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TOP STORY

Where are they now?

Murphy honored with Lifetime Excellence Award after thriving through adversity

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Tim Murphy, a 1971 Sun Prairie High School graduate, was recently honored with a Lifetime Excellence Award from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

Murphy graduated from UW-Eau Claire in 1976 with a BBA in marketing. He used his knowledge and experience to sustain success with American Express for over 30 years. He received American Express' highest level of recognition, being inducted into their Worldwide Hall of Fame for his contributions as a sales leader and role in

growing the company's business from a startup division to a global expense management powerhouse. However, his stellar business career is not what's most notable about his story.

After retirement, Murphy had plans of golfing and biking, but he was struck with a rare neurological disorder around 2011. Murphy remembers word for word what his neurologist told him.

"You can live a normal life Tim," he said. "You just have to give up all the things that you love."

He told UW-Eau Claire graduates in his acceptance speech that he gave his neurologist "an F in bedside manner."



Tim Murphy and his wife, Debbie, at UW-Eau Claire's 2022 graduation ceremony where Murphy accepted a Lifetime Excellence Award.

Tim Murphy

Golf was the center of his life, so giving it up wasn't easy for him. However, he soon realized that golf was a luxury and it was his basic mobility that he really missed.

After a few months of moping around wondering what to make of this news, his wife, Debbie, suggested he pick up photography, as it was an old hobby of his. This was the beginning of a blessing in a curse.

"I traded in my golf clubs and bike for a camera and a cane," Murphy said. "I've never done anything in half measures. I dove in hard. I consumed hours and hours of content."

He taught himself everything he needed to know to be a professional photographer. He's taken a multitude of photos in the Southwest, where he resides in Scottsdale, Arizona. Some of his best work in Arizona includes shots of the Grand Canyon, Antelope Canyon and Navajo Pow Wow dancers.



ABOVE: This Tim Murphy photo, “Dia de Los Muertos Celebration, Scottsdale, Arizona,” captures flashes of color against a dark night backdrop.

Contributed/Tim Murphy

It might be his photography from weeks spent in Ireland over the last few years that draws the most attention, capturing images of castles, seascapes, churches and world-class golf courses. He never would’ve turned to photography if it wasn’t for the neurological disorder.



BELOW: Game of Thrones fans will recognize this Tim Murphy photo as King's Road.

Contributed/Tim Murphy

“I turned my life around and took a different path,” he said. “I hit rock bottom and developed this completely different life.”

His lack of mobility hasn't stopped him from capturing the best quality images. In his acceptance speech, he said he remembered a time where he battled his mobility to capture images. He was shooting 6,000-year-old dolmen – which are massive rock formations that were used as tombs – in Sligo, Ireland. He fell while taking the photos, and panicked as he checked if he broke a lens or a bone. As he determined the camera and he were fine, he took advantage of the perspective angle he could capture from the ground.

Over the last half-decade, Murphy has turned a hobby into a thriving business, publishing seven photography books from across the United States to Ireland. In addition, he spreads his knowledge in shows and exhibitions. While he has been able to sell his photography, it's not the money that fuels his passion.

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He'll never forget an email he received from the mother of a 23-year-old cancer patient observing his images from an exhibition at the Mayo Clinic Hospital.

"She told me how much her daughter enjoyed my photographs," Murphy said. "In fact, late at night, she would take solace by visiting the exhibition, getting lost in the images of Ireland. I might sell a book and make a couple bucks on it, but you can't put a price on touching people's lives."

Murphy's donated about 40 pieces of artwork to over a dozen charities, and he's given photo lectures on Arizona and Ireland to senior centers, civic centers and churches. Recently, an Arizona bank reached out to him about putting his photos on MasterCard credit and debit cards.



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RIGHT: This Tim Murphy photo, “Desert Sunrise,” is one of the photos that an Arizona bank wants to use for its credit cards.

Contributed/Tim Murphy

It was a long childhood journey for Murphy before ending up at Sun Prairie High School. He spent a large portion of his years as a child living on military bases wherever his father was stationed.

By the time he was 8 years old, he spent more time living outside the United States in North Africa. His father’s final destination was at Truax Field in Madison and his family settled in Sun Prairie. His parents contemplated moving back to Memphis where they were from, but they had made friends in Sun Prairie and they liked the community better than in Memphis, where Martin Luther King Jr. was just assassinated in 1968 – around the time of their decision.

It wasn’t until 1995 that Murphy and his wife moved to Arizona to enjoy the better weather and the beautiful golf courses.

Murphy knew about his award for almost three years. He was supposed to receive it in 2020, but he had to wait until UW-Eau Claire’s graduation returned in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In a way, Murphy said he was happy it got delayed because he had more time to process it and collect his emotions.

“I was very emotional at first and overwhelmed at first,” he said. “I probably would’ve been a mess giving my acceptance speech if it was in 2020.”

The Lifetime Excellence Award was given to four UW-Eau Claire Alumni who have “demonstrated longtime and successful commitment to their careers and communities,” according to the university. These individuals have made a positive impact through their dedication to service and living their lives as a testimony to UW-Eau Claire’s motto of “excellence.”

“Photography is a lifeline for me,” Murphy said. “I could’ve just sat around and felt sorry for myself, but I tried this and I’m happy as a clam. I can’t wait to get out of bed to shoot and post something.”

There is much to take away and learn from Murphy’s story. He offered up advice to young aspiring graduates.

“Take stock in what you have and enjoy it,” he said. “Do not take anything for granted. Don’t take people for granted, whether they’re your friends, family or strangers. Choose your battles wisely. The common thread is putting things in perspective, and that took me years.”

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Jeromey Hodsdon

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