

This Fairy Offers Hope

An author's unexpected journey results in an enchanting children's book series.

by Julie Woik
Community Contributor

The world's going to hell in a hand basket!
Now that's a sentence we've all heard a time or two over the years. And if you've picked up a newspaper or watched any type of news cast in recent history, you'd be likely to believe that this is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Well, I've got a story that may leave you feeling otherwise! My name is Julie Woik. I've been a Sarasota resident for almost 30 years, and I'm the author and creator of "The Life and Times of Lilly the Lash," a children's book series in which an eyelash utilizes her charm and mystique to playfully explore important life lessons and empower audiences everywhere to build strong self-esteem and good character.

Let me start by explaining that becoming an author was most certainly *not* on my bucket list. Life was good. Really good. I

was happy, healthy, had a great job, a terrific husband, friends I could count on; I truly needed for nothing - or so I thought.

It happened in the blink of an eye

It all began late one night in May 2006 on my way to the bathroom. Yes, that's right, my books were inspired by an eyelash I wiped from my face at about midnight while strolling down the hall to my bathroom! As soon as I looked at the eyelash, it became Lilly the Lash.

Within seconds, a poem detailing the recent struggles of a good friend began to fill my head. It was only because a woman with 19 years experience as a publishing executive heard part of the poem and encouraged me to use the eyelash fairy concept to do something remarkable for children that I decided to give it a whirl. I distinctly remember wondering to myself if this poor lady had sipped a few too many martinis with her gal pals at lunch that day!

Though the poem had most definitely come from me, I had not considered myself to be any kind of writer. Although I took her advice, all I kept thinking was "this could be disastrous." It was almost with the greatest of ease, the words began tumbling



Julie Woik displays two of her "Lilly the Lash" books at her booth at the Phillippi Farmhouse Market.

Photo courtesy of Curtis Ross

“I’ve realized my purpose on this planet.”

Julie Woik

onto the paper like a child carelessly tossing alphabet blocks onto the floor in front of them, simultaneously forming all of the right words in all of the right places. I found that by tapping into the profound experiences I had while working with young children in the field of psychiatry, and combining them with my own personal struggles and triumphs, I was overcome with enormous inspiration. And lo and behold, right before my eyes, out popped one book, and then another, and yet again, another.

If you should ever decide to write a book and want to take the steps to actually see it in print, you basically have two options. You can either seek out a literary agent who will approach and pitch your idea to various publishing houses, or you can take things into your own hands and self-publish. We chose the latter.

Quite honestly, it was Chris Caswell, a helpful and well-informed Sarasota entertainment lawyer who introduced and then led us down this path. My husband and I met with Caswell to explain my vision regarding the books, my thoughts on making them into a full-length series, and more specifically, offering children and their families something more than just a book. Caswell felt strongly that this was something really special, and encouraged us to take it on ourselves. After some extensive investigative research, we took the plunge.

Our books are what people refer to as picture books. My stories are in rhythm and rhyme, and the illustrations are designed to give the reader a visual overview. But in our case, you can’t even talk about “The Life and Times of Lilly the Lash” without calling attention to the breathtaking art work.

The illustrations, created by Marc Tobin, are so visually stimulating that they appear to pop off the page in 3-D style. The cinematic-like images have been a key component in the success of the series. Every page carries an element of allure that draws a child’s interest again and again. From the very onset of this project, I felt if I could provide a book that grabbed their attention and empowered their imagination, that power, in turn, could be used to promote good choices and positive behavior. From what our customers have been reporting ... I think we’ve hit the mark.

Things aren’t always as they seem

While I felt my life was progressing quite happily prior to the inception of this series, and I felt that I lived my life appreciating most things as many people do, I have to say the experiences I’ve had over the past eight years have left me nothing short of grateful. Grateful for every moment, and every single person I’ve encountered along the way.

There are of course, millions of creative people doing millions of magnificent things all around the world every single day, and there’s a story to accompany each and every one of them. I’m no exception. However, what I’ve come to discover is that people aren’t only enamored by the tantalizing tale



A young reader peruses one of Julie Woik's "Lilly the Lash" books for children.

Photo courtesy of Julie Woik

Continued from previous page

regarding the birth of Lilly the Lash, but they also want to be part of the journey moving forward as well. Lilly takes us back to basics by teaching old-fashioned values with a modern day twist. People want to be connected to that. Lilly has this way of engaging virtually everyone she comes into contact with, leaving them with a lasting impression of down-home goodness and heart-felt hope. They believe that together we can make the world a better place. And *that*, I have deemed, is what really makes my story worth telling.

It's imperative that I take a moment to express that from the very get go, though I loved Lilly the Lash and everything she stood for, I had a "happy-go-lucky/I'm in this for an adventure" type of attitude, and my thinking was that of "this is going to be great fun selling books." Clearly I had no indication as to where this was headed, and was completely unaware of the intense emotions that would spill over me on this wonderful whimsical ride.

In the days to follow, I went about the business of selling books. I arranged book signings at craft fairs and art shows, farmer's markets and seafood festivals. If there was going to be an opportunity to meet customers and sell my books, I was going to be there meeting customers and selling my books. But then there was this strange turn of events; and after the first, 27th and 135th time, I began to see a pattern. It was then, through the eyes of the people I was meeting, I realized that I wasn't selling a book at all. I was offering HOPE.

From there, everything changed. Each day my world would twist and turn in such a way that I no longer saw the books as

a commodity. What I had, I declared, was precious cargo, and people were excited about that. I was excited, too! And out of the excitement, I even managed to have a revelation.

While there was no doubt that all of this made me feel really good inside, people kept saying over and over to me, "Oh my goodness, you have such passion." Now, I've heard the word passion before, it's not like I didn't know what it meant, but that always seemed like such an odd thing to say, since I really didn't see it that way. As far as I was concerned: I simply worked for Lilly. I know that statement may sound like I need to be carted off in a little white jacket, but I believe anyone who has had a passion for anything will understand why I would say something so ridiculous.

The thing is, you don't really pick a passion, a passion picks *you*. It lives within you. And then one day, usually rather unexpectedly, it is unleashed. Slowly it fills you with a kind of happiness you never knew existed. Hours melt from the clock, weekends disappear from the calendar, and wrinkles form on your face from the endless years of joy.

It's something that just feels right. This silly little eyelash has brought me a tremendous amount of love, and because of her, I've now come to realize my passion, and my purpose on this planet.

Incredible Encounters

I know everyone meets cool people from time to time, but I gotta tell ya, I'm surrounded by the cream of the crop pretty much every day. I meet people who are sponsoring homeless

Books and Beyond

Free activities provide children and their families with an entertaining educational experience.

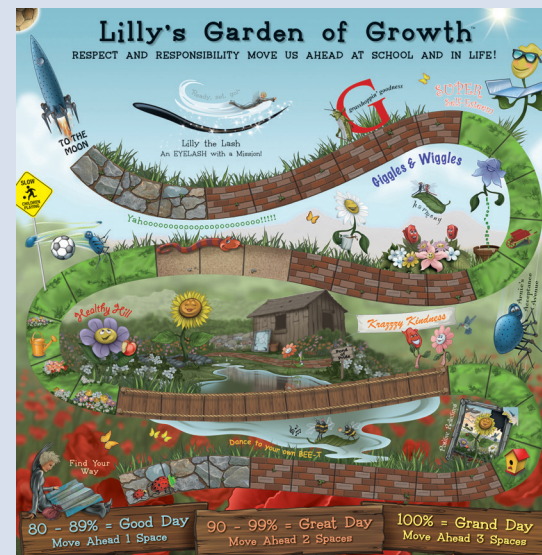
Teaching Life Lessons

There are lots of children's books available on the market these days, but The Life and Times of Lilly the Lash series has upped the ante in more ways than one. Inside each book you'll find a captivating, value-based adventure, a list of fun facts, a teaser for the upcoming episode, 20 things hidden throughout for children to find, and last but not least, an important cause which a percentage of the book sales support.

Not only do the books themselves offer a great value, but each book comes with an array of free teacher and therapy lesson plans, crafting activities, and a variety of games created for boys and girls alike.

We offer Lilly's Garden of Growth, a free motivational chart to be used to encourage children to make good choices. All of Lilly's activities are perfect for the educational community, as well as the family structure at home.

The reading level is ages 4 to 10, however Lilly's customer base is actually 0 to 10. Written in rhyme with a sing-song tempo, coupled with mesmerizing images that even the adults can enjoy, these books are a popular choice for baby shower gifts or a "read to" for the very little ones. There are presently four books in the anticipated 15-book series. Self-worth, sharing, honesty and respect have been addressed, while other essential lessons like cour-



Lilly's Garden of Growth Motivational Board Game.
Photo courtesy of Julie Woik

age and empathy are in the works. Stay tuned for Lilly's next exciting escapade where balance is learned deep inside the jungle.

You'll find the books, DVDs and Lilly's Gift Satchels, along with all of the free educational activities when you visit Lilly's website at lillythelash.com.

1

The first book in the series has recently been transformed into a musical production for children's theater.

LILLY THE LASH MUSICAL

- **Advanced Productions and Entertainment** has generated productions for Fortune 500 companies as well as conglomerates such as Nickelodeon.
- **Lilly the Lash** and The Garden Gathering is the interactive musical of the first book in the series The Garden Gathering created by APE. Currently touring... Call 954-674-1449.
- **A second version** is already in the works. APE wants to broaden the scope of availability by incorporating a horticultural aspect which ties with existing school curriculum. This will provide an excellent opportunity for institutions to utilize suitable grants to offer education and entertainment in one fell swoop.

shelters, people whose church groups donate backpacks to underprivileged children, couples who have two or three children of their own, yet are adopting children out of foster care, and people who simply care about their neighbor so much, that they're eager to make and take them cookies on any ordinary Tuesday.

I know this about these people because they share their stories with me after they see my books and understand what they're about. Lilly the Lash teaches us to love ourselves, love our neighbors, make good choices and do good things. In a world seemingly filled with unstable, uncaring, unsavory people, I'm joyful and proud to report that there are many, many more concerned, loving, compassionate souls out there, making a positive difference every single day.

Take Kizz Wallace-Powell for example. She's an educator, parent and a most beautiful person. I met Kizz a couple of years ago. What makes Kizz so cool? Well, I was filling my van with gas one day, when Kizz pulled up behind me. Having removed all of the decorative marketing materials from the outside of the van in preparation for new and improved, a dust-covered bumper sticker that garnished a small image of Lilly the Lash with a statement below it referring to the series as "character building," was all that remained.

Although it wasn't much, it was enough to peak Kizz's interest. She got out of her vehicle and approached me. After a brief introduction, she began to inquire as to what this whole Lilly the Lash thing was about. I immediately tried to place the gas handle on automatic in order to supply her with a brochure, a few bookmarks, and a quick glance at the books; only to discover that the auto clip was broken.

I apologized for the inconvenience and suggested that due to the line of customers behind us it would be best if I finished filling my tank in order to move forward and out of the way. Without a thought, Kizz smiled gently, slid my hand to one side and replied, "Oh, here, I'll get that," and continued to pump my gas. Huh!? I almost didn't know what to do! I didn't know if I



Sunny and Arnie's musical debut.
Photo courtesy of Julie Woik

should laugh at how amazingly spontaneous and fabulous this gal was, or if I should cry at her dedication to searching for yet another possibility of bettering the lives of her students and loved ones.

I gathered the information, showed her the books, and gave her the 15 second spiel, all while she continued to fill my tank — no small feat since it tops off at 25 gallons!

In the meantime, as if that wasn't enough, the couple getting gas in the next aisle over could hear Kizz's reaction to the books, and leaned in to ask for more details, as they had age appropriate grandchildren and felt the books sounded so uplifting.

This incident was completely mind-blowing, and I've been telling it at conferences and presentations everywhere I go. Just imagine, someone so engrossed in finding out about the prospect of hope that

they were willing to *pump my gas!*

I have lots and lots of these delightful stories; so many in fact, my friends think I should write a book about it.

Don't get me wrong, I realize that everything isn't always rainbows and butterflies, but I sure am glad I get to share hope with the world on a daily basis.

And if you stop and look around, you'll see it too. As Lilly articulates in one of her books "It's there at your feet; in the sights and the sounds and the people you meet." In these incredible times of uncertainty, it's good to know that there truly is hope for the hand basket!

For more information or to purchase books in the "Lilly the Lash" series, visit lillythelash.com.

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