

15 MINUTES WITH: John Van Lieshout

AUTHOR

BY NAN BIALEK
PHOTO BY KIRSTEN SCHMITT



As a shareholding attorney at Milwaukee's Reinhart Boerner Van Deuren, John M. Van Lieshout is fully aware that there are big cities in this state, but

says he always thinks about Wisconsin as a place of small towns and villages.

"Right or wrong, that's what's real to me," he says, "and I think Little Chute is representative of those small towns."

That's probably because he was born and raised in Little Chute, Outagamie County, in the northeast part of the state. His dad was the physician in town and his mom was a nurse, but with seven children, simply keeping up with the cooking and cleaning kept her hands full.

Van Lieshout's recently published memoir, "Growing Up Little Chute," is essentially a love letter to his hometown, which he believes has a lot in common with many small Wisconsin towns. It also has more than a dash of nostalgia for his freewheeling childhood.

In the book, he takes readers outside to play the game that the Little Chute kids of the late 1960s and early '70s were obsessed with: driveway basketball. Van Lieshout and his friends played year-round, aiming at the hoops nailed above almost every garage door in town. Their hands got so cold during winter games that the skin on their fingers cracked open.



They would often play with a radio on so they could listen to Milwaukee Bucks games as they tried to perfect their own turn-around jumper shots. And they marveled at the skill of the Bucks' play-by-play announcer, Eddie Doucette.

"As a new franchise, the Bucks were lousy and didn't get better until they drafted Lew Alcindor/Kareem Abdul-Jabbar," Van Lieshout writes. "Nonetheless, we faithfully tuned in to the broadcasts of every game because Eddie was simply so entertaining that you couldn't afford to miss any of the action."

Van Lieshout fondly remembers the summer days he and his buddies spent playing outside. After breakfast he and his friends would head for the town's swimming pool. They'd come back home for lunch, go back to the pool, and come home again when the pool closed. "Helicopter parents" were scarce in those days, and in Little Chute, kids were expected to get to and from their local destinations on their own.

"We didn't have the internet and didn't have much television, so we played outside all the time; games like Kick the Can, Red Rover and on the sort of lethal playground equipment," he recalls. "You were outside all day and you came home when you had to."

One of the most unusual stories in the book is the saga of the souvenir tapestry his parents brought back home after visiting his sister, who was living

in Zimbabwe. Suffice it to say that some pesky unwelcome visitors tagged along on the tapestry for the trip back home. The situation quickly escalated into a fiery ending — a conflagration involving firefighters, police and a TV news crew.

Prior to writing "Growing Up Little Chute," Van Lieshout says, he always felt a bit guilty when walking into a bookstore: "I guess I'm one of those people who goes into a bookstore and thinks, 'Most of these books are the result of effort. I should make the effort.'"

He decided to start writing his book while putting together family stories for the eulogy of his mother, Josephine June Mayhew Van Lieshout.

"I put together some stories that reflected on her personality and what she meant to our family," he says. "In putting those stories together, it struck me that there was a book in there. The book is dedicated to my Mom because she instilled in me a love of reading." The dedication also includes his wife and daughter.

Van Lieshout worked on the book through the COVID epidemic and has this advice for aspiring memoirists: keep it short. He also keeps it conversational, so that reading "Growing Up Little Chute" feels like reminiscing with a good friend.

"Everyone has their story," says Van Lieshout. "I tried to write this from my heart." MKE