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For Love of Literature

Spring Park resident Troy Ehlers pursues his true passion with the creation of *Minnetonka Review*.

BY KELLY WESTHOFF PHOTOS BY TATE CARLSON

Troy Ehlers knew long ago what he wanted to do with his life. He wanted to write. He went to college determined to earn a degree in English. Once there, however, the others talked him out of it. “People said it wasn’t practical. You won’t make any money. I got pushed into business,” he says.

Ehlers graduated with a degree in finance and then worked as a stock trader,

still his second love. “My true dream was being a writer,” he says.

Fed up with cubicle life, Ehlers decided to follow his dream. He quit his job and began working as a trader from his Spring Park home while earning a graduate degree in fine arts through a distance learning program at Spalding University in Kentucky. Along the way, he published short stories and won a national contest for his novel-

in-progress. He interned at Edina-based Milkweed Editions and served as student editor of the *Louisville Review*.

After graduating in 2006, Ehlers decided to found his own literary journal and began soliciting help from colleagues he had met at writers’ workshops. “We’re all big readers and writers with different skill sets,” Ehlers says.

The eight-member staff of *Minnetonka Review* is spread out from Oregon to New England, and some have never met face to face. They work by e-mail and telephone.

Picking a name was perhaps the hardest part of getting the journal up and running, Ehlers says. “It was as if our entire future depended on finding the perfect name.”

They rejected dozens of names as goofy or pretentious, and then Ehlers suggested Minnetonka on a whim. “They loved the name unanimously,” he says. “To us it’s so commonplace, but for others it holds the allure of a magical American Indian tongue. If you’ve never heard it before, it is a silly word, and some people actually think we’ve made it up.”

The scope of *Minnetonka Review* is considerably broader than its name, however. Of the roughly 80 authors published in the first three issues, only 12 are from Minnesota. Submissions have come from as far away as Hong Kong, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates, and only 10 percent of the journal’s 250 subscribers are from Minnesota. *Minnetonka Review* is one of 10 established literary reviews published in Minnesota, evidence of the state’s strong literary traditions, says Ben Barnhart, editor of Milkweed Editions. “The good ones draw in talent from outside the region, which ultimately raises the local bar a notch or two,” he says.

Published annually, the journal is sold mostly online and at trade shows. Ehlers says the group hopes to publish biannually

beginning this year. The journal has yet to turn a profit, and Ehlers doesn't expect to see one. Staff members take turns pitching in money as needed to publish 1,000 copies per issue. "This is a labor of love, not profit," he says. "We're pursuing our dreams."

Like other literary journals, *Minnetonka Review* focuses primarily on new writers and fresh voices. Because of that, Ehlers says, literary journals can be fun reading for book clubs. "You get a wide variety of literature in a journal, some poetry, some short stories, some essays, and everything is coming from a different author ... You're guaranteed a stimulating conversation. Somebody's going to hate something that somebody else loved," he says.

Choosing what gets published in the journal is also a labor of love. Each of the 200 to 300 submissions that arrive every month must pass muster through three rounds of reading. "There are so many writers out there who are looking for an outlet," Ehlers says. "Going through the submissions is probably the easiest and most enjoyable part for me."

For authors, Ehlers offers some advice: "If you want to write, read. That can't be stressed enough. But the key is, of course, to actually write. The more you write, the more you discover where your strengths lie. And if writing is your strength, you should follow your passion." **LM**

Kelly Westhoff is a Plymouth-based freelance writer.

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