

Jeff Deck adds an apostrophe at a Chicago clothing store.

Women's &

Mens

Righting Wrong Writing

Heroically persnickety typo crusaders set the U.S. straight

CURRENT LIVES

The scene of the crime: Madison, Wisconsin. Acting on a hot tip, Jeff Deck pulled down his dark fedora and headed to Brennan's Market with partner Benjamin Herson. "The store was pretty clean," Deck says, "but then we saw it." In the fruit section. A crime of omission. Deck and Herson approached a young woman who was making signs.

"Excuse me, ma'am," said Deck, 28, all business. "I'm a professional typo hunter and fixer. The sign for Washington apples is missing an *n*. It reads 'Washigton.'"

She gave the pair the once-over, shrugged, and went back to her signs.

"We can fix it ourselves," Deck said. "I have my typo-correction kit right here."

(Deck carries the kit with him at all times, even to weddings.)

"Oh, no. We have a special marker for the signs," she said.

Deck and Herson went off by themselves and quietly debated changing it without permission—a bold move they don't like to make unless absolutely necessary. (A Los Angeles man threatened to call the police after he caught them adding an apostrophe to a "Cars Will Be Towed at Owners Expense" sign.) They asked another employee, who cheerfully gave them permission to insert the missing *n*. "It was the classic if-Mom-says-no-ask-Dad move," Deck says.

With his fedora and gritty determination, Deck has been dubbed the Indiana Jones of typos. The founder of the Typo Eradication Advancement League (TEAL), Deck spent much of last year on the 2008 Typo Hunt Across America, a correctional odyssey that has taken him and an assort-

ment of friends from coast to coast in a 1997 Nissan, righting wrong writing on signs as small as bulletin board notices and as big as billboards. Sleeping in tents or friends-of-friends' couches, Deck spent the year living on Pop-Tarts and pancakes as he stalked the wild gaffe.

Crossing into Arizona from New Mexico, they jumped over a barbed wire fence and ran across an expanse of cactus-strewn scrubland to eliminate the apostrophe in a billboard advising tourists to bring their "camera's." "That was a big one," Deck says. "That apostrophe was about the size of my head." At an Office Depot in Texas, Deck and Herson spotted a number of erroneous signs, all nine feet high. Their friend and host Paula advised them to commandeer a rolling stepladder and change the signs themselves. "I worked at an Office Depot for five years," she said. "They won't care." (They didn't.)

Deck was raised in New Hampshire, graduated from Dartmouth with a degree in creative writing, and spent a couple of years in Washington, D.C., at *Rocks & Minerals* magazine. He realized his true calling at a Dartmouth reunion in 2007. "There were classmates curing cancer, and I was doing nothing," he remembers. "I started thinking about how I could change the world in my humble way."

Deck never contemplated a life of



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crime, though. At the Grand Canyon, he and Herson corrected a folksy-looking sign, adding a comma and changing *womens'* to *women's*. (Miraculously, they resisted the urge to fix *emense*.) The National Park Service was not impressed. It turned out the sign was created in the 1930s by a celebrated architect (and lousy speller). Though nothing indicated the sign's historic importance, the government pressed charges. Deck and Herson agreed to pay \$3,035 to restore the sign and to stay out of national parks for a year.

Forbidden from discussing the details of the case until August, the good-guy grammar outlaws will likely be back. And they're hopeful. After all, grammar and spelling are just one way to look at the world, Deck says, and "America is lax about only a few points." *Lance Contrucci*

ARGUMENT STARTER

Drug use and sexually transmitted diseases among American teenagers persist at alarming rates. And U.S. teens aren't the scholars some of their international peers are. **"We have to end adolescence as a social experiment,"** Newt Gingrich writes in *BusinessWeek*. "We tried it. It failed. It's time to move on ... Children rapidly assuming the roles and responsibilities of adults would yield enormous benefit to society." Students who finish high school a year or two early, the former House Speaker says, should qualify for a year or two of free college tuition.