

Story Time

Observing her children inspired this business officer to pursue her passion for writing and publish a book.



Najah Lowe is the chief financial officer at Vistamar School, a grades 9-12 day school with 270 students in El Segundo, California. najahlowe@vistamarschool.org
vistamarschool.org

I've always been an avid reader and storyteller. As a young girl, I spent my days immersed in books and regularly journaled. I often added details to make my everyday life seem more dramatic, to the point that I now look back at my childhood journals and think, "That couldn't possibly have happened that way, could it?" I realize now that it was my imagination going wild and my creativity being developed.

At the same time, I was introduced to accounting and finance at an early age, through my family's real estate business. Though I always had an affinity for money and personal finances, I never thought I'd want a career handling numbers. My love of stories remained strong, so I went on to study English literature at California State University, Dominguez Hills.

After college, I began work at an independent preschool as assistant to the business manager and executive director. This job was fulfilling because I was mentored by a talented accountant and a dynamic head, and was able to regularly interact with teachers, families and students. It was there that I decided that a career in independent schools was for me, and I set out to learn everything I could to one day manage operations myself.

With this new goal in mind, I went back to school to earn my MBA with a concentration in human resources. At 28, I became the director of finance and operations for a small nonprofit organization in Washington, DC, and then returned quickly to the independent school sector. I recognized early on in my career that working in an independent school would allow me to invest in myself, expand my family and make time to fulfill my passion for writing.

FROM THE HEART

This past year, I published my first children's book, "Brendon, the Second Child." The story is about a little boy whose sister never misses an opportunity to remind him that he's the younger sibling. Fearing Brendon may start to believe that being "second born" means "second best," his mom explains what makes Brendon a special part of their family.

The book is based off observations of my own children, my son Brayden and daughter London. Like their fictional counterparts, my kids are attached at the hip yet constantly find ways to



Business officer Najah Lowe with her family, which was one inspiration for her new book.

torment each other. I began to notice, for instance, that my daughter would make fun of my son's glasses, and he would walk away from those interactions with his head down and shoulders low.

Every time this happened, I would sit down with Brayden and tell him about my own experiences growing up as the second child and how people would compare me and my sister on a regular basis. I wanted Brayden to know that I understood what it's like to be the youngest, and he should be proud of his big, round eyes and glasses because they are what makes him unique, and certainly that being the youngest is just as special as being the oldest. That's when I realized I should share this story in a book.

BUSINESS FIRST

After making this commitment, I found myself struggling with a profound sense of self-doubt — not so much because I didn't believe in the story, but because there are so many things you have to do in order to publish a book. Being a CFO, my mind first went to the business side of the book. Was this a lucrative plan? How much exactly did I need to invest in this project? Would it sell?

I started by reaching out to various children's authors in my network to get a better sense of these questions and received sound advice that helped me develop my business plan. Doing my research, I found deals with smaller publishers that were very author-friendly and had a more reasonable budgeting process than the bigger name publishers.

I ultimately identified a small independent press that offered me full royalties and specialized in getting my book on multiple sites, such as Amazon and Barnes & Noble as well as Follett and other educational book sellers, which helped increase sales and marketing.

PEN TO PAPER

After I established the plan and my budget, I finally sat down to write the book, which turned out to be the easiest part since it was so close to my real life experience, both as a kid and watching my own kids. I was fortunate that at this time, I was working flexible hours and my kids were just starting remote learning because of the pandemic. Nothing was holding me back. I said to myself, "No door is closed for me to write this book."

My kids ended up being a huge motivator in this process. I read them many of my rough drafts to gauge their attention span, see when their eyes lit up and determine which vocabulary words went over their heads. After each reading, I would even quiz them to see how many details they remembered and what moments stood out to them. While I wouldn't say my kids were my editors, they were certainly an important part of the market research process!

Critical to finishing the book was identifying an illustrator with experience and expertise in drawing children of color. I was very specific in my proposal that the illustrator needed to be able to draw a variety of hair textures and inflections of skin colors. I even sent the finalists pictures of my family as a reference.

For me, portraying stories about families of color and people of color helps everyone. Our children are so important to the future of this country, and how they treat each other and the more joy they can find in themselves and each other, the better the world will be. Building a foundation of support and self-esteem

starts at a young age. When you can look at the bookshelves and see yourself in books, you can find more ways to feel good about yourself. Similarly, if you're a white child and see a Black family in a book that may share similarities to your own, it invites you to connect on a multitude of levels. Points of commonality can be as silly and everyday as wearing glasses or having an annoying older sister.

THE CHILD'S POINT OF VIEW

When I finally chose an illustrator and was able to announce the publication of my book, I had a total sense of victory knowing I had done something for my kids and my family. While my younger son may be too young to recognize himself in the character of Brendon just yet, it's been amazing to see him point out the ways in which they are similar and find joy in seeing a boy like himself be accepted and loved by his family.

As for my passion for storytelling, I'm already writing my second book, "Cracker not Cra-koh," about a smart and playful boy who has trouble pronouncing the word "cracker." It will be available in early 2021. The biggest lesson I've learned about myself through writing my first two books is that I was more inhibited as an adult than I realized. In order to write good children's literature, I needed to make it my business to be around the kids and understand their learning process.

I feel like I see my children differently now that I've written a book. Before I was more cautious about bringing dirt or glitter into the house, or getting down on my knees to paint messy art with my kids. Now I find myself better able to relate to them and let them lead me toward a more expansive, silly way of seeing the world and exploring my passions and theirs. Anyone who's interested in learning more about children's literature or connecting with students in their everyday work has to be willing to go there and not be an adult, get down on their level, touch what they're touching and see it from their perspective. **N**

We'd love to hear from you! In After School, business officers share a passion or perspective from outside their usual working hours. Want to contribute? Email NetAssets@nboa.org. In the subject line, type **AFTER SCHOOL**.



"Brendon, the Second Child" is written by Najah Lowe and illustrated by Julia Lopresti.