

Portrait

Author writes with and for children

Kara Starzyk

From darkness came light and a children's book for Weston resident Ellen Wolfson Valladares. Her first book, "Jonathan's Journey to Mount Miapu," is a tale of a 10-year-old boy's adventures on an enchanted mountain that ultimately guide him to overcome his fear of the dark.

The idea for the book came to Wolfson Valladares, 43, about a decade ago while healing from a traumatic, dark period in her life. In 1995, she experienced the deaths of her mother and her stillborn baby. While this loss caused deep sorrow and mourning, she said the healing process led to discovering her inner light and a belief in angels.

Wolfson Valladares said she found peace when she began learning about angels from Doreen Virtue, a well-known spiritual doctor of psychology and metaphysician. Inspired, Wolfson Valladares became a certified Angel Therapy Practitioner and teaches others about connecting with their intuition and inner spirit through seminars and workshops in South Florida.

She also has been devoted to helping others cope with the loss of a baby. She became a peer counselor for bereaved mothers and led a support group called Surviving Pregnancy After a Loss. She currently serves on the advisory council of Butterflies from Heaven Foundation, a nonprofit organization that supports families who have lost babies due to miscarriage, stillbirth or newborn death.

Her passion to help children and adults recognize their life purposes and reach their potential is reflected in the story of "Jonathan's Journey to Mount Miapu," which was self-published last year. Woven into chapters filled with nature, magic and adventure, Jonathan learns to cope with fears, become self-accepting and handle bullying. He must find confidence and courage in order to save Mount Miapu from the Great Darkness that threatens to cast permanent darkness.

While the book is marked in the age range 8 to 12, Wolfson Valladares said she wrote with youth and adult audiences in mind. She recently spoke with

a group of children who read the book through the Tween Book Club at the Weston Branch Library. She said the book opened up dialogue for the children to discuss their own fears as well as their opinions on the story. She recounted that most of the young readers expressed a desire to live on or visit the mystical Mount Miapu, except for one child who preferred not to be without a computer and a television.

"Children are so incredible and give me hope for the future. I want to help open their creativity and minds so they have the tools to navigate in this crazy world," she said adding that she drew inspiration to help others from a Jewish proverb that hung in her childhood home: "If you save one life, it is as if you have saved the world."

"Jonathan's Journey to Mount Miapu" has been awarded the 2009 Gold Mom's Choice Award, the 2009 Coalition of Visionary Resources (COVR), Visionary Awards Book of the Year and COVR Visionary Awards winner in the Children's Books category. The book is available on amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com.

"These are very special awards. If I could pick any awards to win, these would be the greatest honor," said Wolfson Valladares, adding that the highest reward was the positive feedback from her sons Gabriel, 12, and Michael, 10. "My children and their friends were my best research subjects."

While writing the book, she sought the advice and opinion of children in the neighborhood and at her kids' schools, Eagle Point Elementary and Tequesta Trace Middle School. Her husband, Manny, was one of the first readers and provided feedback during the writing process.

The Florida native wrote much of the book's scenery based on places she has been as well as envisioned during meditation. Ink illustrations by artist Maureen Burdock add vibrance to the characters and scenes. Having lived in Weston since 1992, Wolfson Valladares said the fictional community of Westwood, Fla., in many ways reflects Weston with its guard gate neighborhoods, schools and lush landscape. She said Mount Miapu has characteristics of the mountains of North Carolina where she frequents in the summer; Guatemala,

where her husband was born; and one of her favorite places in the world; Bok Tower Gardens in Lake Wales.

Wolfson Valladares knew at an early age that she wanted to be writer. Her studies in journalism at the University of Florida led her to a career as a freelance reporter for the *Jewish News Journal* and *South Florida Parenting Magazine*. Recently, she found an autobiography that she completed in school when she was 9 years old, projecting that someday she would write a book. For information, visit www.childrenofthelight.net.

Why did you move to Weston?

We loved the Weston neighborhoods. My husband and I were into bike riding and Weston has a lot of bike paths. At that time, we didn't have children so schools were not a factor, but now the schools are great. I would not trade this place.

Are there other writers in your family?

I am the youngest of four children. My brother Steve has written children's books and my sister Karen is journalist. My mother encouraged us to write, and she was always reading books.

Does the main character reflect you?

An author can't separate one's self from the characters, so in some ways yes. [Jonathan] and other characters have traits of my sons or people I know. The character Grandma Trudy, who is full of wisdom and kindness, is based on my mom, Gertrude, who passed away.

What are your hobbies?

Yoga and walking our two mix-breed dogs, Flash and Chili Pepper, that were adopted from a shelter. I also love the beach and the ocean. I love the mountains and waterfalls. I guess I just love being in nature.

What is your favorite book?

"Harry Potter" by JK Rowling and "The Alchemist" by Paulo Coelho

What is your favorite food?

Chocolate-chip cookies



Ellen Wolfson Valladares' first children's book is called "Jonathan's Journey to Mount Miapu."

What is your favorite song?

"Calling All Angels" by Train

What is your proudest accomplishment?

Completing and publishing my book

Since you have been a reporter, what is a question that you always wanted to be asked if you were interviewed?

What is a pivotal moment that changed your life?

And how would you answer?

The year that I lost my mother and daughter, I began to see the world in new ways. Although so painful, I look back and know that this changed me for the better.

What advice do you have for other writers?

Don't give up, stick with it. Everyone has their own idea and a story to tell. Don't be discouraged by people who say that your story has been told because everyone's experience and voice is unique. It is not easy, but persevere.