

Meet Bob O'Connor, 'My View' contributor and local celebrity

By [Jeff Schober](#)

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You have probably never met Bob O'Connor, but after reading any of his frequent "My View" columns in *The Buffalo News*, you'll feel like you have. Sharing a sharp wit and pinpoint insights, O'Connor has become something of a local celebrity across Western New York because of his words.

The Hamburg resident, a retired civil engineer, mixes "everyman" observations with funny twists and absurd moments, all shaped by a South Buffalo Irish-Catholic sensibility.

A sampling: "[I never went to my senior prom](#). In fact, I never went to any formal dance during my high school years. I'd like to claim that I was protesting this quaint and bourgeois rite of passage, but I had the personality of a hedgehog and wasn't in great demand in the dating scene. I was more patty melt than beefcake, and the only girl in my life was Marcia Brady." (*May 2, 2015*)

O'Connor, 61, generates four or five columns annually. Accompanying them is a tiny head shot — cropped from a group picture at his daughter's wedding — smaller than one square inch. Having a stamp-sized image alongside his words has ended O'Connor's anonymity.

"I get stopped by strangers all the time," he said. "It probably happens once a week. The first time a guy said, 'Are you Bob O'Connor' I looked at him but didn't remember ever meeting him. I can't believe that people recognize me."

The tone and tenor of his columns suggest a man accustomed to laughing at life's mundane realities.

In a column dated July 4, 2008, he wrote about keys to planning a family vacation: "Choosing which relative to sponge off of was a science in itself. The kinship had to be close enough so that they knew who you were when you called to mooch, yet distant enough so that if the trip went sour, neither party would care if they ever saw the other again. We tended to alternate sides of the family and found that second or third cousins twice removed were ideal. "Hello, Karen. You may not remember me, but your mother and my dad had the same great-grandparents. We met at Aunt Bebe's funeral back in 1976. Hello? Hello?""

For 30 years, O'Connor oversaw construction on Western New York highways. When he retired, he accepted a job as State Highway Safety Engineer in Virginia. He lived and worked in Richmond for twenty months before returning to Hamburg after the birth of his granddaughter.

“All my stories are true,” he reflected. “I might exaggerate sometimes, but when I get an idea, I sit down to write it. I don’t show it to anybody before I send it in. I usually write them in about 20 minutes.”

O’Connor and his wife, Terry, grew up in South Buffalo. They were 14 when they met at the corner of Downing Street and Abbott Road. The former Terry Breidenstein attended St. Ambrose and then Mount Mercy, while Bob studied at St. Martin’s then Timon. Friends suggested they date in high school, but it wasn’t until they bumped into each other at a college mixer in 1973 that they felt an attraction. Bob was an engineering student at the University of Buffalo; his future wife was enrolled at Erie Community College.

They have four children together: Annie, Kyle, Jimmy and Kerry. Then Terry returned to school in her 30s to become a teacher, Bob worked part-time so he could raise the kids.

“I loved that,” he said. “I really did. All our kids are characters.”

The couple has two grandchildren, Ella and Kate, who live in Cheektowaga. Being a grandfather is regular fodder for O’Connor’s columns.

He is a well-seasoned writer, having been published in national magazines such as Newsweek and Guideposts. So how does an engineer develop a writing style?

“Going to Catholic schools, the nuns were terrible at math and science. But they were really great at history, English, discipline and religion. Those were their strong points. That’s where I learned to write.”

In fact, one of O’Connor’s columns reminisced about the debacle of his seventh-grade science fair: “Each year, the entries were judged by a gaggle of nuns from a nearby school. No disrespect intended, but having nuns judge science projects was like having Jim Kelly judge a poetry contest.” (*Aug. 26, 2012*)

“Being self-effacing is not an act,” O’Connor said. “I grew up with 10 brothers and sisters, and we’re all still alive and get along. There’s no way you’re going to get a big head with a family that size. Years ago I had an aunt who said, ‘Bob, one day you’ll be thankful to have so many brothers and sisters.’ I said, ‘Yeah, but it’s terrible now!’ ”

Because of his conversational style, readers feel like they know O’Connor. He often gets letters and emails about his writing, but is reluctant to reply.

“I’ve never met Bob O’Connor,” said Joan Christopher, 55, a Kenmore native who lives in Las Vegas. She reads The Buffalo News several times a week and has posted online comments about O’Connor’s columns. “But I feel like I know him. You get a sense of just how comical he is when he shares personal stories.”

Another sample, from Oct. 13, 2014, in which O’Connor expressed [his fear of animals](#): “The woman across the street owns a Great Dane the size of Secretariat. Every chance I get, I wander

over and feed the beast a doggie treat. My neighbor thinks I love animals, but I consider the Pupperonis as protection money. When the beast goes bad, I want to be on her good side.”

O’Connor claims his wife is “mystified” by the attention he receives.

“It’s interesting,” Terry agreed. “We’ve been approached at garage sales and stores and people will say to Bob, ‘How do I know you?’ He’ll never say it’s from The News. He’ll ask if they grew up in South Buffalo or attend our church, St. Bernadette’s.”

“Years ago, [former Buffalo Bill] Bobby Chandler posed for Playgirl magazine,” O’Connor recalled. “His wife couldn’t believe that people were so excited about him, because she lived with him everyday. That’s kind of how Terry feels when strangers stop me.”

Terry appreciates her husband’s humor, even if she sometimes serves as the punchline. On Nov. 5, 2009, O’Connor joked about the differences between genders after his wife wondered if he would remarry were she to pass away:

“‘Never! How could I possibly ever love another?’ I thought this was the answer she was looking for. As usual, I was wrong. ‘But studies show that people in the happiest marriages tend to remarry,’ she pouted. ‘Don’t we have a happy marriage?’ I realized too late that I was entering that dark and forbidding place where only husbands can go: The Land Of You Can’t Possibly Say The Right Thing. I tried to recover. ‘Well, when you put it that way, of course I will remarry. In fact, I’ll probably hook up right there at your funeral breakfast. Hell, I can start looking around now if you’d like; there’s an old lady down the street who gives me the eye whenever I’m out mowing the lawn in my cut-offs.’”

Someone once mentioned that people see the same things O’Connor does, but his talent is being able to uncover the humorous angle.

“I get asked all the time what’s next,” he said. “As retirees, we’re always doing something. We don’t watch TV during the day. If we’re home and nothing’s going on, Terry and I are both readers. We have two kids out of town, and both grandkids are here. I have a cottage I’m working on. Terry is involved in our church and sings in the choir. When someone asks if I want to go back to work, my answer is, I did that for 30 or 35 years.”

Terry is accustomed to waking at night to find her husband jotting an idea in the notebook he keeps by their bedside. The next day, he elaborates and refines the thought. Sometimes it serves as a kernel for a column. Despite the loss of anonymity, O’Connor intends to keep writing.

Jeff Schober is the author of "Bike Path Rapist," "Growing Up Gronk" and several works of crime fiction set in Buffalo in the 1980s. His newest book, "Faces and Fingertips," is available now. Visit his website at www.jeffschober.com.