

THE AUTHORS SHOW – Authors of Children's books

Author: Marie Joy

“Buddy was a very lonely bear. His whole life he had been all alone on a high shelf in a toy store. He didn’t wear a fancy outfit or sing songs when you squeezed him. He longed to be part of a loving family. He dreamed of doing amazing things and traveling to faraway lands...”

My writing journey began in 2004, with a story idea and a sketch of a little bear on a piece of scrap paper at work. I never knew all of the amazing things that this little bear would lead to. At that time, my son Ryan was deployed in Iraq and I spent a lot of my time sending care packages and writing letters to soldiers. Through the generosity of friends, coworkers, and strangers, we were able to send thousands of care packages to soldiers who were deployed in harm's way. I called our grassroots organization Operation Hugs From Home. I really wanted each soldier to feel like they received a hug from home. Sometimes people would donate Beanie babies and other small stuffed animals to put in the care packages. I would dream of being one of those little bears and envision the adventures that the soldiers and I could go on. That's when the story was born. However, I didn't have the confidence to actually attempt to publish the book for many years.

A few years ago, I asked a soldier named Brandon Pollard, who had been deployed with my son, if he would illustrate the book. I had been friends with him for years on Facebook, and saw that he was attending the Portland Art Institute. He would post drawings and paintings that he was working on, and I saw that he was quite good. When I asked him to illustrate the story, little did I know that he had actually lived the story. I had forgotten that I included a small stuffed bear in his care package and he took that little bear on adventures with him, flying in helicopters and riding in trucks across the countryside in Iraq and Afghanistan. He actually still has that stuffed bear, and it sits on a shelf above the desk where he does his artwork. This talented veteran turned out to be the perfect choice to bring Buddy's story to life.

We called our book Buddy the Soldier Bear. It took awhile to get it to the point that we felt it was just right. It was finally published in January of 2017. Since then, I've embarked upon quite

a journey with the book and the stuffed bear that is sold as an accompaniment to the book. I've participated in book fairs and had book signings, been interviewed on the radio, and spoken at elementary schools. The greatest honor so far has been speaking at the national convention of the Blue Star Mothers of America, a military mom's group that was sanctioned by congress. It was absolutely surreal, almost an out-of-body experience. The convention was in New York City and was a total blast. While in New York, I also met with the bookstore manager at West Point Military Academy, who is now selling the book and bear.

The book has received some awards, including the Gold Award from Mom's Choice Awards, the illustration award and a five-star review from Readers' Favorite, and being chosen as a finalist in the Arizona Literary Contest. I am truly humbled and honored by these accolades.

The best part of the entire journey has been being able to give a portion back to nonprofit organizations who serve active duty military and veterans. My dream was to create something that could generate revenue so that I would be able to give back. I'm passionate about helping soldiers and veterans. My mission is to serve those who have served us. I'm hoping to schedule some media appearances, to get Buddy's story to that next level. My goal is to make Buddy the Soldier Bear a household word, not for my own fame or fortune, but for the purpose of being able to give back to even more soldiers and veterans.

My dream is to sell a million books. I repeat this on almost a daily basis to my husband. As I leave for work in the morning, he kisses me goodbye and we both say, "a million books." While that may seem silly or far-fetched, I have chosen to dream big and believe that this will eventually happen. I've found that what you focus on can happen. However, a few years ago, if you would've told me that I'd have a published book and speak at a national convention, I would have burst out laughing. So, if that dream can come true, so can the sale of 1,000,000 books! Why a million? It seemed like just the right number to shoot for. I want to sell that many books, so I can give back exponentially to our brave heroes. So far, we've been able to donate a portion of sales to organizations dedicated to preventing veteran suicide and towards postage for military care packages. With the help of Buddy's fans, I believe that we can make a great difference in the lives of those who have sacrificed so much for us.

Through Buddy's story, I hope to inspire children (and grandmothers like myself) to dream BIG. I always end my talks at elementary schools by telling the children to dream big like Buddy did, and if they work hard enough, all of their dreams can come true. Buddy's did in the book, and there's no reason their dreams cannot become a reality as well. Children are faced with so much negativity. I want Buddy to be a bright spot and inspiration in their lives.

Some people may think I have lost my mind. Possibly, but more importantly I have found my purpose and passion in life. I hope that my readers all dream big and may all of their dreams come true. My advice would be to live your passion, and live it now! Don't waste years wallowing in self-doubt like I did. You can do it! I truly believe that in time, I will sell a million books. You may ask, how does someone actually sell a million books? It starts with the first step. So take that first step. Dream big, and believe!

To quote a favorite song, "Dream on. Dream on. Dream until your dreams come true."