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MAGAZINE

A Mom's Mission

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book author
JOANNE PASTEL
celebrates
diversity

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ONE MOM'S MISSION TO ENCOURAGE DIVERSE EXPERIENCES FOR ANY KIDS, ANYWHERE

BY KATE KUNKEL PHOTOS BY SILAS CREWS

The view from JoAnne Pastel's living room window really does remind you of a storybook world. Trees frame the winter shoreline of Long Lake, sparkling in the sunlight that illuminates the ice on the branches. Look for a moment, and it isn't hard to imagine long summer days where a family fishes together from the shore before taking a stroll through a quiet lakeside neighborhood. It's quite literally a scene from a children's book. Several books, in fact.

Pastel is the founder of Farmer's Hat Productions and the co-author of the company's four *Bur Bur and Friends* books. Designed to introduce preschool children to outdoor exploration and active play, the series includes a cast of multicultural characters created to help any child find themselves in the stories. "Early on in the development of *Bur Bur and Friends*, we tested products at a day care," Pastel says. "The teacher that worked with us pointed out that the kids wanted to know more about the characters that looked most like them. We started to see that while kids may not see *color*, they *do* see their identity in the characters. That's why many of the characters are based on actual kids—we wanted our books to reflect what a real group of children looks like, in the real world."

To Pastel and her business partner Kacie Fitzsimmons, the real world has been their greatest source of inspiration. Both parents of biracial sons, the women recognized a notable lack of children's books with diverse characters. "There were lots of books about Dora and Diego. There were books



MAKING BUR BUR >

JoAnne Pastel found inspiration for her popular children's book series in her son, William, and her own back yard overlooking Long Lake.

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—JOANNE PASTEL, ON THE INSPIRATION FOR THE BUR BUR BOOKS



LITTLE GIRL >

Bur Bur’s friend Anna got her own book, *Anna Goes Hiking*, in November.

introducing people like Muhammad Ali,” Pastel says. “There wasn’t anything that looked like my son or, honestly, like his group of friends. I wanted to see something that real kids could relate to.”

Her Long Lake home stirred Pastel to explore life as an author. A former stockbroker, she decided to stay home when her son William was born. “That’s kind of how I got this whole thing started,” she says with a laugh. “For me, I just needed more to do. I met with a life coach, and we determined that I’m definitely an entrepreneur. It was at about that time that I noticed the need for a different kind of children’s book. I knew I could do it. As a stockbroker, I had

to develop my own clients, so I wasn’t afraid of starting a business—

I knew I could start a business. And the books are much easier to sell than stocks!”

Pastel and Fitzsimmons first penned *Bur Bur’s Boating ABC’s*, naming the lead character after William’s imaginary friend, and basing the story on the family’s actual boating adventures. *Bur Bur’s Fishing Adventure* and *Bur Bur Throws out the First Pitch* were written next, and all three books were published in April 2007. “I was a little bit nervous the first time I went to sell a book to a bookstore,” Pastel recalls. “I didn’t know how well the multicultural aspect would play. But I’ll never forget the smile on their faces when they opened the books.”

Bur Bur was a hit. Whether it was the brightly colored eye-catching illustrations, the relatable characters or the exciting

CO-EXIST > JoAnne Pastel and Kacie Fitzsimmons co-author the Bur Bur series of books, promoting diversity and an active lifestyle.





themes, bookstores around the nation began picking up *Bur Bur and Friends* at a rate that astounded Pastel. Last fall, Farmer's Hat Productions developed the *Bur Bur and Friends In-Flight Activity Book* for Sun Country Airlines. "It's amazing how fast it's coming together," Pastel says. "We've only been in business for two and a half years. The books came out in the spring, and we just had our big kickoff at Mall of America in July. The newest book, *Anna Goes Hiking*, came out in November. It's all so new, but we're getting phone calls every day from across the country. People want to place the books in stores in California and Atlanta and all over. It's really been overwhelming."

LAKE INSPIRATION >
JoAnne Pastel's home office overlooks Long Lake.



Beyond demand for the product, the early success of the book series can be measured in terms of the widespread national attention that Bur Bur has received. *New Jersey Family Magazine* named *Bur Bur's Boating ABC's* a "Best Bet." The books were recommended summer reading at libraries in Boston. Most notably, Farmer's Hat Productions won two prestigious national awards honoring Bur Bur and Friends. The iParenting Media Awards rate thousands of products annually and celebrated the Bur Bur series as one of "2007's greatest products." The list goes on and on. "The Teacher's Choice Award was when it

"THE TEACHER'S CHOICE AWARD WAS WHEN IT REALLY HIT HOME FOR ME. ... WE WEREN'T TRYING TO DO IT ANYMORE—WE WERE DOING IT."

—JOANNE PASTEL,
ON THE RECENT
SUCCESS OF HER BOOKS

really hit home for me," Pastel says. "I found out that they were searching for books with diverse characters, and they found *Bur Bur's Boating ABC's*. I felt then like we were actually doing what we set out to do. We weren't trying to do it anymore—we were doing it."

From the office on the lower level of the Long Lake home where Bur Bur "was born," Pastel reflects on her goals for her own community. "It is very important to expose kids to diversity—not just diversity of people, but diversity of experiences. I'm not saying people aren't open-minded. I don't think that's the case at all. But my goal for this area—and for everywhere, really—is to expose kids to people and experiences they may not normally have. There are other cultures. There are other ways people live. There are new things to do, and new people to meet."



FAMILY TIME > JoAnne Pastel with her husband, Bill Dunlap, and her son, William


Combining her family life with her professional life has been a very natural transition for Pastel, who appears as Bur Bur's mother in the books. "It is funny to see our family in print, to realize that those characters are us," Pastel says. "We don't talk about the fact that Bur Bur's mother has dark skin, and his father has light skin—we don't talk about nationality at all. But I think when you take these very diverse characters and engage them in active play and outdoor adventures, you're sending a message that anyone can do new things."

This is a message that Pastel is clearly honored to send. "I don't

MEET BUR BUR >

For more information about Bur Bur and his many friends, visit www.burburandfriends.com.



think I really had a choice but to follow this dream. I've just always been that way. I don't *want* to do things; I *do* them. And I'm lucky for that. My days are fun. They're passionate. I really hope to show kids what's out there. There's a whole world for them to experience, and it starts in their own back yards." 

Kate Kunkel is a Minnetonka-based freelance writer.