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National Outdoor Book Award winner makes Manchester appearance

DARREN MARCY Herald Staff

When Lou **Ureneck** and his 18-year-old son, Adam, shoved their raft into the Kanektok River deep in the Alaskan mountains near the Arctic Circle for a week-long fishing trip, **Ureneck** was hoping to salvage the troubled relationship between the two. When they pulled out 110 miles later near the Bering Sea, not only was the relationship with his son much improved and headed in the right direction, but **Ureneck** had recovered something within himself he never even realized he had lost.

A memoir about the 2000 trip and **Ureneck's** life leading up to the epic journey has become a raging literary success, winning a 2007 National Outdoor Book Award for outdoor literature.

Ureneck will present his novel "Backcast: Fatherhood, Fly-Fishing and a River Journey through the Heart of Alaska," at 7 p.m. Saturday at the Northshire Bookstore in Manchester.

As **Ureneck** takes readers down the river, he also takes them back through his life and how he was brought to that Alaska river.

He reveals that his own father abandoned him when he was 7 years old, and a stepfather, who was really the only father figure he knew, also walked away when **Ureneck** was in college.

Throughout his youth, **Ureneck** turned to fishing and the outdoors for comfort.

"The outdoors saved me," **Ureneck** said. "It gave me a place to go to that was beautiful and serene and peaceful. Nature became an important part of my life as a boy."

Losing two fathers, **Ureneck** vowed never to divorce and when it happened, he said, his son took it very hard. Adam lived with his father during high school, but grew more and more angry approaching his high school graduation.

"Through that time, he and I were close," **Ureneck** said. "But the relation was deeply strained. I saw the anger deepening into something more permanent."

A six-year-old promise to fish Alaska found **Ureneck** financially and emotionally devastated by the divorce, but he knew he had to keep his word or, he believed, he risked losing his son forever. A trip was put together on a shoestring.

The trip started poorly with Adam angry and the pair bickering.

But a difficult stretch of river while lost forced them to work together and began a new chapter of the trip.

"There was a lot that was great about the trip," **Ureneck** said. "The wildlife, the scenery, the fishing. But there was a lot of trouble between Adam and me, particularly at the beginning of the trip. But things got better as we went down the river."

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There were also moments of terror and uncertainty. Perhaps the most harrowing was an encounter with a female brown bear and her cub, when **Ureneck** and Adam rounded a sharp bend in the river and surprised the sow and cub.

"Typically, bears, if you leave them alone, they leave you alone," **Ureneck** said. "The guaranteed exception is if you surprise a bear, particularly a female bear with a cub."

The river was very narrow - about three times as wide as the raft - and the pair quickly pulled the raft to shore and stepped out about 40 yards away from the bruins.

Ureneck knew it was a bad situation and grabbed the double-barreled shotgun loaded with slugs as the sow's eyes locked on Adam.

The teen started walking away from the bear and then broke into a jog - exactly the wrong move when confronted by a bear.

The sow went after Adam and **Ureneck** raised the shotgun and yelled for Adam to stop. He kept running and so did the bear.

Just before he was going to pull the trigger, he yelled again. Adam stopped and so did the bear - at 20 yards away.

Ureneck said she turned toward her cub, which had scampered into the brush during the excitement, and after a moment of indecision, turned to go look for her cub.

Heart-pounding moments like those helped **Ureneck** rediscover a piece of himself lost in the divorce.

"Nature had always been important to me," he said. "I had lost my connection in recent years with nature. Being out there brought me back to life and stirred up my old confidence. I was changed by my time in the outdoors of Alaska. The experience of that wild river and breathtaking landscape changed me."

That renewed strength carried over into his role as a father.

"One of the things that happened along the way is I regained my confidence as a father," **Ureneck** said. "(The trip) gave me the strength and confidence to start being a father again. I had lost my ability to be a father and it was contributing to the problems between Adam and me."

When he started writing, the book started as a fishing story, but he quickly realized his youth and the impact it had on who he had become was a big part of the tale.

"Initially, the book was just going to be the story of Adam and me making our way down the river," **Ureneck** said. "As I began writing, I felt the undertow of my own childhood. It was the story of me growing up as a boy without a father and loving to fish."

While **Ureneck** immediately recognized some of the changes the trip had on him, it was several years before he better understood all the benefits the trip brought to his life.

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