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Section **A**

'THE LIFE AND TIMES OF LILLY THE LASH'

Julie Woik's storybook character helps develop self-esteem in children

By Michael "Silk" Casper
Action Reporter Media

Originally from Kekoskee, Wis. and a graduate of Mayville High School, Julie Woik's background was in the field of psychology, taking a first job at "Day-break," a group home in Horicon.

A vacation took her to Sarasota, Florida, and with resume in hand, she immediately found a position in the psychiatric wing of Memorial Hospital. After eight years there she was offered, and settled into an office position at the practice of a colleague. But as can easily happen, life and fate sent her down a different path.

Julie's story of how she 'became' a children's book author, reads like a fairy tale in and of itself.

"Several years ago, in the middle of the night," Julie said "I wiped my cheek, and found an eye lash. An idea came to me, a poem about a gal friend of mine filled my head. I wrote out the poem with the intention of giving it to her as a gift in a frame, but someone who worked in publishing overheard the poem and suggested that my writing was interesting to the point that, if I was able to change the story slightly to appeal to children, I might be able to get 'something going' with the concept, and soon thereafter came 'The Life and Times of Lilly the Lash.'"

There are four installments published so far in the 'Lilly' series, beginning with 'The Garden Gathering,' and the plan is to write a total of 15.

"The age range of children who read the series is zero to 10," Julie said "and they're written in rhyme. The very little ones do very well with rhyme, and it's easy to learn to read when rhyming. It's written musically, or lyrically and the books are often read as bedtime stories, but the messages within carry through to fifth graders."

Each book in the series teaches a life lesson. "Or is encouraging to children to learn about values, and morals," Julie said "The Garden Gathering' teaches about self-image, and liking ourselves just the way we are. The second book called 'The Toy Store' is about a little boy who has every toy imaginable, but no friends until he learns the value of sharing. The third book in the series is called 'Ocean Commotion,' where Lilly the Lash finds herself in the town of Rockin' Reef, and the lesson learned is about honesty. The messages within all of the books are about our souls and spirits, learning to be better people, better friends, better neighbors, and loving ourselves."

Creating the books' artwork and visually bringing Lilly to life is Marc Tobin.

"Marc is from Factoryville, Pennsylvania," Julie said "I found him on the Internet, and he's absolutely spectacular. We have a laugh everyday that we collaborate together. He creates the images on a computer, all the while adding color, and shape...it's actually, in many respects, more difficult than just drawing on paper. His artwork and talent is incredible."

Because the 'Lilly the Lash' series does instruct, getting the books in front of educators has been an important avenue for Julie. "I can't even keep up with the demand of people wanting

me to visit their schools," Julie said "it's wonderful, the teachers are great, and the kids even greater, and receptive!"

Julie's fourth book is called "The Kacklin' Kitchen" and deals with bullying.

"Yes, the milk carton named Mookkee MaGee," Julie said "bully's the butter, eggs and cheese, and has to learn about respect. It shows an example of bullying, and demonstrates respecting everyone for who they are. Even if you're not being a bully, you need to understand, we're all different and have different ways, and so forth. It's about being respectful to others while getting to know them."

Julie has self-published her 'Lilly the Lash' series, and like all of those who set out to create something on their own, it's quickly realized, it's not as easy as one may hope.

"No it's not," Julie said "a lot of people ask me about it. A friend of mine, who is a publisher as well, said to me, 'Boy, I wish folks who want to try this had a chance to meet you and I before they go ahead and print 5,000 books, sell the first few hundred to friends and family, and then sit with a garage full of 4,800 books that they can't sell.' It's all about being able to afford to self-publish, having the time, and marketing. Who are you going to sell it to? Who is your demographic? How are you going to get them interested? How will they find out about it?"

Having an appealing website can be a start.

"And we have a great one," Julie said "lillythelash.com and it's adorable, we offer lots of free educational activities, a free board game, we have 20 hidden things in each book...all these things are fantastic, but how would you know Lilly the Lash exists...if you don't know...that Lilly the Lash exists (laugh)!"

And although Julie has had her Lilly series in many major bookstores, she has actually found her greatest success selling them out of the trunk of her car, or van, as it were.

"Been saying that for a long time," she said "the first two books can still be purchased through Barnes & Noble, and Amazon websites, but it's actually very expensive to have them handle your books. There are warehouse storage fees. They get a commission for each sale. If the book is returned, you get charged for that. So, we felt by the third book, that we just weren't going to put it up for distribution, and I don't think we ever will. We charge so minimally for shipping that we're comparable or at a lower cost than any business that would handle them for us."

The next big thing for Lilly the Lash is that it's turned into a stage play.

"It's a musical adaptation of the first book," Julie said "the play is called 'Lilly the Lash and The Garden Gathering,' and it is literally 'the book come to life.' It's unbelievable! There are nine songs with the possibility of an additional three more being added. I met Stephanie Montalvo who owns Advanced Productions and Entertainment company from Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, she created 'The Garden Gathering' play, and her husband composed much of the music. And they also happen to work with Nickelodeon and some Fortune 500 companies who produce both corporate entertainment, and stage plays for kids. Stephanie loved Lilly, and pitched her to Nickelodeon, and now it's a live play that had its first curtain go up this past late summer, with plans to run for another couple years. They will move on to the next book, 'The Toy Store,' and on and on. The stories are so easy to create into a play, they have so much meaning, and so many lessons to learn. The kids can watch the plays, which can be tied to teacher's lesson plans, then when they return to school it can be a continuing educational tool between teacher and student."

Julie's fifth 'Lilly the Lash' installment is titled "Jungle Jive," and is set in the imagined 'Tree Bark Falls,' where a young monkey will learn the important life lesson of "Balance."

To find all of the wonders of Julie Woik's work, and Lilly's journeys while teaching good character, visit www.lillythelash.com



JULIE WOIK

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