

Behind the Story

"The Gluten-Free Kingdom"

I cannot tell the story of *"The Gluten Free Kingdom"* without a bit of history. Less than a year into my gluten-freedom, I was able to talk [read beg] my wife into entering a gluten-free cookie in a 2004 cookie-baking contest. Eight out of the last 12 years my wife and I (as [Gluten Intolerance Group of East Central Wisconsin](#)) have participated in a local event celebrating our town's [gluten] cookie factory. Beyond the obvious focus on gluten, this festival is a great family-centric event.

Our objective is to educate, spread awareness, and to show people that gluten-free food does not taste like cardboard. Over the years, we saw the horrors of biopsy-diagnosed celiacs sampling all the baker's [non-gluten-free] cookies. We got to see the smiles from gluten-free kids and adults when they found out we had a cookie they could have [we always keep a container of uncontaminated cookies just for our GF guests].

The theme for Ripon's Cookie Daze 2013 Bake and Taste contest was "Fairytale". My wife had a specific cookie already in mind for the contest. So instead of making a cookie fit an already existing fairytale, we decided to create a tale around the cookie. The plan was simple; write a one to two page story for this cookie contest.

When it comes to fairytales, I think knights, and dragons, and damsels in distress. Oh my! A king and his kingdom aren't complete without jewels and riches. We named the cookie *"Chocolate Raspberry Gems of the Gluten-Free Kingdom"* [a select few of us unofficially called them *"Dragon Droppings"*, but you didn't hear that from me]. Our table will be decorated as a medieval castle complete with knights and dragons, cookie recipe handouts, lots of gluten-free information handouts, and of course our [yet to be written] fairytale. Oh dear, what have I done? Not only must I turn an eight foot table into a castle, I also have to conjure up a fairytale - neither of which, I had done before! And thus starts the birthing process of *"The Gluten Free Kingdom"*.

We now know the setting, but what about the story? What better story to tell than a real-life fairytale - loosely based our own lives? The story line was already "written" because we've lived it. I simply needed to plug it into a medieval setting and add some exciting bits. BRILLIANT!

Seriously, I feel I am living a real-life fairytale - but that's another story.

I was treating the story as a "throw away" piece - its only purpose was to validate my wife's cookie. The only people I hoped might read it were the judges. We submitted the story with the cookie to help them understand. I don't know if they ever did read it.

In the end, we handed out a lot of gluten-free information, a lot of recipes, and my wife won 1st Place for People's Choice and 1st Place Overall. Sadly, we did not win Best Table Decoration. Putting bias aside [and the two to three weeks I spent making the castle, gathering the decorations, and printing the handouts], I seriously believed we had the best table decoration that day. I invite you to check out the pictures from that event and tell me we didn't have a rockin' cool table: http://bit.ly/GIGECWFB_CookieDaze_2013

The Gluten Intolerance Group of North America has been gracious enough to publish a few of my newsletter articles in their member-only quarterly publication, "Celebrate Gluten Free". I decided to submit the story to them on the off chance they found it interesting. I received a reply from the editor stating they might consider it for their children's publication. "OK, that's great, thanks for your time." My expectations were low, so I moved on.

Eight months later, the publisher of GIG's children's publication [now titled "Generation GF Magazine"] said they published Chapter 1 and it was a hit! I was asked to send them Chapter 2 for the next issue. Oh dear! Not expecting this story to see the light of day, I had stopped writing. Because I had a rough outline of the story and enough time before the deadline, I agreed to finish the story, chapter by chapter, not

knowing how many chapters it would take. Keep in mind; this is my first attempt at creative writing. I had no idea what I was doing, or if I could even complete it. I was in uncharted waters without a paddle.

When I wrote the first chapter, I didn't know the readers were going to be children/teenagers. Heck, I wasn't expecting any kind of audience. This new development of age specific writing added yet another check in the "Things I don't know" column. I spent a lot of time pondering this situation. If I change my writing style, will it be liked as well as the first chapter? If I didn't change it, will I lose the kids? I kept coming back to the Harry Potter series of books [which I have not read]. Kids of all ages [some as young as 6] were devouring these tomes at astonishing rates. I'm an ordinary average guy who lacks the literary skills of Ms. Rowling. I felt it was a safe bet that most children or teenagers would understand the story. I decided to stay the course and write it in the same manner as the first chapter [not that I knew any other way]. However, in the subsequent chapters, I altered my word choices knowing the target audience.

The purpose of the story obviously changed once I knew it would be published. "Educate, Motivate, Advocate" was the mantra I created when I started our local support group in 2008 [now known as Gluten Intolerance Group of East Central Wisconsin]. I would apply the same philosophy to the story as well.

Most of the historical statements and references that were made came from a number of history websites that I felt were reputable. I tried to keep those facts as real and authentic as possible. Of course, I applied the same rule to the gluten/gluten-free information that I presented. Testing for gluten intolerance didn't exist in the Middle Ages, but by applying a bit of creative license to the immunofluorescence tests for dermatitis herpetiformis, I was able to create Roderick's test for gluten intolerance.

Along with Sir Alcher and Lady Pechal, a real person inspired Roderick the Wizard. My mentor and friend, Dr. Rodney Ford of the Children's Clinic and Allergy Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand was a logical choice to play a wizard. The king, queen, and princess were an amalgam of people I have run into over the years.

I wanted to give the readers a glimpse into what happens when we make that transition. We all struggled with the process and some still struggle years down the road. I wanted people to know that it's OK to feel the way they are feeling. To acknowledge, respect, and deal with the massive jumble of emotions - not to ignore or suppress them.

I hoped those who are not gluten-free might gain some insight and understanding into what their friend or loved one is experiencing. I also wanted to help non-gluten-free friends/family/spouses to understand their roles. They don't know it, but they share the same journey, albeit in a different way. I see so many in the gluten-free community who struggle because their family and friends don't get it - they don't understand it. I think the gluten-free community needs more understanding from those around us. If we don't educate them, who will?

I wanted to convey the importance of reaching outside of one's self in order to help others. For myself, having to go gluten-free has given far more than it has taken. I am eternally thankful for what Melissa Diane Smith calls "The Gift of Gluten-Free". All those years ago when I was lying on the living room floor in the fetal position, I could not have imagined what was in store for me [besides death]. I gave up gluten, but what I received in return is beyond measure. I realized that I was given an opportunity to use my skills and talents to help others. Heck, there were talents that I didn't even know I had [like writing]! The biggest item unearthed in me was a passion - a purpose - something that was lacking in my life previously. I was given a gift and I was shown how to benefit others by giving it away. It was a profound awakening. I think it's important for others - regardless of age - to discover the treasures hidden inside them.

I was 41 when I realized I needed to be gluten-free [I do not have celiac disease according to the biopsy results, but I know gluten affects me adversely]. It's tough enough for an adult to handle the physical and emotional ramifications of being gluten-free, but I cannot fathom what it must be like for children or their parents. We do not have children, but it must hard for parents to watch their child go through the process. I

think we need to be especially attentive to GF kids - give them the proper tools to be happy and healthy. I am glad to see GIG is offering content geared toward children and overjoyed to see Generation GF groups popping up around the US! Well done!

The feedback I have received has been extremely positive and complementary. Full disclosure - what I have received has been primarily from friends, family, support group members, and GIG representatives - people who know me. While I sincerely appreciate their kind words, there may be a tad bit of bias there, so I try to temper those positive remarks. I have seen some [unsolicited] positive comments from strangers on GIG's Facebook and website pages. One thing I have noticed, all the feedback has been from adults - not children. Yes, adults appear to love this story, but I have no idea what children think. I thought it a bit ironic for a story that was targeted at children. And last but not least - *Gluten-Free Living's* interest in the story. I can only assume this means it struck a chord - hopefully it's a consonant and not a dissonant chord.

I have gotten requests for an illustrated version, which I think is a great idea. Due to time constraints, I had to shorten the GIG published story. It's my dream to publish an expanded, illustrated version - I will be pursuing this.

As in my work as a support group leader - if this story has helped only one person [child or adult], in any way - I consider it a success.

Honestly, I'm completely dumbfounded by the attention this story has generated. I never expected it.

I cannot thank GIG enough for getting the ball rolling.

Thanks for your time!

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