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## Couple rewrite the 3 R's -- reading, 'riting and rhythm

**By Anne Gonzales - Bee Staff Writer**

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It all started in the potato salad line at the Talkeetna Moose Dropping Festival in Alaska. John Bushell was there performing as a pianist, when he was introduced to his future wife, Sharon.

"Our eyes just sort of fluttered," he recalled of that meeting 26 years ago. "And here we are today."

Where they are is sort of a moving target. For the past three autumns, the couple have packed up their camper, left their comfortable three-bedroom home in Homer, Alaska, and rambled through the Western states reading and playing music for kids.

They live in their camper shell over a pickup truck for nine months out of the year and perform school assemblies, combining their love of reading, writing, music and education.

"When we decided to do this, our friends took bets on when we'd get divorced, but it's a blast," said Sharon. "We're best friends. It seems like regular life would be so dull."

"What's regular life?" chimed in John, giving his wife a squeeze around the shoulders.

Last year, the Bushells did 46 assemblies at elementary schools in Alaska, Washington, Oregon, California, Arizona and New Mexico, performing for 25,000 students. This year, they expect to do at least 60 assemblies. During the assemblies, John plays the piano and Sharon reads from her books, all about the fictional Bernie Jones, a 10-year-old boy growing up in suburban America in the 1950s.

At Ellen Feickert Elementary School in Elk Grove this week, John slipped into his stage persona, "Johnny B.," for an assembly. Wearing black high-top tennis shoes and a glitter-blue tie, he performed rousing boogie-woogie tunes and Jerry Lee Lewis' "Great Balls of Fire." When he played, his feet uncontrollably floated off the ground, his hair flipped rhythmically and the students were mesmerized.

As Sharon reads about the adventures of Bernie, his substitute teacher, Mrs. Broadbottom and the school bully, Chuckie Wadsworth, John plays the background music on the piano, adding melodrama.

Sharon has published two Bernie Jones books and has another on the way. The books are part of a national reading program that tests comprehension.

Cody Bayles, a sixth-grader at the school, said he had already read some of the first Bernie Jones book.

"I was looking forward to meeting the author," he said. Cody also commented that Johnny B.

"played the piano really good."

Cody connected with the Bushells' message to dream big and practice a little bit every day to get better.

"I want to be a professional wakeboarder when I grow up, and now I want to practice more," he said.

The Bushells charge \$350 an assembly through their business -- Road Tunes -- but the couple make most of their money off book sales at schools the day after assemblies, John said.

Raised in Oakland, John graduated from the Berklee College of Music, a contemporary music school in Boston, and got a master's degree in education from Boston University.

For a while, he bumped around the country, living out of a van with a piano in the back. His goal was to perform in every state. When he had performed at school assemblies or as a street musician in all 48 continental states, he headed to Alaska. He landed in Talkeetna, nestled at the base of Mount McKinley.

There, he met Sharon, a Port Angeles, Wash., native who went to Alaska for a job on the pipeline. When her car broke down in Talkeetna, she wound up staying for five years.

Five months after their meeting, the Bushells married and spent their honeymoon in Hawaii, where John met his goal of performing in every state. They settled in Homer.

Sharon worked at the Anchorage Daily News interviewing real-life Alaskan pioneers and writing a weekly biography for the newspaper. She completed 250 biographies in the "We Alaskans" series.

Meanwhile, John got a grant to teach music to natives in 40 remote Alaskan villages. At one village, he recalled playing for a group of elders on a piano with seven keys missing.

In 1985, John began a 13-year career teaching school in Homer, taking a break from 1988 to 1990 to do a syndicated radio show with Tom Bodett, an author, columnist and radio personality he met in Homer. The "End of the Road" show, with Bodett reading his commentaries and Bushell playing piano in the background, was picked up by 63 stations around the country.

After the Bushells' two children left for college, John retired from teaching and the couple took their show on the road. Their camper is small, but they say it has all the amenities, including art on the walls, books and room for friends.

"We've had some all-out dinner parties in this," Sharon said. The camper also holds the hundreds of pounds of rocks the two collect on their travels for their rock garden back home.

"We don't make a lot of money, but we have a wonderful lifestyle," John said.

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