

They post daily "bad dad joke" in front yard; people groan, but love it

By Allison Klein, Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.18.20

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Image 1. Tom Schruben (center) and his 11-year-old daughter, Darcy (left), stand next to the "bad dad joke" sign they posted outside their Kensington, Maryland, home on May 1, 2020, as a neighbor walks by. The father and daughter write a corny joke on a whiteboard each morning. Photo: Michael S. Williamson/Washington Post

Maryland's stay-at-home COVID-19 order has been stressful for Ann and Tom Schruben, who are self-employed workers who live in Kensington, Maryland, with their 11-year-old daughter.

Ann noticed her husband was a little grumpy — he's generally a cheerful guy who likes to crack jokes and puns.

In fact, their daughter, Darcy, had given him a book of "exceptionally bad dad jokes" as a Christmas present.

Ann heard a friend in Ohio was posting a daily joke in front of her house. She told Tom he should do the same thing and at first, Tom resisted, but then, in late April, he grabbed a whiteboard and wrote at the top "BAD DAD JOKES" and scrawled in purple ink:

"Hold on — I have something in my shoe! I'm pretty sure it's a foot."

At 8 a.m. on April 17, he set the whiteboard near the footpath in front of his house and waited inside his screened-in porch to see if anyone reacted. Nothing. A few hours later, he heard a chuckle from outside.

"Once he got his first laugh, it was so satisfying to him," said Ann, a landscape designer.

The next day he woke up at 7 a.m. and scribbled his second bad dad joke, "Without geometry, life is pointless."

Soon, he heard people laughing as they walked by his home, and some called out to Tom and told him how much they liked the jokes while others stayed for a socially distanced chat.

A spring returned to Tom's step and each morning since, he's put out a new joke.

"It surprised me how much it made my mood better," said Tom, 62 years old. "I don't really know why. I guess I feel like I'm contributing a little bit to other people's happiness."

Day 3: What do you call a cow with no legs? Ground beef.

Day 4: What do you call a bear with no teeth? A gummy bear.

One woman who strolls by each day told Tom when she gets home she calls her granddaughter to relay the joke.

"That makes my day," he said.

Tom, an environmental consultant, also likes the routine of putting up the joke.

"It gives me a reason to get up and get out in the morning early," he said. "It breaks up the day and gives me a little purpose. We look forward to it in the house."

The Schrubens talk each day about which joke to display by leafing through the book Tom got for Christmas, titled, "Exceptionally Bad Dad Jokes: So frightfully awful ... yet wonderfully spiffing." Sometimes they pull the jokes from there and sometimes the Schrubens make them up.

"He loves to make really bad jokes," Darcy said. "He makes a lot of puns."

One joke from the book has prompted the most discourse. On day eight, he wrote:

"I ordered a chicken and an egg from Amazon. I'll let you know."

Lots of neighbors were talking about that one, including Jim Pekar, 59 years old, who ambles by the whiteboard each day to see the latest bad dad joke.

"If you don't like them, well, they're not supposed to be good," Pekar said, adding that he calls his neighbor's humor "stand-up for the shut down."

Mana McNeill, 65 years old, also saw the chicken-and-egg joke as she walked through the neighborhood with her walking buddy, Tina McKay, age 68. Both women live nearby in North



Chevy Chase.

It was raining that day so Tom had covered the sign in plastic wrap to protect it.

"We stopped and read the joke, and we had to think about it for a minute," McNeill said. "Then I finally got it. I've been telling other people the joke since. It's clever."

She has known the Schrubens for years, since their grown children were in school together. But when the women walked by that day, they didn't know Tom had been putting out jokes.

"That was great fun; we had a chuckle," McNeill said. "It was a nice respite on our walk. You have to find something great in this mess."

That is exactly the life perspective that has kept Tom and Ann going since two of their six children died from medical issues, one in 2002 and one in 2009, they said.

In the darkest days, they made a conscious decision to seek out things that make them feel happy.

"It adds to our trying to find joy where we can," Ann said. "It's hard won, believe me."

And so if a silly — and bad — dad joke does that for them and others, they intend to keep it going.

"Everyone is very stressed with the virus and the quarantining," Tom said. "I thought it would be a good idea to give people a break from that, shake them up momentarily to take their mind off their troubles for just a minute."

How long does he plan to continue?

"Until we're done with the virus," he said. "Maybe longer."