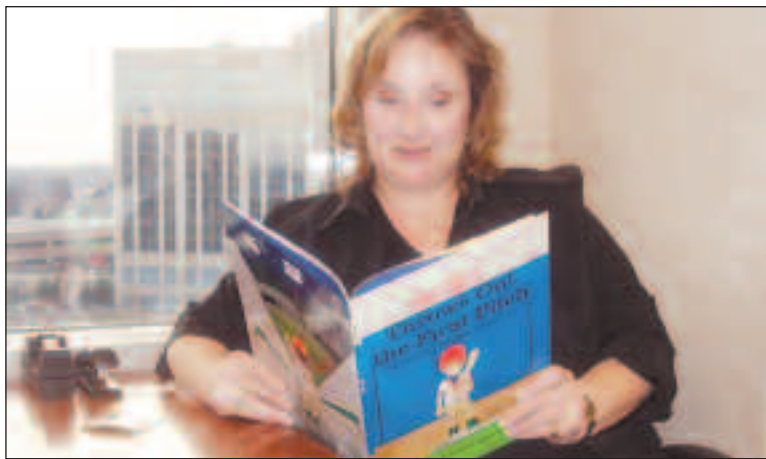


Kakie Fitzsimmons of Apple Valley reads “Bur Bur Throws Out the First Pitch.” She co-wrote the award-winning book with friend, JoAnne Pastel.

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AV mom's passion awarded

Kakie Fitzsimmons' son inspiration for new childrens' book series 'Bur Bur and Friends'

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One Apple Valley woman is turning her passion for writing, and literally her son, into an award-winning venture.

Kakie Fitzsimmons is co-author of the “Bur Bur and Friends” children’s book series with a cast of multicultural characters, including Mateo, who is based on her 7-year-old son.

She and longtime friend JoAnne Pastel of Orono, whose 4-year-old son is the model for Bur Bur, began working on the books three years ago after both women, mothers of biracial sons, realized there weren’t any others that featured a diverse set of children.

They’ve since released four books – one of which received the 2008 Teachers’ Choice award from Learning Magazine and three of which were named among iParenting.com’s greatest products of 2007 – through their company Farmer’s Hat Productions.

“We want to reflect what we see in society today,” said Fitzsimmons, a single mom. “We’re two determined mothers who want to make a difference for a lot of kids.”

But rather than focus on the characters’ diversity, which comes from abilities and family circumstances in addition to their skin color, the books have an outdoors bent that Fitzsimmons said she hopes will promote exploration and active play.

“They all have a really nice Minnesota-feel to them – nature, sports and outdoors,” said Fitzsimmons, who grew up in Eagan.

“Bur Bur and Friends” started off with the release of “Bur Bur’s Boating ABCs,” “Bur Bur’s Fishing Adventures” and “Bur Bur Throws Out the First Pitch” in spring, and in November, expanded to include “Anna Goes Hiking.”

Upcoming books will cover basketball and soccer and could include

friends from the series Lily, Kenya, Connor and baby Joey. They aim to teach teamwork, sportsmanship, friendship and other valuable concepts.

“We want kids to look to these characters as someone they learn from and someone they have fun with,” Fitzsimmons said.

So far, children, parents and teachers alike have taken to the colorful hardcover books and Bur Bur merchandise offered at specialty childrens’ stores around the metro, online at www.farmershatproductions.com and by special order at Barnes & Noble and Borders.

At a reading at a Minneapolis library, Fitzsimmons said one toddler was so enthralled as she read aloud that he pantomimed actions from the stories, like swinging a bat and casting a fishing line.

Both Fitzsimmons and Pastel have made multiple television news and print media appearances for their concept. A national launch ceremony complete with life-size characters was in July at the Mall of America.

Fitzsimmons, however, gives credit to a small team, including young illustrator, 20-year-old graphic design student Lindsay VanDeWeghe of Minneapolis, for much of the early success.

But the company, started with money from their own pockets, has its limitations. Fitzsimmons said the books, priced at \$14.95 each, have sold in the thousands. Farmer’s Hat Productions is now seeking outside investors to expand the line into a nationally recognized name.

Fitzsimmons said they are also currently working with the Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan and St. Paul public school districts to make the books and their lessons available to more local children.

“Educators are clamoring around this,” Fitzsimmons said. “People absolutely love it.”

For more information on “Bur Bur and Friends,” visit www.farmershatproductions.com. For related childrens’ activities, see www.burburandfriends.com.

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