

NEWS

Mike Ragsdale on travel, popularizing 30A and the pursuit of happiness



[Savannah Evanoff](#)

Northwest Florida Daily News

Published 5:26 p.m. ET Nov. 15, 2020

SANTA ROSA BEACH – 30A isn't a destination. Neither is happiness, for that matter.

Mike Ragsdale, the founder of the 30A brand, said it's a lifestyle brand – less about inviting people to the 19-mile slice of paradise known as 30A in South Walton County, and more about bringing it to them. It's much like the pursuit of happiness, but we'll get to that later.

Besides, 30A isn't exclusive to the Gulf Coast. There is a 30A in India, Vermont, New York and Bay County; Ragsdale can list them all. His 30A started as an alternate route off Florida State Road 30. Most of it is U.S. Highway 98 now.

More: PHOTOS: 30A lifestyle founder Mike Ragsdale

“The brand is symbolic of that alternate, slower beachfront drive,” Ragsdale said. “It's small town America at the beach, the vibe of Northwest Florida's Gulf Coast.”

Branding 30A

30A wouldn't be 30A if it weren't for Ragsdale, not that he would take credit for it.

The road was there. He just popularized it, he said.

It's true. Ragsdale never set out to make a bunch of money, label an area with an umbrella term that would shape tourism forever or create a lifestyle brand that would sell nationwide. All he really wanted was to live by the beach.

Everyone has a book that changes their life, their trajectory. For Ragsdale, it was Tim Ferriss' “The 4-Hour Workweek.” Ragsdale was living in Birmingham, Alabama, with his wife, Angela, when he read it. The book gave him guidance in an uncertain time.

More: OUT & ABOUT: Gulf Coast Electric honored by the BBB

“I was coming off some failed businesses,” Ragsdale said. “We were looking at moving to the beach. We didn’t know what we were going to do. I might be bartending. I might be writing. I might be driving a taxi. We thought, ‘Why not pick the place you want to be and then figure it out?’ ”

He had vacationed in Gulf Shores but had no real intent to live in the area — until the real estate market crash in 2005.

“A friend of ours owned several houses here that all of a sudden he couldn’t get rid of,” Ragsdale said. “He was like, ‘Hey, I hear you’re thinking about moving. I’ll cut you deal on a house down by the bay in Destin.’ ”

Back then, everything was Destin.

“Most old-timers call this area Destin,” Ragsdale said. “They would say, ‘I’m going to Destin’ even if they were coming here. We kinda ended up here accidentally. If he hadn’t called me, we’d probably be in Savannah (Georgia). Or if circumstances were different, we might not have left at all. We ended up showing up here, not knowing a soul.”

It was an old house that kept flooding.

“Another brilliant investment I made,” Ragsdale said with a laugh.

At the time, he wanted to be a writer. He dabbled in freelance work, stringing words together for the Seaside Times and The Thirty-A Review. His mother was a journalist for the local newspaper when he was growing up.

“After graduating college, I had a website company that developed content on the World Wide Web, when no one knew what that was,” Ragsdale said. “It was creative writing. We did a lot of spoof, ‘Onion’-like articles. In some ways, it was like writing news, but smartass stories.”

More: Landfill fodder you can wear, sit on

Then in 2006 he started a blog — before that was a thing.

“I thought, ‘Well, I need to start a website and just start writing, get in the habit, then I’ll write my great American novel or my Academy Award-winning screenplay,’ ” Ragsdale said.

He bought the 30A.com url from a company in Texas on a whim — not that anyone wanted it. No one called it 30A then.

“That growth was inevitable,” Angela said. “Watercolor, Seaside – those were communities that were well established when we moved there.”

“There’s no downtown Santa Rosa Beach, no mayor, no police chief,” Ragsdale said. “It’s unincorporated. It’s difficult to point to a map and say, ‘There’s Santa Rosa Beach.’ The TDC (Tourist Development Council) at the time was referring to this area as ‘The beaches of South Walton.’ ”

But Ragsdale likes short brand names; easy to spell, easy to remember.

So 30A it was, and it’s hard to forget.

‘Three Sunshine A’

Ragsdale used 30A.com like a travel blog, writing about his family’s relocation to the Gulf Coast.

“I started making lists because I was in love with my new home; I don’t mean this house, this community,” Ragsdale said. “I started making these lists of best sunset, best place to get a martini, best place to get a burger. That was the website for a long time. It was almost to remind me of what I liked to do.”

It was more for him than anyone else.

“Finally, I was out on the beach one day and a local real estate guy said, ‘I really like your website. How much does it cost to advertise with you?’ ” Ragsdale said. “I’m like, ‘I don’t know. \$50 a month?’ I didn’t have ads on the site. He said, ‘Yeah, that sounds great.’ Soon, someone else asked me and I was like, ‘Hmm, \$100 a month.’ ”

Ragsdale eventually decided to focus on the blog and turn it into something that paid the bills.

While the TDC and beach communities spent money trying to bring people to the area, Ragsdale took a different approach. He brought the area to the people.

He likens 30A to an eco-Disney World, where instead of roller coasters and go-cart tracks, there are coastal dune lakes and walks on the beach.

“Anyone who loves Disney knows you can’t be there very long,” Ragsdale said. “You run out of money and you have to get back to work. But that said, people love Disney and when they leave Disney, they still consume Disney: movies, products, TV.”

The brand 30A is like that, too.

“We keep people in touch with that beach happy feeling they get when they’re here, when they’re stuck in Des Moines working a job they don’t want to do, going to that cubicle Monday morning, paying that mortgage they’re worried they won’t be able to make,” Ragsdale said. “We want to bring a sliver of happiness, a sliver of sunshine to the person’s day who saves up their vacation days all year long with the hope they get to spend a few days of those vacation right here.”

Beach Happy is the name of one of their merchandise lines.

Angela thinks the optimism of the brand is responsible for its success.

“The message was always positive,” Angela said. “He didn’t want to portray anything in a negative light, from needing more traffic lights, anything having to do with infrastructure, to an accident with a tourist or God forbid, a drowning. There were plenty of channels that could broadcast that news. He wanted to keep it positive.”

When the business started, Angela’s biggest role was mom, taking care of Jayne, now 31; Kelsey, 29; Carlton, 24; and Holly 21. But she always helped when she could, such as when they first started printing T-shirts.

“I would help deliver the stickers or the T-shirts,” Angela said. “Mike, really, I don’t know that he had a vision for what it could be. He just took it day by day and let it organically evolve. When I could get involved, I absolutely did get involved.”

More than 400 stores nationwide carry 30A merchandise, and 30A bumper stickers unite drivers everywhere.

“Driving along the road and seeing one of those on another car, if they’re stuck in Louisville or Chicago and they see that sticker, if it only gives them five seconds of the smile and it reminds them of the beach and transports them back here, that’s their job,” Ragsdale said.

Likely their smallest piece of merchandise has had the biggest impact. Angela remembers their 500,000th sticker production as monumental moment for the business.

“Mike used to go pick them up from the printer, and they literally were stored in our bedroom at the time,” Angela said. “So every sticker that was on a car, I was like, ‘That’s been in my bedroom.’ Seeing how people embraced that little blue sticker was amazing to me. It developed its own tribe, community. It was humbling and exciting all at the same time. Every time I say ‘brand’, the sticker pops into my mind.”

Proceeds from the stickers benefit the Alaqua Animal Refuge in Freeport, which Angela said is close to her heart.

The empty-nesters have spent the past two months on a cross-country road trip. Their eyes are trained to see the stickers, she said.

People don’t have to be on Scenic Highway 30A to feel like they’re on 30A.

“Nobody drinks Red Stripe because it’s good beer,” Ragsdale said. “It’s not bad beer; it’s just beer. People drink it because it mentally transports them to Jamaica. Nevermind that it’s brewed in Pennsylvania.”

Ragsdale compares it to another brand, Patagonia, a lifestyle brand few people actually associate with South America. The 30A products carried in New Jersey, Oregon or California aren’t promoting a tourist destination, but a vibe.

“They don’t even know it exists,” Ragsdale said. “They will be like, ‘What is three sunshine A?’ ”

Life hacks

He still runs his business on the principles he learned from “The 4-Hour Workweek.”

“It was one of the first books to talk — I don’t think he used the term — but really they’re life hacks,” Ragsdale said. “It was, how to think about setting up businesses differently in this age of modernization and of connecting using online freelance sources, not having an office and overhead, learning to rely on freelancers for specific tasks than hiring someone in a cubicle. It talks a lot about traveling around the world and working and going to exotic destinations where the dollar goes a long way. One of his formulas was, pay someone to create something in rupees. Charge someone dollars to use it and live somewhere where you’re spending pesos.”

Ragsdale has had a videographer in Serbia, a graphic designer in Egypt, an assistant in Oregon and worked on a graphic novel, “Holier Than Thou,” with illustrator Pablo Arias of Santiago, Chile.

The editor of The 30A Company and Ragsdale’s “right-hand person,” Amandeep Mangat, lives in Mumbai, India.

“We talk every day,” Ragsdale said. “She knows this area better than 99% of locals, no kidding. We brought her and her family last year, and it was so fun for her to see this area — she’d never been to America — she had been writing about, studying. Even when were driving along the road, she would go, ‘Oh, Forest Williams is playing there tonight.’ It was fun to see her see it for the first time.”

Ragsdale doesn’t see the point in filling eight-hour days with useless meetings. He set up the company to be virtual long before COVID-19 launched the trend toward remote work. He spent 10 months starting September 2011 traveling the world, visiting 25 countries with two of their children.

In the past two months, he and Angela have seen Mount Rushmore National Memorial, Yellowstone National Park, Badlands National Park and Grand Canyon National Park — and they never clocked out.

“We decided to buy the RV, which accomplished another thing. Not only can we do the social distancing thing and do something we fantasize about doing, but we can also take these knuckleheads with us, Cosmo and Ernie,” Ragsdale said.

Cosmo and Ernie are their two Maltese dogs.

Beach happy

Sitting in his waterfront home wearing a Beach Happy shirt with his shaggy hair, Ragsdale might look like the chilliest guy to have ever walked the earth; one beach wave shy of a “gnarly, man” or an “It’s all good.” To him, it is all good.

He is serene, chill — the type who isn’t rattled when you reschedule on him four times.

The assumption many people make based on his demeanor and branding is mostly true. He is chill. But he had to work at it.

Ragsdale has been stressed since the 1980s.

“Part of it’s trying to manifest,” he said. “I’m a very stressed out individual. I’m very worrisome. I’ve gotten so much better, of course. It’s really faking it until I make it. I struggle with depression. I’m a manic depressive personality, always have been. In college, my friends would say you would either be the life of the party everyone wanted to be around or the biggest jackass everyone wanted to get away from.”

Alcohol turned him into Jim Carrey’s manic movie personas, he said.

“You wouldn’t know which Mike you were going to get,” Ragsdale said. “I went through most of my life worrying, relentlessly burning brain cells. I’m convinced, more dangerous than COVID, more dangerous than drinking, more dangerous than smoking, worrying, stress is burning up our batteries. How many years of life I’ve wasted?”

And he still isn’t immune to stress. He knows he has emails in his inbox.

“Ten minutes after I get up in the morning, I push the coffee button and I’m checking mail at 6:30 (a.m.),” Ragsdale said. “I’ll check mail and respond to things at 12:30 (a.m.) after I finish Call of Duty. I’m working all the time — holidays, doesn’t matter — but I’m also able to take mini vacations throughout the day.”

Midday, he might go for a paddle or a bike ride. And he doesn’t wait for the weekend to watch dolphins through the eyes of his inner child.

“I couldn’t do that if I was in an office environment because the manager would give me the stink eye,” Ragsdale said. “You can’t just say, ‘I’m going to take 30 minutes,’ and go paddle. I can do that here. Then I’ll come back and I’m ready. I feel like I’m still living life.”

Ragsdale thinks too many people live for the weekend. American culture is set up from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

“That’s why we’re TGIF,” he said. “I believe every day should be a weekend; every day should be something you’re excited about. You’re not going to be happy every single day, but I think it’s something you should strive for. We’re finally living in that era where people are going to realize, ‘I’m living in the rat race.’ And I was that dude. I’m not belittling anyone who is there. I’m just the guy who finally jumped to the other side and I’m trying to talk back to anyone else and say, ‘It’s possible.’”

We’ve been duped into thinking things will make us happy, he said.

“In Burma, the average salary is \$1,200 a year,” Ragsdale said. “They’re a lot happier than we are. You are better off earning \$20,000 doing something you love than \$200,000 doing something you hate.”

Another cultural construct Ragsdale wants to obliterate is waiting until retirement.

His dad worked for the power company for 42 years in Cullman, Alabama. He started reading meters and climbing power poles right out of high school. His mother, too, made sacrifices, following Ragsdale’s every whim. If he was in Cub Scouts, she was the Cub Scout leader. When he was in grade school, she was the lunchroom lady — which became exceptionally less cool the older he got.

“I remember when we moved down here and bought a jet ski and we were doing these things, my dad saying, ‘You’re doing it the right way, son,’ ” Ragsdale said. “He said, ‘I’m not going to be able to get on a jet ski. Those days are gone.’ ”

Most won’t retire at 60, Ragsdale said. And if they do, their health is declining and their habits are too rigid.

“It’s hard to move to the beach when you’ve lived in the same house 40 years,” he said. “I’m convinced we should be living our retirement every day. I feel bad for the people who I see come down here. I can see it in their eyes, they’ve got five days and by God they’re going to spend as much time at the beach as they can. At the end, they’re depressed because they have to go back.”

People live their life with the Sunday blues. Basically, Ragsdale wants you to stop kicking happiness down the road — even if it’s Scenic Highway 30A.

Like everything else, happiness takes practice.

“Happiness is not something you achieve,” Ragsdale said. “It is not a destination that one day you will arrive at. Happiness is a daily work in progress. I think people think it just happens. We’ve been conditioned to think it happens, ‘When I retire, I’ll be happy,’ ‘When I get that promotion, I’ll be happy,’ ‘If I move into that new apartment, I’ll be happy,’ ‘That day I get that car, I’ll be happy.’ The reality is, it’s like that new car. It’s great for a little while and that luster wears off. We all want to think we’ve got 100,000 more grains of sand left in that hourglass; we might have two.”

So yeah, at 51, Ragsdale and his wife are as happy as they ever been. But they took the scenic route.

“I would say the last year and half has been the best years of my life — not financially,” Ragsdale said. “Some of this stuff I’ve been practicing and now it’s all firing on all cylinders. Finally I feel like I’m becoming that guy I’ve been hardcore willing myself to be for the last 20 years. I wanted to be that beach guy, that carefree guy that lived by the sea.”