



Photo courtesy of Jennifer DiMarco

Banner Forest author Jennifer DiMarco (center), her daughter Faith and son Maxwell joined forces to produce three children's books in the midst of the coronavirus lockdown.

Pandemic spurs a literary family affair

Banner Forest author, son and daughter team up to produce three fanciful children's books

BY MIKE DE FELICE
Special to the Independent

PORT ORCHARD — Mix together a global pandemic and idle family members at home. What do you have? Plenty of free time.

Families facing such a dilemma — and that's most of us these days — have put a lot of effort into coming up with creative ways to fill their time together. Local author Jennifer DiMarco took that challenge to a whole new level by enlisting the skills of her two adult children to do illustrations for her three latest children's books.

"In this unprecedented year, like many families, we had a lot more time where nothing was happening," DiMarco said.

"So having something that would really engage [my kids] Maxwell and Faith and keep their minds occupied was at the forefront of my own mind. I thought this would be the right time to have them try to illustrate something on a professional level — and it worked. They loved it."

DiMarco, who has written more than two dozen novels, primarily in the science fiction genre for adults and six other children's books, resides in the Banner Forest area of South Kitsap with her son Maxwell, 21, and daughter Faith, 18. The threesome combined their talents to put out three children's books:

"When Longneck Learned to Love" is about a self-doubting dinosaur who, when he sees himself through his par-

ents' eyes, learns to develop his lagging self-confidence.

"Take Flight!" is a sing-song book about a flock of cute fruit bats that goes on a mini-adventure one night.

"My Patchwork Heart" features a woman who learns that love can be everlasting through the eyes of a magical dog.

"I have always taken inspiration for my children's stories from my children. I think about what they want to hear and what engages them," the author said.

"I started writing children's books for them. I felt this was especially important because my son, Maxwell, is autistic, and helping him find a way to connect with the world was a priority for me."

The children were introduced to drawing by watching YouTube videos of the legendary artist Bob Ross at work in front of his painter's canvas, known for painting landscapes on his PBS program. DiMarco also purchased some instructional art videos about how to draw lines, shapes and shading.

It seemed only natural to have her kids have a go at illustrating the children's books.

DiMarco's writing career spans 31 years. Her first breakthrough book, which kicked off her career, was published when she was 19 — "Escape to the Wind," a science-fiction novel that climbed to the top of the Seattle Times bestsellers list. Notably, a short story about a global pandemic that she penned a year before the novel coronavirus hit, has been made into a movie called "Social Box." The independent film will air on Amazon Prime Video in December.

FAMILY, SEE A3

A (corona) virus like no other

BY BOB SMITH
Kitsap News Group

The unprecedented global pandemic spawned by the novel coronavirus — increasingly known by its scientific name COVID-19 — is guided by statistics measured in percentages.

As in how many millions of Americans have been tested for the virus and how many have been found to be positive. And what percentage of those testing positive have died after contracting the virulent organism responsible for nearly 240,000 deaths in this country in 2020.

In the cold, rigid mathematical world of an actuary, it's been a societal event of massive reckoning. But as those who have lost loved ones to COVID-19 or have friends and family members working in service

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Information you should know. Page 8

industries such as restaurants, bars and places of social gatherings, who have lost their economic livelihood, it's been a year filled with emotions ranging from annoyance to depression to heartache.

There are the obvious economic consequences of the pandemic: employees without work, businesses struggling to survive a barren consumer market, and mom-and-pop entrepreneurs losing their lifetime investments after being forced to close their doors when the money ran out.

While the debate rages on about the efficacy of shutting down social and commer-

cial life in order to curtail the pandemic, it's apparent to a growing percentage of people that there are no simple solutions to effectively contain the viral superstorm short of a globally accepted vaccine.

Meanwhile, there's little chance of creating a win-win situation for citizens at large and for businesses on Main Street USA — and the people who depend on them to make a living.

But that hasn't quelled the effort of many people here in South Kitsap (see below) to mitigate the disastrous impact on restaurants and bars as their owners struggle to stay afloat following indoor seating restrictions were instituted by the state to quell the spread of the deadly virus. A second round of restrictions on eating establishments was imposed by Gov. Jay Inslee on Wednesday.

Surviving COVID-19

Kitsap restaurants band together to keep serving meals through Full Circle Meals project

BY BOB SMITH
Kitsap News Group

PORT ORCHARD — When the specter of a coronavirus pandemic settled over the global landscape in March, residents in relatively isolated Kitsap County came to the realization that their world was about to change in significant ways. The prospect of dealing with a potentially deadly virus was multiplied by the growing sense shared by small business owners that their investments and life savings were at risk of disappearing, along with their depended-upon crowd of customers to their restaurants.

Restaurants and bars — a risky business proposition in the best of times — are labor-intensive operations hyperfocused on the costs of employing people to prepare meals, wait on tables and handle the endless chores required to make a restaurant function. And there are myriad costs associated above and beyond those costs, including building leases, maintenance and marketing, that owners must address as they pay the bills.

When Gov. Inslee introduced COVID-19 restrictions impacting restaurants and bars this spring, The Dock Bar & Eatery's Sego and co-owner Coreen Haydock, his wife, recognized that without customers, there would be no need to have employees on site. And no work meant no paychecks for their hardworking staff.

Sego, an active community leader in Port Orchard who also owns Waterman Investment Partners, said he and



Bob Smith | Independent

Restauranteers Suanne Martin Smith (left), Steve Sego and Coreen Haydock say the Full Circle Meals initiative (which Sego created in March and administered by the nonprofit Arc of the Peninsulas) has helped to keep restaurant businesses across Kitsap County afloat during the period of indoor-dining restrictions imposed by the state this year. Gov. Jay Inslee announced a second round of indoor dining restrictions that took effect Wednesday.

Haydock pondered what avenue their business could take to stay in business and ultimately survive the pandemic. Their solution? Connect with other restaurants in Kitsap County and join forces with the nonprofit Arc of the Peninsulas to prepare packaged meals for delivery

to people facing tough times through organizations such as the Rescue Mission and Retsil Veterans Home that serve the homeless population, low-income families, at-risk teens and critical-care staff tending to seriously ill patients.

SURVIVING, SEE 4

KCIRT's investigation of jail inmate's death completed

Investigators found no evidence of criminal intent by corrections officers

BY BOB SMITH
Kitsap News Group

PORT ORCHARD — A multi-agency law enforcement team of investigators found no indication of criminal intent or negligence involving Kitsap County corrections officers related to the death of inmate Sean Michael Howell earlier this year.

Investigators affiliated with the Kitsap Critical Incident Response Team (KCIRT) filed a report Nov. 5 with the Kitsap County Prosecutor's Office for review of any charging decisions related to the man's death.

According to the report, team investigators interviewed 19 corrections officers from Kitsap County Jail who were either involved or witnessed the incident, as well as four members of the jail nursing staff who were on duty the day of the incident.

KCIRT was brought in to investigate the use of force that was suspected of causing the death of Howell, 28, who was arrested on May 8 by the

Bremerton Police Department and booked into the jail for first-degree murder.

According to the team's report, county corrections officers responded at around 10:30 a.m., May 9 to an incident involving Howell, who was housed in a crisis cell and attempting to tamper with the cell's sprinkler system. Four corrections officers and one sergeant entered the suspect's cell and attempted to restrain him with the intention of moving him to another cell.

Jail reports indicate Howell began to resist violently, whereupon corrections officers used pepper spray and a taser on him, both of which had little to no effect on the man. They were able to place him in a restraint chair, but as he was upright, they realized Howell was no longer breathing. Officers and medical staff on-site immediately began CPR and called for additional aid. He was taken to a hospital, where he remained unresponsive.

The report stated one of the responding corrections officers was hospitalized with injuries sustained during the incident. The officer was treated and released the same day.

Howell was removed from life support the morning of May 15. The Kitsap County Coroner's Office determined that the man's cause of death was

"restraint asphyxia" and the manner of death was deemed homicide, a definition of which involves the death of an individual caused by another person.

It was decided that investigators from Bremerton Police and the Kitsap County Sheriff's Office — the two agencies whose officers were involved in the incident — would take part in the investigation. Subsequently, the Washington State Patrol was named the lead investigating agency, with assistance from Port Orchard, Poulsbo and Shelton police department detectives.

In accordance with a Washington state statute, two community members not associated with law enforcement agencies were included in the investigative process, which included being provided advance copies of media releases, receiving regular briefings on the investigation's progress, and having access to the entire investigated file at the conclusion of the investigation.

KCIRT said the investigators participated in a vetting process to preclude conflict of interest and ensure credibility to participate in the investigation. A family liaison also was assigned to Howell's next of kin and has been in contact with them throughout the investigation.

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Climate change a concern under the sea

A ferry ride to Seattle provides a panoramic view of the city skyline and (on a clear day) a glimpse of Mount Rainier raising its snowy head. But did you ever wonder what's going on below the boat?

KITSAP NATURALLY

By NANCY SEFTON



First, let's get oriented. Puget Sound is an arm of the "Salish Sea," which includes the Strait of Juan de Fuca (our waterway to the Pacific) and the Strait of Georgia (Hello, B.C.). Ever wonder what you'd see if the Sound was drained?

Imagine a panorama of winding canyons, towering cliffs and deep troughs, all carved by glaciers over 10,000 years ago. The deepest place? About 930 feet.

As one descends, underwater habitats change; each nurtures its own life forms, from microscopic creatures up to our local whales.

Let's start at the very top. Prowling a Kitsap beach during our lowest tides, you encounter marine life temporarily stranded: sea stars, clams, sea urchins, barnacles, snails and numerous others. Thick beds of eelgrass are partially exposed, shiny green blades slumped on the wet sand. Deeper, these rich grasses shelter a host of fish species; they also provide spawning grounds for herring, pathways for migrating salmon and food for waterbirds.

Deeper still, sea otters might be diving down to feed on spiky sea urchins (ouch). In all, Puget Sound nurtures 200 species of fish, 26 species of marine mammals, 3,000 species of invertebrates (animals without backbones), 100 species of seabirds and countless saltwater plants.

Ready for the downside? The Sound is flushed daily by the tides, but not enough to clean it of the waste from a large human population. Furthermore, climate change is rapidly melting Earth's ice fields, causing the sea level to rise. Thus, saltwater is slowly creeping into our local freshwater marshes, altering their ability to host a variety of wintering sea birds.

Intertidal wetlands are eroding, causing beaches to shrink. Many wild-life species, even salmon, will have dif-



Nancy Sefton/Courtesy photos

Beach lovers can find all kinds of critters at low tide, like on Bainbridge Island.

ficulty adapting to such changes.

Are the cards stacked against this watery world at our doorstep? We humans clustered around the Sound need to understand that all living things occupying our lands and waters

are interdependent. It's time for a "sea change," a reversal of the regrettable trends we're responsible for. We hear a lot about conserving wildlife; the first way is to conserve the natural habitats they depend upon.

FAMILY

CONTINUED FROM A1

While DiMarco's career is impressive, so are her two children.

Maxwell's background

"Pretty early on, we realized something was not right," she said of her son Maxwell. "He was struggling. He was completely non-verbal and didn't meet anyone's eyes. He seemed to be in his own world."

At 14 months old, he was diagnosed with autism.

"I was told by a physician at the time that he would never speak or communicate in a meaningful way," she said. "He said I should look into group homes because I am small and the doctor was afraid Maxwell would grow up and be too much for me to handle. But, I was not going to give up on him."

DiMarco sought out a second opinion and spoke to several experts. Two factors ended up having a significant impact on her son. A doctor at Children's Hospital diagnosed Maxwell with Hyper-IgE Syndrome. He was highly allergic to several food items such as wheat, nuts and dairy. Exposure to these common food items sent his immune system into overdrive. She subsequently eliminated those foods and made changes to his diet, which helped tremendously.

The other factor that improved Maxwell's functioning skills was getting a baby sister when he was 3.

"After two years of interacting with his baby sister, he started to develop verbal cues - making sounds to communicate," DiMarco said. "For example, saying 'oh' for yes and 'uh' for no. Eventually, the sounds turned into actual language. He connected to his sister first, then to me."

Remarkable cognitive advantages continued.

"He turned 21 this month and not only does he speak beautifully, but he has graduated from high school, written a novel, is an accomplished film editor and has won acting awards.

"The statement he hears more often than not is, "Oh, I had no idea that autism could look this way," DiMarco remarked with pride.

Maxwell does a weekly internet show for kids call "Seriously Cereal." In each episode, he and a guest do a light-hearted review of a breakfast cereal, commenting on things like whether the product gets soggy in milk, how tasty it is and how interesting the stuff is on the back of the cereal box. The show, which started two years ago and is still going strong, has quite a following on YouTube.

Faith

Faith had challenges of her own. At birth, she had opposing blood types from her mother that caused her to be allergic to mother's milk. Unable to take nutrition, she lost weight and had to be rehospitalized for a month within days of coming home. Fortunately, Faith's setback

was short-lived. She had a healthy comeback and suffered no lasting effects.

Growing up, Faith and her brother, both of whom were home-schooled, loved to do skits. One day the pair came to their mom and asked her to write them a TV show. This prompted DiMarco to take a screenwriting class.

"Faith said the show would be about a little kid named Faith who is a ghost hunter and her sidekick is her brother with autism," DiMarco said.

The result of Faith's idea was "Ghost Sniffers, Inc."

"The show was about a brother and sister who both had superpowers because they were both born with medical conditions or disabilities. Together they used

their superpowers with other kiddos to help solve silly and whacky mysteries, kind of like Scooby-Doo," DiMarco said.

"The show was very popular. A lot of families wrote in and talked about how it impacted their lives. We had children come in from all over the country to guest star on the show. Any child with a disability or medical condition could go on an adventure with Faith

and Maxwell's characters."

The show ran for 14 episodes between 2009-2013 on public access television and YouTube.

The family's three children's books are the latest accomplishments of the DiMarco family. It would be no surprise — pandemic or not — if this gifted trio continues to come up with other entertaining contributions.

The books were published by the local nonprofit Blue Forge Press of Port Orchard. Blue Forge also has a record, gaming and film division. The film group produced many of the family's TV shows.

Two of the most recent children's books are available at the Book' Em bookstore in Port Orchard. All are available at blueforgepress.com and on Amazon.



Photo courtesy of Jennifer DeMarco

The DiMarco family of the Banner Forest area of South Kitsap put their idle time to use during the COVID-19 lockdown and produced three fanciful children's books.

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To register, visit KitsapTransit.com

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 21

North Kitsap: 9:00 - 10:00 am

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