

Author Honored

Distinguished Grad's life shaped in Butler

By Lori Dudek
Eagle Correspondent

Nearly 70 years ago, a young soldier prepared to leave his home in North Butler. Destined for Europe, he must have wondered if he would ever see his hometown again.

Although Chester Aaron, now an award-winning author, has not visited his hometown of Butler since he left so long ago, the people and places that shaped his youth, and ultimately his life, live on through his writing.

Aaron of Occidental, Calif., with 26 published works to his credit, reaches deep into his personal life and experience growing up in Butler in the years leading up to World War II. His first adult novel, "About Us," published in 1956, is the autobiographical tale of Aaron's life as a boy in North Butler. At the time, it was a rural coal mining community populated by poor European immigrants. His family was the only Jewish family in his community. A sequel, "About Them," is slated for release on July 1.

The 88-year-old Aaron also was recently named a Butler High School Distinguished Graduate by the BHS Class of 2011. The announcement was made June 3 during the BHS commencement ceremony. Aaron is a 1941 alumnus of BHS.

"The students look at what an individual has achieved over their lifetime," said Jeff Schnur, principal at BHS. "The kids take this very seriously. They look for someone who is not only good at their craft, but has also reached out into the community."

While serving in World War II, Aaron was part of the American forces that rescued Jewish prisoners at Dachau concentration camp. Following his military service, he earned degrees at the University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco State University. He was a literature and writing professor at St. Mary's College of California, and still teaches continuing education courses at Santa Rosa Junior College.

Aaron also helped design a weekly workshop for 28 fifth-grade students at a California

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school to learn to write short stories. The students recently published a collection of their finished works.

The Distinguished Graduate award is well deserved, according to Schnur.

As if being a distinguished teacher and author is not enough, Aaron is also a recognized expert on growing garlic, a passion that has its roots in Butler.

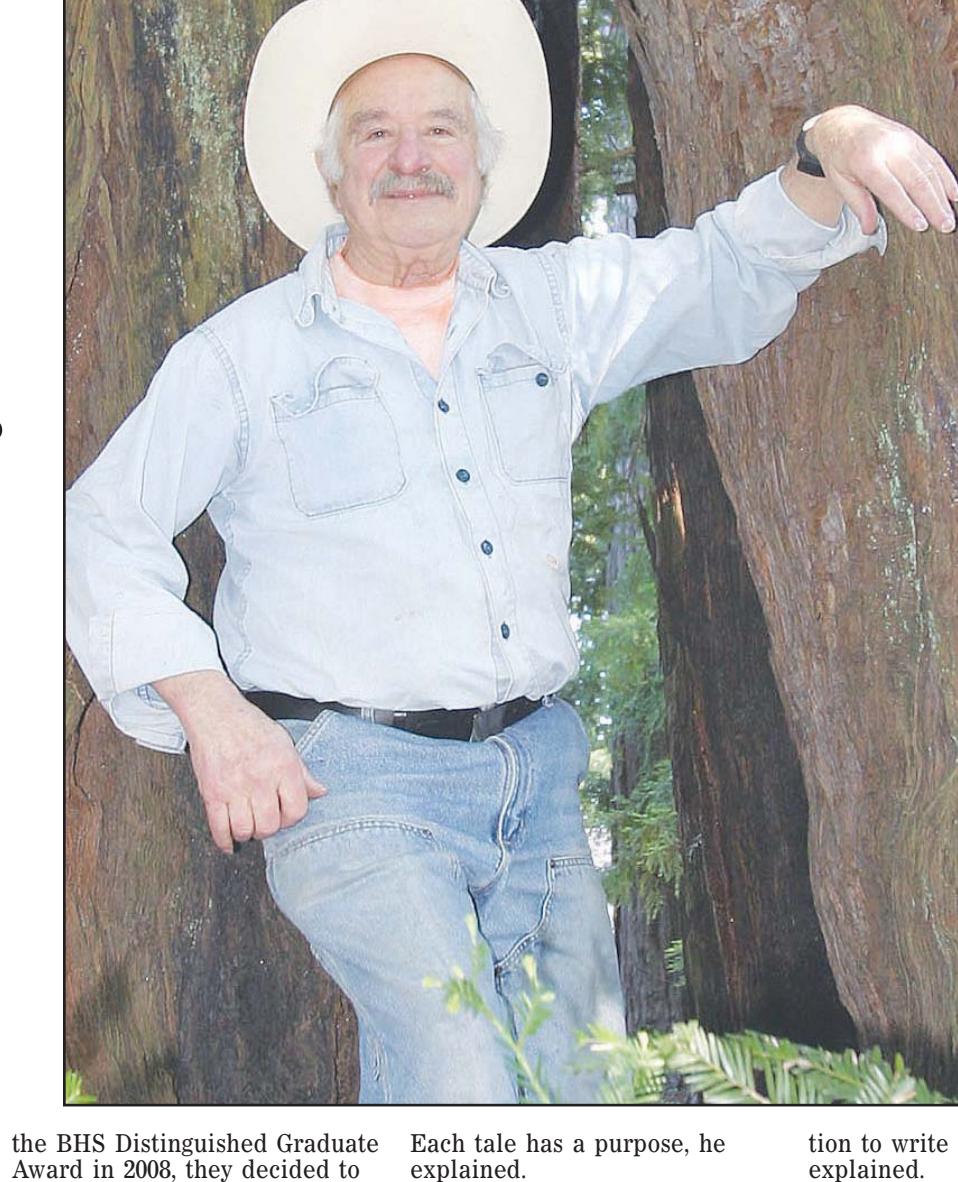
"My father had a little garden behind the store in North Butler," Aaron said. "And when I had an ear ache, he would squeeze garlic in my ear."

Aaron said that as a soldier in World War II, he would often see Russian soldiers use garlic cloves to treat their wounds. "They had a recovery rate that was as good as (Americans) and we had penicillin," he said.

Aaron's interest in growing garlic led him to collect more and more species from all over the world. At the peak, he was growing and shipping more than 40 different species of garlic. It was, in fact, Aaron's renown in growing the bulbous plant that brought him full circle.

Former Cranberry residents Mark and Mary Ellen Banks, now of Aspers, Pa., had heard of Aaron's extensive cultivation of garlic. Mary Ellen Banks' mother also had an interest in growing garlic. When the Bankses were planning a trip to California in January 2004, they contacted and met with Aaron to purchase some garlic as a birthday gift for Mrs. Banks.

They soon discovered Aaron was a Butler native. The Bankses and Aaron quickly became friends. When the Banks saw a Butler Eagle article about



the BHS Distinguished Graduate Award in 2008, they decided to nominate Aaron the following year.

Many of Aaron's works weren't published until he was retired.

"To me, that means he is a shining example of how to age gracefully and be engaged and connected to the surroundings and people around you," said Mary Ellen Banks. And yet, he is very humble and modest."

West Sunbury residents Mark and Margie Riddell also met Aaron in California. As friends of the Bankses, they were introduced to Aaron during travels to California's wine country.

"We chatted for hours," said Mark Riddell. "He knew many people of my wife's grandparents' generation. It was like a very small world came together. ... I wish I could have gone back in time and walked the streets with him, because it would have been a lot of fun."

Aaron's newest book is a sequel to the award-winning novel, "About Us." In the sequel, the autobiographical character of Ben Kahn is returning to his hometown following the unexpected death of a childhood friend. He reconnects with his childhood love, a daughter of the town's only black family.

As the details of long-hidden family secrets are unearthed, Aaron weaves a story that is gritty and graphic, and mostly true, he said. He relies on his intuition to decide what to include and what to leave out.

Each tale has a purpose, he explained.

"I believe in writing as closely to the truth as I can make it," he said. "As closely as to what I believe the truth to be."

In "About Them," Aaron includes the story of a male character who is found in the woods, naked and badly assaulted. He is found and saved by a family friend named Kenny Greenaway.

"The incident in the Kenny Greenaway story is true," Aaron said. "That really happened." Aaron said he has been asked why he chose to include the details of a disturbing sexual assault, when he has living relatives.

"I wanted to demonstrate both a story about hate and a story about love," Aaron said. "Kenny Greenaway helped us."

Throughout his work, Aaron writes of the real-life struggles and triumphs of his poor Jewish family in a non-Jewish coal-mining town during the years leading up to World War II. Although Aaron changes the names of Butler and North Butler to Summer and Sundown, locals can easily pick out landmarks such as Connoquenessing Creek and Cummings Store.

Aaron said "About Us" is about his family's experiences. As the only Jewish family in the small community, his family formed a particularly close bond with the town's only black family.

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