

This ‘notoriously unhinged’ advice column is now a must-read memoir

David Oliver USA TODAY

It all started with a distinct ping. And by distinct ping, we mean a Grindr message.

“It was on this app that, for the first time ever, some white guy greeted me by saying, ‘Hola papi,’” John Paul Brammer writes in his memoir, out now, that was inspired by this message and his advice column of the same name.

The mixed-race Mexican-American writer created the column several years ago and channeled the format into an essay-filled memoir “¡Hola Papi! How to Come Out in a Walmart Parking Lot and Other Life Lessons” (Simon & Schuster, 206 pp.). Expect, above all else, vulnerability.

Menacing middle school bullies who prompt Brammer’s suicidal thoughts. A “one that got away”-style love story. And as the sub-headline in the title suggests: Coming out in a Walmart parking lot. Consider it par for the author’s meandering-but-methodical course.

“I love the idea of portraying what’s going through someone’s mind, the moment they make a decision, or the moment that they experience an emotion,” Brammer, who is from rural Oklahoma but now lives in Brooklyn, New York, tells USA TODAY. “I just really like putting those things into words, because I think that’s the most ambitious, beautiful thing that language can really do, it can sort of put someone else into the experience or the life of someone else. And I like using my own life to that end, because I think that’s so intimate.”

How the column ¡Hola Papi! became a memoir

¡Hola Papi! has lived at a series of different companies and publications including queer dating app Grindr (yes, the irony), Condé Nast, Out Magazine and now at Substack (and is syndicated in The Cut).

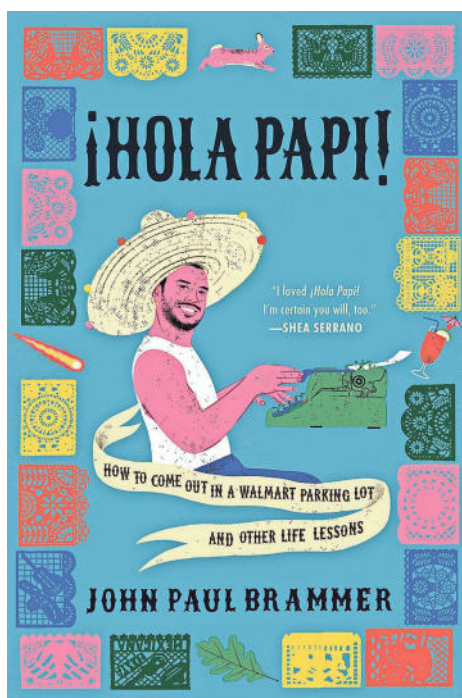
“That’s not so much a reflection of my commitment issues, which I do have, but more of a reflection of instability in the media world,” he says.

Brammer wasn’t sure if letters would ever come in when he launched the column, but oh boy, did they.

A sampling of recent ones: “How do I stop comparing myself to other people?” “Papi, am I secretly hideous?” “Papi, can I be proud of where I’m from? Even if it sucks?”



Mexican-American writer John Paul Brammer created a column several years ago and channeled the format into an essay-filled memoir called “¡Hola Papi! How to Come Out in a Walmart Parking Lot and Other Life Lessons.” ZACK KNOLL



That said, the column is known to be “notoriously unhinged,” Brammer says. Nothing beats his favorite letter from a man whose boyfriend was pretending to be Colombian. “I reread it three times thinking, ‘How did I get such a gem in my inbox?’” he says with a laugh. (He

advised they break up.)

Brammer structured his memoir as a series of advice columns to pay tribute to the column.

“I’ve always thought of it as a vehicle for my writing, and not my biggest aspiration in life or anything, but I wanted to pay homage to the format and the medium, because I’m so thankful for it and there’s no guarantee that I would have found the readers that I did,” he says.

On writing about your life: ‘You should know how you feel about it, but you often don’t’

Brammer sticks to the old adage: Write what you know.

“If I’m writing about something, it pretty much means I’m at peace with it,” he says.

“I’m not one of those people – and I really admire these people – who haven’t quite figured out how they feel about something and they use writing to help them figure it out, almost like in the process of writing it so it helps them realize, ‘Oh, OK, these are my feelings.’”

He tenses up otherwise. “I find it difficult to write about things that I haven’t quite figured out or that I’m still struggling with or that still bring me anxiety or fear,” he says.

To that end, the book offers zoomed-

in snapshots into Brammer’s life as opposed to a panoramic view. He details one incident of sexual assault, for example, but chose to not include an incident where the first official man he started dating raped him.

“I wanted to write that story so badly but at the end of the day, I find him to be such an uninteresting person,” Brammer says. “And I find that whole experience was really heavy and intense, yes, but I couldn’t quite feel the emotional intensity I was looking for that I needed to write something about it.”

Brammer joked with his friends about it a few days later, then realized he needed to take it seriously – only to bury it, and once again revisit it years later.

“It’s such a weird, interesting activity to look back at the facts of your own life, which, obviously, you’re the expert, you live through it, you should know how you feel about it, but you often don’t,” he says. “Social trends and conversations and culture can re-contextualize how you see the facts of your own life. And that’s something that’s very uncomfortable to acknowledge because we want to feel like we have a good handle on the things that have happened to us, and that we know our own story. But with new information comes reshuffling of the narratives. And that’s often a painful process, it’s often very fraught.”

Brammer is already at work on his next book

Brammer misses his pre-pandemic writing routine. And we may have missed out on more quality quillwork from the author.

“Not being able to work in coffee shops has – I’m not going to say that it’s robbed this country of some cultural treasures, but maybe so, because I haven’t been able to write the way I have been for a year and a half now, because I just can’t sit my butt in a coffee shop,” he says.

Brammer is starting on his next book now, which is a fictional take on a chapter that didn’t make it into the memoir about his first gay house party when he was still coming to terms with himself.

“It’s all coming together a little bit right now, just throwing words to a Google doc and seeing if they stick,” he says. “If it works, I’d be really happy. If it doesn’t, I’ll move on to something else.”

Our advice? Devour whatever Brammer cooks up.

BLUE ZONES PROJECT - SOUTHWEST FLORIDA



CCPS to Feed Every Child, Everywhere This Summer

by Megan Greer

Summer break has officially started for Collier County Public Schools (CCPS), but some of their regular bus routes will keep running, and for good reason. They are delivering food to thousands of children who might otherwise go without the meals that are usually provided to them via their school’s daily meal program.

On April 20, 2021 the USDA announced it would extend its Pandemic Flexibilities for schools through June of 2022. This allows CCPS to serve free meals through the Summer Food Service Program to all children under 18 regardless of school registration status. Participating school districts will receive a higher-than-normal reimbursement for each meal they serve, and the increased funding is intended to empower school districts to provide the most nutritious meals possible.

Accordingly, beginning on June 15th CCPS will begin delivering meals to children along regular bus routes in neighborhoods where families are less likely to have transportation. A three-day supply for breakfast and lunch will be delivered on Tuesdays, and a four-day supply will be delivered on Fridays.

To ensure that staples remain sufficient for the whole household over the summer, Chron’s Charity Service Foundation’s, Mrs. Blueberry Bus will tag along on Fridays in Golden Gate City to deliver bulk food boxes to families in need. Other identified routes will distribute Harry’s Helpings, supplemental food boxes, from the Harry Chapin Food Bank on Tuesdays and Fridays.

For families that have access to transportation, CCPS has established 10 summer feeding sites where curbside meals can be picked up on Tuesdays and Fridays between 8:30-9:30 a.m. from June 15th - July 20th. These sites include Calusa Park Elementary, Corkscrew Elementary, East Naples Middle, Gulf Coast High, Manatee Elementary, Poinciana Elementary, and Shadowlawn Elementary in Naples and Immokalee Middle, Eden Park Elementary (Starts June 22) and Pinecrest Elementary (Starts June 22nd) in Immokalee. Harry’s Helpings will be available at Immokalee Middle School on Tuesdays and Fridays.

Mary Scattergood, the Administrative Supervisor for CCPS’ Department of Nutrition Services is thrilled that the USDA has extended its Pandemic Flexibilities through the next school year. The district enhanced its SSO feeding program to include pick up and delivery last year in the height of the pandemic, but she and her team have seen food insecurity rise despite the return to ‘normal’ for more and more families.

“The need is there and the USDA removing the bureaucracy around whether or not a child is enrolled in the district allows us to feed not just the brick and mortar kids, but all kids that are in need of food,” said Scattergood.

To complement their Summer Food Service Program, CCPS has partnered with University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences to include nutrition education alongside their meal distribution. UF/IFAS will provide nutrition promotion and education messages that coordinate with the fruits and vegetables that are being served upon each pick up or delivery day.

“We hope that this will increase fruit and vegetable consumption over summer,” said Jessica La Mons, Menu Planning and Procurement Supervisor of the Nutrition Services Department at CCPS. “We also plan to get creative and decorate the education boards to make reading them fun and engaging for the students.”

The coordination and collaboration of CCPS’ holistic feeding program and the partnerships created between CCPS, Harry Chapin Food Bank, Chron’s Charity Service Foundation and UF/IFAS is a reflection and highlight of the transformational work of the representatives that sit on the Southwest Florida Food Policy Council.

Twice a month, the Food Policy Council, created by Blue Zones Project and several organizations that serve in varying capacities within the region’s food system, meets to discuss current needs and opportunities to enhance healthy food access to individuals and families experiencing food insecurity.

Thus far, the council has been awarded \$100,000 from the Etna Foundation’s Healthiest Cities and Counties grant and has saved 6,250 pounds of fresh produce from going to waste. Instead, the produce is distributed to non-profit organizations that feed the hungry through the implementation of the MEANS Database. The Food Policy Council is striving to create positive policy, systems and environmental changes across southwest Florida that lead to better efficiency of healthy food distribution, enhanced local food procurement, urban agriculture, and nutrition education.

Brought to Southwest Florida by NCH Healthcare System, in collaboration with Sharecare, Inc., Blue Zones Project is part of Southwest Florida’s well-being improvement initiative that encourages changes in the community that lead to healthier options. For more information, visit southwestflorida.bluezonesproject.com.