

SAAR on SCHOOLS

College board like FHUSD - just more 'zeroes'

By Ryan Winslett
Times Reporter

Fountain Hills resident Dana Saar said quite a bit has happened in his first six months serving on the Maricopa County Community College District governing board.

With another five-and-a-half years on his term representing District 2, though, he's only just getting started.

"These past few months have been an enjoyable learning experience," Saar said.

"I've been a teacher and an administrator at the community college level, but this is certainly a different experience."

Saar used to teach at the East Valley Institute of Technology home, and he also was on the Fountain Hills Unified School District governing board.

He was there for 13 years before moving on to his new seat with the MCCCDC.

Packing plenty of experience as a FHUSD board member, though, he said representing 10 community colleges and various instructional centers throughout Maricopa County is something of a different ballgame.

"This is a big operation," Saar said.

"We had over 260,000 students last year and a \$1.6 billion budget. We send out 12,000 paychecks each pay period.

"It's similar to what I was doing with FHUSD,

but there are a lot more zeroes at the end of those numbers."

As an example, the local district had to trim \$600,000 from its operating budget this year. As for MCCCDC, that figure was around \$200 million.

Over the past few months, Saar said he's already had to help make some tough decisions.

"One of the most difficult decisions is making it more difficult for students

to attend with tuition increases (Prop 300), and then putting an extra burden on people through additional property taxes," Saar said.

"For the average Fountain Hills home, that's about \$3 a year. It's just the concept of asking taxpayers to support us more than they already are that's tough."

In making these types of decisions, Saar was always known as the guy to ask questions of the FHUSD board. He said that hasn't changed.

"I tend to ask more questions than board members are accustomed to," Saar said, smiling.

"But that's just how I operate."

Saar said he's also noticed a big difference in post-secondary education in terms of student needs.

"We don't spend a lot of time on food service issues

and things like that," he said.

"Instead of four schools, we're talking about four colleges and 26 campuses. We don't get as involved as we would [in Fountain Hills]."

As far as pet projects go, Saar is working on a couple at the moment, one targeting spending and environmental friendliness, the other in how the board itself operates.

"First, we're getting

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Dana Saar

ready for a paperless week," Saar said.

"We spend upwards of \$5 million a year on paper and printing. We're going to try to go paperless for a week and see what that does."

Saar said this is something that has already been implemented by the local board.

"The FHUSD board is way ahead of the curve in that regard," Saar said.

"They've been doing that for years now."

Saar said the goal is to study cost savings and efficiency of operating in a more digital environment.

Saar also said the MCCCDC board will be trying out a new seating arrangement.

"We're setting up a U table and stepping down from the dais for one of our next meetings and trying that out," Saar said.

"I've always been against the idea of a board operating from a dais. I spoke to someone recently who brought up a good point: A board meeting is exactly that. It's not our time to present ourselves to the public, though they are certainly welcome to attend and provide input when appropriate."

Moving forward, Saar said his goal is a simple one.

"I like to say we're preparing our students for their future, not our past," Saar said.

"The community college is a unique environment because not everyone is there for a bachelorette degree. Some just want to take classes in quilting, which we can provide."

As a result, Saar said it's hard to determine a student success rate in a place where not everyone's goals are the same.

"First we need to identify what their goals are," he said.

"After that, we can figure out how to achieve them. We have a goal of improving student success by 50 percent by 2020."

Much of what the board is currently doing, Saar said, moves toward that goal.

"We're constantly planning and evaluating and working with high schools to better prepare their students for post secondary careers," he added.

Saar said reaching the MCCCDC's goals will be a long, tough process, but he's looking forward to being a part of it.

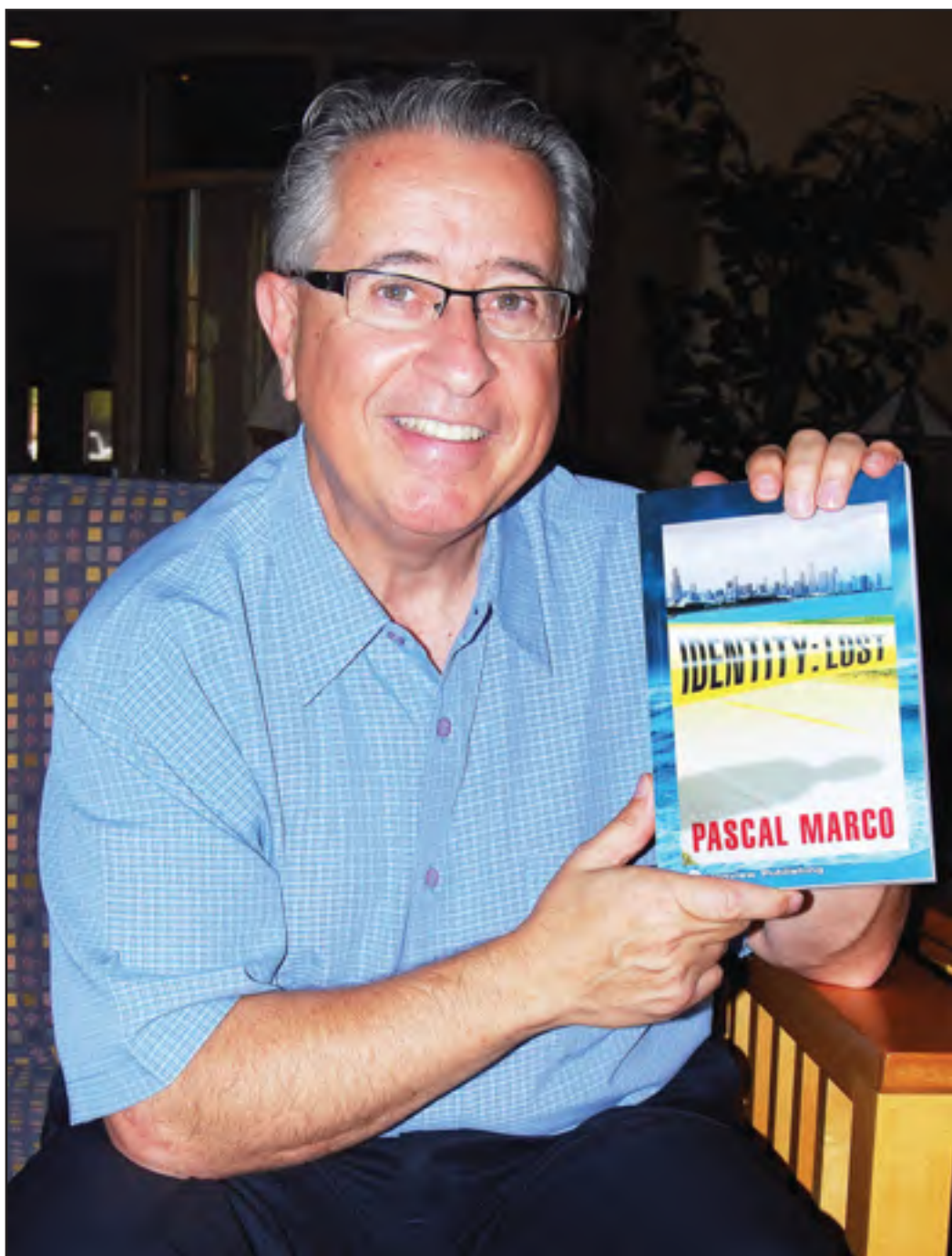


Fountain Hills resident and 13-year school board member Dana Saar continues his work at MCCCDC.



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First-time mystery author Pascal Marco, a former town resident, displays his book, "Identity: Lost," about the murder of the last living member of the Chicago Black Sox team.

Author stays close to Chicago roots for first mystery book

By Barb Charzuk
Times Reporter

Novelist Pascal (Pat) Marco got his start writing mysteries in grammar school.

He remembers he and a boyhood chum, both fans of then-popular television program, "The Man from U.N.C.L.E.," turned the plots into their own literary scripts for the two main characters, Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin. They filled steno notebooks of imaginary episodes.

"I didn't know it then but we formed our own little two-person writers' group," said Marco.

Years later, Marco would return to writing and seeking feedback from a writers' group for his novel, "Identity: Lost." Oceanview Publishing released the hardcover book on June 14. The book can be found at Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble, and in all electronic formats.

He will discuss writing and sign books at The Poisoned Pen bookstore, 4014 N Goldwater Blvd., Scottsdale, at 7 p.m. Monday, Aug. 8.

Marco lived in Fountain Hills from 1994 to 2005 when he owned a media replication company on

Colony Drive.

He earned bachelor and master's degrees in communications and theater from the University of Illinois, in his hometown of Chicago.

For the last six years he has lived on the border of Scottsdale and Tempe where he operates a printing, web development and media-streaming firm, Pascal Creative Group.

Marco started writing "Identity: Lost" more than five years ago. He was inspired after attending the White Sox's American League Championship Series clincher in Anaheim, Calif. in 2005.

He won tickets for the game in a lottery the morning of the game, drove to Anaheim from his Arizona home and was overwhelmed with memories of his father, a longtime Sox fan.

He wrote an essay about the experience, showed it to friends who thought he should get it published and was asked to write some articles for whitesoxinteractive.com.

He joined the Scottsdale Writers Group, where he was encouraged to write fiction. He chose a true incident of gang members murdering an elderly man in 1979 and witnessed by

an 11-year-old boy. The youth is placed in a witness relocation program in Arizona after the killers are acquitted.

He drew inspiration from another piece of history -- Bobby Rush, co-founder of the Illinois chapter of Black Panthers who was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Marco played with the idea of "what if" a former gang member had been involved in an unsolved crime and later became a congressman.

"As a writer, you're always saying I could have done this or I might have changed that. When I read the pages of the book, they still move me as if I'm reading them for the first time. I'm very much happy with what I created," he added.

Marco has written five or six chapters of his second novel, once again fictionalizing a premise to relate three separate true incidents from different years.

He said he received "dozens and dozens" of rejections before a publisher contracted with him. His writing mentor, Deborah J. Ledford, told him "you only need one person to love your book."

"That's key for an aspiring author to keep in mind," said Marco.

IDENTITY: LOST