

Arlington school counselor and teacher pen book about traveling cat (Posted 2015-10-14 17:27:15)

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ABSTRACT

Kathryn Belcher Frazier, a third-grade teacher at Arlington's Abingdon Elementary School, illustrated the book with images drawn and painted by hand.

FULL TEXT

As a counselor at Carlin Springs Elementary School, Gretchen Schuyler Brenckle encourages kids to set and meet goals. Last summer, she decided to go for a dream of her own: writing a picture book series to teach students about geography.

"My students inspire me in so many ways," Brenckle said. "One of the things I talk to them about is goal setting; how can I sit there and tell them to do that when I need to accomplish my own?"

Brenckle's book, "A Cat Named Denali," was published in August. It is the first in a series starring Brenckle's own white-pawed black cat, Denali, who travels in the stories with her family on adventures across the United States. The destination for the first book is North Carolina's Outer Banks.

Kathryn Belcher Frazier, a third-grade teacher at Arlington's Abingdon Elementary School, illustrated the book with images drawn and painted by hand.

"Kids really relate better to an animal," said Frazier, who earned a bachelor's degree in fine arts as well as a graduate teaching degree. "I knew I had done a fair job on the cover when I showed my 4-year-old and she started laughing."

The two native Arlingtonians attended Yorktown High School together, but only became close friends years later while working at Carlin Springs, where Frazier taught before moving to Abingdon. Their 4-year-olds were born six weeks apart, and Frazier knows the real-life Denali well enough to draw her from memory.

"It is difficult to go from a friendship to starting a business or making a product together," Brenckle said, "but we were very honest with one another. I trust Kathryn's artwork and vision -- I feel like I can send her words on a page and she can send me her vision."

Although Brenckle and Frazier have avoided promoting their book at work, news of "A Cat Named Denali" has been met with enthusiasm from their respective principals and fellow teachers, who have bought copies and asked the

author and illustrator to come speak to students. Arlington School Superintendent Patrick K. Murphy sent a letter of congratulations.

"One of our teachers read it to her class today, and some of the kids came up and talked to me," Brenckle said. "It melted my heart, because I asked them what their favorite part was and they were so excited to tell me the whole story."

The book lends itself to early-reader classrooms, with a blank map of the United States for kids to fill out and discussion questions about the story.

"It was some of the hardest work I've ever done," Frazier said. "It was harder than my job, where I also need to be creative, problem-solve and figure things out. But this is a completely creative endeavor, which is taxing in a completely different way -- I loved that about it.

"As a third-grade teacher, we're teaching the kids you have to be visualizing, you have to be inferring, you have to be predicting and drawing conclusions, and I had to do those kinds of things to make sure my illustrations connected with the text," she said.

Next stop for Denali? Arlington.

"We're both Arlingtonians, so for Virginia we will do Arlington," Brenckle said. "There's so much history here. We want to include places where kids can go themselves with their parents, so the kids can look through Denali's eyes. After that, possibly Annapolis."

Frazier added, "We need to travel together; pick a fun place to go and have a girls' weekend."

Brenckle points to her book as an example for children to follow their dreams.

"Now I can walk the walk," Brenckle said. "I can tell the kids, 'I really want to show you that if you put your mind to something, you can do it.' It doesn't matter how old you are, or if you have obstacles in the way. You can do it."

axliving@washpost.com

Lanyi is a freelance writer.

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