Puzzling Thoughts

When an interest in doing crosswords becomes an interest in making crosswords

Story by Lory Hough

One across: What Ed School employee is a cruciverbalist, or a person skilled in creating or solving crossword puzzles?

Answer: Marc Raila, manager of the Education Innovation Studio, the school’s makerspace on the third floor of the Gutman Library.

For decades, Raila, a former art major who taught photography and says he loves the creative process, has been solving crossword puzzles for fun.

“Crosswords have always been there for me in some shape or form,” he says. “I’ve always been interested in solving them, although never on any kind of regular basis.”

But then the pandemic hit. With the extra time, Raila started building a canoe (which he finished and launched last year) and ramped up his crossword game.

“Locked at home for months on end, I was trying to reduce my screen consumption and I had some crossword books laying around that I’d never finished,” he says. “I started voraciously consuming those, often multiple puzzles each day.”

He actually prefers doing them on paper, he says, with pencil. “I always make mistakes.”

Nowadays, Raila does crosswords whenever he has free time, like (on his phone) when waiting for the bus or (on paper) at the rink where his two daughters take skating lessons. His daughters also help him do The New York Times mini and other puzzles most nights.

He went one step further in early 2023 when he came across a New York Times series about how to create your own crossword puzzle.

“The process seemed confusing, but I thought, hey, I enjoy solving problems, so this could be the hobby’s logical next step,” he says. “I made a couple and submitted some to The New York Times. They’ve all been rejected, of course — this is actually a fairly competitive arena” — but USA Today published his first puzzle in March of this year. He also created a custom puzzle for Ed. magazine, on the next page, complete with a few clues found in this issue.

Raila admits that when it comes to creating puzzles, the process is “a little slow going.” Coming up with a theme is the hardest part.

“I’ll rack my brain for weeks coming up with a theme and fleshing it out, and then getting it to fit into the grid,” he says. “Writing the clues is one of my favorite parts. It’s where the wordplay and jokes come in.”

Before making revisions to a new puzzle, Raila runs a draft by his wife and other family members, who serve as beta testers, as well as a neighbor who also makes crossword puzzles. With her, he says, “We bounce things off of one another.”

One family member who would have been especially interested in Raila’s hobby is his maternal grandmother, Ebba Bestgen, who was born in Wyoming and eventually settled in Quincy, Massachusetts, just south of Boston, where Raila grew up.

“My grandmother, who lived to be 97 and kept all of her mental faculties almost until the day she died, didn’t do crosswords but she did other word puzzles,” he says. “She swore that’s what kept her sharp throughout her older years.”

ACROSS
1 Party thrower
2 Naomi of tennis fame
3 Sore throat source, briefly
4 Dancing digit
5 Adams of beer fame, and Harvard alumnus of 1740 and ’43
6 Kilt pattern
7 Roadie’s load
8 Atlas pages
9 Goddess of the hunt
10 Orange Monopoly card
11 Toddler
12 Like a retired prof., maybe
13 Not confess
14 “It’s true!”
23 River boat
25 Primary ingredient of 5-across
28 Pulsate
29 Texter’s exclamation
30 Shock
31 Camping shelter
32 Lip (pretend to sing)
33 Wandering worker
34 Shrinking Asian sea
37 @@@
39 Getting this gives you an advantage
40 Common word that sounds like its second letter
41 Pea places
43 Repeated top-of-page text blocks
44 Swiss currency
46 Bespectacled Beatle
47 _Book Club
48 Close...
51 1990s martial arts-based fitness fad
52 Kind of beauty
53 Zoo enclosures
54 Exam for a future MBA
55 Scarce
56 Assistant
57 Gobi (Indian potato dish)
62 Promise to pay, in brief
63 Star Wars Solo

DOWN
1 Took a trail
2 Naomi of tennis fame
3 Sore throat source, briefly
4 Dancing digit
5 Adams of beer fame, and Harvard alumnus of 1740 and ’43
6 Kilt pattern
7 Roadie’s load
8 Atlas pages
9 Goddess of the hunt
10 Orange Monopoly card
11 Toddler
12 Like a retired prof., maybe
13 Not confess
14 “It’s true!”
23 River boat
25 Primary ingredient of 5-across
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Marc Raila’s tips for solving his crossword puzzle: 1) Plural clues indicate plural answers. 2) If the clue contains an abbreviation, the answer does, too. 3) Find a good eraser. 4) When all else fails, find the answers at gse. [harvard.edu/ed/crossword]