Laurie: Yeah, they know.

Mike: So you know, you can trade criticisms, but the nice thing about it as opposed to going to family and friends for that type of stuff is they're gonna read it, they're gonna comment, there's gonna things that you agree with, there's gonna be things that you're like blown away, like why didn't I pick that, why didn't I think of that.

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: There's gonna be things like, okay, that's a pretty good idea. There's gonna be things that you're kinda like, eh, that's kinda iffy, and then there's gonna be like the aggravating things. But the nice thing is, is there's no follow-up. Like, they send you the write-up.

Laurie: Yep.

Mike: And then you more or less, they're not gonna be offended if you take or don't take their advice. Whereas with a friend or family member, first off, they might not tell ya everything that they wanna say because they don't wanna hurt your feelings, and if they do tell you something, they might expect you to do it, so it's--

Laurie: So true, yeah, they might Yeah, they're gonna open the book and look for their word, or--

Mike: Yeah, exactly, and then if you don't do it, they might be like, well, why'd you come to me and ask for help if you're not gonna, so you don't, you can kind of avoid all that by going to strangers and--

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: You know, doing that, and--

Laurie: Keeping that level of professionalism, like you said.

Mike: Yeah.

Laurie: That constructive criticism and say all the things you want and take it or leave it.

Mike: Yep.

Laurie: Those people may, probably will never even read the book, they'll never pick it up.

Mike: Yeah, exactly, so.

Laurie: So you did all that beta reading. Did you hire an editor as well, or did you bypass that?

Mike: I kinda looked at beta reading and editing as kinda one and the same. You know, I guess beta reading, they're kinda looking more for the story. In my case because I'd written in rhyme, they're probably, you know, analyzing meter, that type of stuff, whereas an editor I think is more interested in like punctuation, grammar, and that sort of thing, capitalization and all that stuff. But I think all of that came out--

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: Throughout the process of the beta reading. The closest thing I would say to editing was one of the Fiverr gigs that I went and I actually paid a little more for is I wanted to find somebody who is just strictly poetry, so I found somebody who was the editor of a poetry magazine who all they did, you know, not all they did, but one of their things was to, resubmissions to see if they were worthy of being his magazine, so he had a lot of experience reading poetry. And even though this is a children's book and not poetry per se--

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: It's written in rhyme, and the story I was trying to tell and the emotions I was trying to invoke, it was reminiscent of poetry, so I figured why not get a poet's opinion. And so he was super helpful.

Laurie: Oh, good.

Mike: And gave me a lot. But I guess over the course of all the beta reading, all the manuscript swapping, I kind of had, you know, any little bit of grammar--

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: Or punctuation was pointed out multiple times.

Laurie: As well, gotcha. So you mentioned that you learned to welcome constructive criticism--

Mike: Yep.

Laurie: Along the way. Is there anything else, was there anything really eye-opening else that you learned through this process?

Mike: I mean, I guess just learning about the children's, you know, the world of children's literature. I wouldn't have know that there was, you know, how publishing works and all that stuff. Granted, I didn't go with a traditional publisher. I read enough about it to kind of infer how publishing works and all that sorta stuff. You know, a lot goes into this, a lot more than I would've realized otherwise. I mean, my oldest, Andrew's 5 1/2 now, my daughter's 2 1/2, I read to them every night. I've probably read hundreds of books. Who knew that so much effort went into every single one of these things that can be read in a matter of sometimes three minutes, so.

Laurie: Yes, do you see any more books on your horizon?

Mike: Well, I do have two kids, and as anyone with more than one kid probably can attest, whatever you do for one-- right, they have to do for the other. So at the very least, I'll probably do that. I have some ideas, a really good one that came from my mother-in-law, so.

Laurie: Oh, okay, good.

Mike: I'll wait until it's ready before I divulge what that is, but--

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: Maddie will be the main star of that one, so.

Laurie: Oh, cool, good, that's very smart.

Mike: Yep.

Laurie: You gotta have one for each.

Mike: Yep.

Laurie: What advice would you give to anybody watching or listening that hasn't published yet, maybe has an idea or a family situation that's motivating them to put a resource out into the world?

Mike: Yeah, I guess just be as resourceful as you can. The internet has a ton of information. It has a ton of people willing to help. Draw from what you know you're good at. So I'd never written before or written something like this before. I've written emails at work and stuff like that, but I've never written something to be sold and consumed this way, but I do have a lot of experience leading software projects. And so software projects are highly iterative and feedback driven, so said how can I apply that same methodology to my writing, and hence seeked out the help of beta readers. And also in software, sometimes you put out versions of software which are referred to as MVP versions, minimally viable--

Laurie: Right.

Mike: Knowing that they're just, they meet the minimum specs, but they're not the perfect end result because you don't wanna overinvest in the wrong section of the software. Similarly, you don't wanna overinvest in a verse of your book that's ultimately gonna be thrown away. So be okay putting something out there that's not your best work and letting the feedback kinda drive what shape it takes and drive the direction that it goes. So yeah, I guess drawing on what you do, what you're good at, and just letting others help you. And also similar to software development, there's a large community of people wanting to help. You know, when I first started in development, I was amazed by how if I had a question on code, I could just put it out there on the internet and somebody would just answer it. Like, you know, how cool is that? And it's the same way--

Laurie: People actually are nice.

Mike: Yeah, and--

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: Same way, people are willing to help. You know, our Facebook group is a perfect example of that.

Laurie: Yes.

Mike: So you know, look for help, don't be afraid to ask for help, and just kinda be resourceful and figure it out, be willing to learn, do all those things, and you'll probably be surprised at what you can accomplish.

Laurie: Yes, I love that, and I agree with you 100%, right?

Mike: Yep.

Laurie: So how are your sales going, cause I know it's been out--

Mike: I don't currently know.

Laurie: for about a month.

Mike: Yeah, I mean, as good as I could expect as this moment in time. I mean, it's only released a month now. I think when I emailed you a couple days ago, I was at like 55 Amazon sales, now I'm at about 60. And that's about where I wanna be, I think, at least right now if I'm getting one or two sales a day, because I'm certainly past that point now where I can attribute a lot of the sales to friends and family who bought the book.

Laurie: Right.

Mike: Now I know for sure that the people who are buying them are actually finding them on Amazon or clicking the sponsor to Amazon ads.

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: So you know, I mean, if that's a trend that could continue and potentially even grow the more that I put the book out there. I mean, I'm reaching out to diabetes blogs, websites, and they're actually giving me the opportunity to put my, to link my book out there. So hopefully by word of mouth, people will say, hey, if your friend was recently diagnosed, I know a good book. Hopefully it only grows from here.

Laurie: Oh, yeah.

Mike: And that's, my main goal is to reach as many families that could potentially benefit from this book as possible, so.

Laurie: Well, I love that. I'm super happy with this project.

Mike: Thank you.

Laurie: And proud of you even though we just met. I love when people do something like this, you know, from the heart, really, to help.

Mike: Yep.

Laurie: Because you saw the need, and you've been through it, and you're putting it out there. And so many other families will find it helpful and be pretty grateful.

Mike: Yeah, that's what I hope.

Laurie: So and then you know if it takes off and makes you a little side income at the same time, that's pretty nice.

Mike: Yeah, sure. Yeah, I mean, we've all got bills to pay, so if, you know.

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: And if I could make a little side money to tuck away for Andrew's college and his medical bills and all that stuff and even better, maybe even a few extra bucks to donate back to the community.

Laurie: Yeah.

Mike: You know, whether it be JDRF or otherwise, that would be great, too, so.

Laurie: That'd be awesome. Well, thank you so much, Mike. It's been really nice to talk to you.

Mike: Yeah, well, it's been a real pleasure, and really psyched to be on your show and be able to speak to your audience. So thank you so much for letting me on.

Laurie: You're welcome, thank you. Okay, bye-bye.

Mike: Bye.

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