

# Familiar Faces

An Apple Valley author and mother helps children learn through her books

BY VALERIE TUKEY PHOTOS BY SILAS CREWS

Seven years ago, when her son, Isaiah, was born, Kakie Fitzsimmons began to write. As a single mother of a biracial son, she started a journal full of her thoughts, values and struggles in the hope of giving it to

Isaiah someday. Little did she know that her love for writing personal letters soon would bloom into a career of creating children's books.

It all began in July 2005, when Fitzsimmons received a call from her good friend, Joanne

Pastel. "Joanne knew that I had a strong interest in writing," Fitzsimmons says. "She put a children's book together and asked me to take a look at it." After a glance at the book, soon to become *Bur Bur and Friends*, a smile spread across Fitzsimmons's face. With a few changes, she zipped the corrections back to Pastel. From there, the two decided to work together on the children's series. Fitzsimmons became the vice president and co-founder of Farmer's Hat Productions—the umbrella company that produces the *Bur Bur and Friends* series.

But unlike most kid stories, the two mothers—Fitzsimmons with 7-year-old Isaiah and Pastel with 5-year-old William—wanted to weave in a theme that was present in their own lives: diversity.

"When I was looking for books for my son, there weren't any characters that looked like him," Pastel says of her biracial child. "My hope is to help children see that there are people in the world who look just like them. It's true to life to

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—KAKIE FITZSIMMONS

show a diverse group of characters."

With a thread of multiculturalism running through the series, playing sports and staying active were additional themes the two authors wanted to include. "Obesity is a big issue right now," Fitzsimmons says. "Our books aren't the answer to the issue, but if you start educating children at a young age, research shows that they will develop [healthy] passions."

So far, the *Bur Bur and Friends* series includes three books, *Bur Bur's Fishing*



**COMING FULL CIRCLE >** As they say, necessity is the mother of all invention. In this case, it was from Kakie Fitzsimmons's urge to find someone for her son to relate to that a wildly popular children's book series was born.

*Adventure, Bur Bur Throws The First Pitch* and *Anna Goes Hiking*. Each book shows readers that playing outside and participating in sports can be fun. And even if you've never tried it before, it's okay because Bur Bur hasn't either. "All of the characters in our books go through some kind of first-time experience," Fitzsimmons says. "We always include educational information in the back to help kids learn about the subject." From figuring out what to pack for a fishing trip to discovering new forest animals, with Bur Bur's help children can learn while reading.

But who is Bur Bur? "Bur Bur was William's imaginary friend," Pastel says. "As we were thinking about writing this book, I kept thinking about what or who Bur Bur was." It turns out, Bur Bur is a person just like William, who comes from a mixed background. "William really created Bur Bur," she says. As for Anna, she is one of Bur Bur's six friends. Among the others is Mateo, who is an illustrative drawing of Fitzsimmons's son Isaiah. "To me, Isaiah is my inspiration," Fitzsimmons says. "When he came into my life, my whole purpose completely changed."

Now, as a single mother and four-year Apple Valley resident, Fitzsimmons's role in creating Bur Bur and Friends is a simple addition to her full-time job as a regional training manager at

Ameriprise Financial. "It really is a balancing act sometimes," she says. "So I just use humor. I laugh at it. Because even though right now it's all chaos, I know that someday I will look back and really miss it."

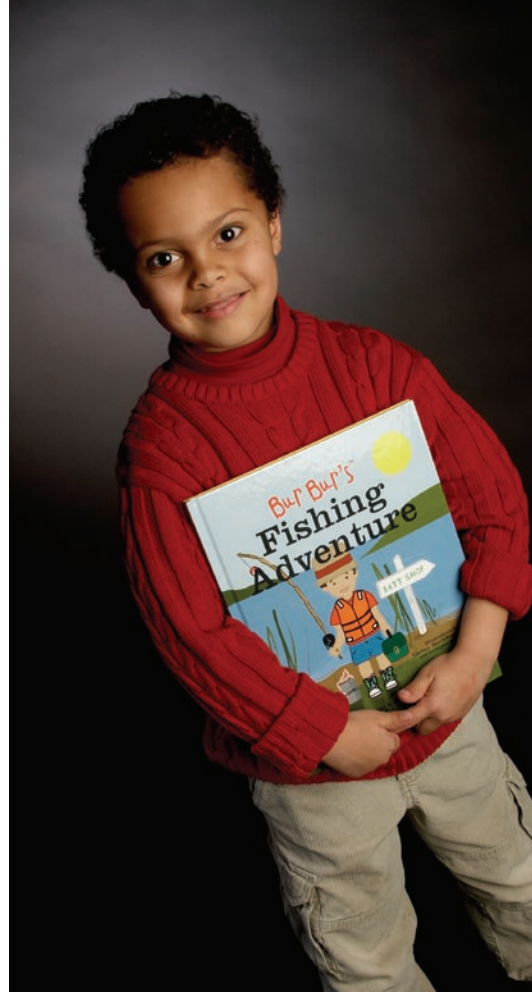
Still, for Fitzsimmons, the children's series is just the beginning. Stories about soccer, dance, football, hockey and swimming are in the works. Each story will include all seven of the Bur Bur characters: Mateo, Lilly, Anna, Conner, Kenya, Joey and, of course, Bur Bur. This way, readers will begin to establish a connection with an assorted group.

Beyond books, and after Bur Bur becomes a household name, the two Minnesota authors hope to depict Bur Bur as a real, walking, talking boy. "We are working with someone on animation right now," Fitzsimmons says. "We aren't sure where we are going to go with it. For us, that is the next step." **M**

Valerie Tukey is a staff writer for *Apple Valley Magazine*.

### Meet Bur Bur and his Friends

Pull your little one up to the computer, and visit Bur Bur and all his friends at [www.burburandfriends.com](http://www.burburandfriends.com).



**SOMETHING TO SMILE ABOUT** > Thanks to his mom and her friend's cultural sensitivity, Isaiah now has myriad book characters he can look to.