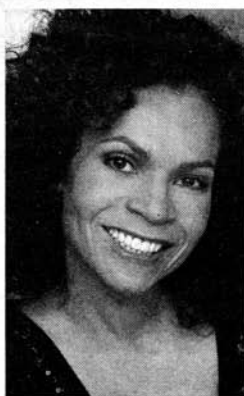


BIZWOMAN



Colorful characters

JoAnne Pastel writes for today's kids

by Erica Marston

When JoAnne Pastel couldn't find storybook characters that her 2-year-old biracial son could identify with, she decided to do something about it. "I was just not seeing a lot of diversity. There were no characters who looked like him, which I felt was really important in helping to build his confidence."

"We want to show reality and what the world truly is like."

— JoAnne Pastel

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Pastel remembered growing up with dark skin and curly hair and playing only with dolls that had light skin and straight hair. "They didn't have dolls of color back then," she said. She didn't want her son, whose father is Caucasian, to grow up with the same disconnected feeling she had. Pastel explained, "When kids see a character who looks like them, they see it's OK to have red hair or curly hair."

Pastel, a former stockbroker, took time off to be a stay-at-home mom when her son was born. About the time she started her search for books for him, she landed a new position.

But after just one day on the job, she knew she didn't have it in her heart to return to corporate America. She didn't want to be someone else's employee or play by someone else's rules. "I went to them and said, 'I'm sorry, I just can't do this.'" She was at a crossroads, and Pastel decided that starting her own business and writing her own children's books would be the perfect project for her.

Pastel drew on the sales skills she'd developed throughout her career and on the support and knowledge of her network of contacts to get help starting her new venture and spreading the word about it.

Pastel partnered with longtime friend Kacie Fitzsimmons, also the mother of a biracial child, to create Farmer's Hat Productions. They began writing books featuring characters modeled after their own children. "We don't talk about race, we just show [the characters]," Pastel said.

They have worked hard to get their fledgling business off the ground. Finding just the right illustrator was an important start. In July 2007, Farmer's Hat Productions self-published the first book in the Bur Bur and Friends™ series—"Bur Bur's Boating ABC's"—named after Pastel's son's imaginary friend. Pastel, who dreams of Bur Bur becoming a household name, feels strongly that self-publishing is the best way to keep the control they need to accomplish that goal.

The line already includes four books and has expanded to dolls, puzzles and T-shirts. Pastel cites the national attention the brand has garnered (including winning several awards) as evidence she's on the right track. Though she has yet to draw a salary, Pastel doesn't lack for big dreams. She'd like to publish books that cover all aspects of diversity, including child characters being raised by one parent (Fitzsimmons is a single parent), adoptive parents and gay parents. "We want to show reality and what the world truly is like," she said.

Pastel chalks up the mistakes she's made along the way, such as paying for consultants that weren't crucial, to learning experiences. She'd like to mentor other new business owners and help them avoid similar pitfalls.

"I am following my passion!" Pastel said. That belief has helped her to stand up to "... people [who have told] me, 'I wouldn't do it' because ... the market would be too small." She can't see herself doing anything else. "I love to see the faces and hear the reactions of people when they see the books," she said, and, of course, her son loves seeing his face in mom's books. For Pastel, there's no greater reward.