In conversation with Charlene McIver



You are a strong advocate for empowerment, learning, and encouraging children to recognise their inner strength. Why is this so important to you?

To empower children, especially those with special needs, it is imperative that they are given the opportunity to do so. The development of their self-confidence and their self-confidence in others will enable them to become more independent and take control of their lives.

Having raised a child with a severe physical disability and ongoing health concerns, there was always a flood of emotions of anger, fear, and anxiety for the whole family during the long, exhausting hospitalisation and recovery periods. Therefore, it was essential to engage in a variety of fun activities and make-up empowering stories whenever possible, in which the super-smart boy in the wheelchair always played the role of the hero.

My goal is to continue to advocate for children with special needs, and I hope my stories will inspire and empower all children in some small way.

Your fabulous book series *Leigh's Wheelie Adventures* provides readers with a positive view of wheelchair use. What are some of the themes in the books?

The *Leigh's Wheelie Adventures* series addresses the physical and emotional needs of children using wheelchairs, which able-bodied individuals may not be aware of. Currently, there are three books in the series.

Squishy Sand Book 1 demonstrates clearly to the reader how a child using a wheelchair would have difficulty accessing the beach, and how friendship and teamwork can help resolve this dilemma. (**Problem:** Mobility issues. **Emotional aspect:** Fear and frustration.)

Medieval Mashup Book 2 focuses on the emotional aspects of a child who uses a wheelchair and has low self-esteem. The main character, of course, is Leigh who has concerns regarding dressing up for his school's Medieval Fair. His choice of a costume is a knight in shining armour. This may prove too difficult and heavy for him to wear while seated in his wheelchair. However, his biggest worry is that he will appear foolish in front of his classmates. Leigh strives to blend in with his peers while still appearing strong and brave like his chosen character – sentiment that resonates with many children. (**Problem:** Difficult to lift heavy objects. **Emotional aspect:** Anxiety and low self-esteem.)

Book 3 will be published later this year (2022). Title to be confirmed. A nature study assignment at school makes Leigh anxious as he attempts to keep up with his more able-bodied classmates. After discovering an easier way to complete the exercise, he embraces nature rather than attempting to climb a tree with his friends. By doing things differently and in a more appropriate and comfortable manner, Leigh is able to overcome his anxiety. This allows him to feel part of the team without compromising his goals. (**Problem:** Unable to reach things high up. **Emotional aspect:** Lack of self-confidence and isolation.)

The *Squishy Sand* book tackles some very practical problems for wheelchair users that perhaps others might not consider or recognise as difficult. Can you share your inspiration for the sandy setting?

The 'Squishy Sand' theme in particular reflects the difficulties my late husband and I had accessing public and private buildings, parks, public transportation, and yes, the beach with Leigh. Getting to a particular area would require lifting or dragging a heavy wheelchair up stairways and/or across gravel or sand. As Leigh grew and the wheelchairs became heavier, this was no longer feasible.

As a child, Leigh enjoyed playing in the sand, and a beach theme captures the most problematic fears wheelchair users have so it was the ideal setting.

How does it feel to win the Literary Titan Gold Award for *Squishy Sand?*

It has been a great honour and privilege to receive so many positive accolades for *Squishy Sand* since its release in 2020. The fact that this was my first children's picture book made me unsure of how the book would be received. However, as a result of so many positive reviews, I realised that the message was being heard and that more children's books about disabled protagonists were needed.

What's next? Can you tell us about Leigh's next adventure?

I also self-published a chapter book for the older reader, *The Mysterious Pool*, a Leigh and Friends Adventure story that features the same characters. It has also received many positive reviews and a number of awards, including the Bronze Medal for Pre-teen Fiction in Moonbeam's 2021 Children's Book Awards. Currently there are plans for a sequel to *The Mysterious Pool.*

Why is it important for educators to include books that promote self-confidence, self-esteem, friendship, kindness, resilience, and adaptability on their classroom bookshelves?

Teachers should include books on these matters in the curriculum in order to empower children to feel good about themselves and their peers. Every parent wishes for their children to grow up to be healthy, confident, caring, and loving individuals.

What does the word 'inclusion' mean to you?

As much as I agree with the concept of inclusion, it is disappointing that we are still in need of a word or phrase to describe equality in 2022.

Leigh attended school during the late 1980s and early 1990s when the term 'integration' was commonly used, which always made me cringe. Later, the term 'mainstream' was adopted, which at the time sounded more appropriate. Currently, the term 'inclusion' is popular, which implies participation or incorporation. However, based on my experience, the term remains synonymous with integration.

Charlene, where can we purchase your books?

My books can be purchased on Amazon, through my website https://www.charlenemciverauthor.com/ or through all good bookstores.

Where is your favourite place to write?

At home – close to the happy memories.

Do you write longhand, on a computer, or another way?

Always on my PC – with a note pad and pen handy.

How long does it take you to write a book?

It took two years to write and compile Leigh's biography released in 2018. Each picture book took nearly a year due to the artwork and the illustrator's schedule.

Do you ever get 'writer's block'?

Yes of course. I just pack up and do something else for a while until I get inspired again.

What is the name of the last book you read?

I enjoy a wide range of books, from mystery adventures to thrillers and scary stories. It was Stephen King's classic, *Misery.*

Do you have a favourite author?

The children's classics, Enid Blyton, Hans Christian Andersen, and E.B. White (*Charlotte's Web* was a favourite of my boys). I don't have a preference for any one particular author as my taste varies. However, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* is very memorable.

What is your all-time favourite book to read?

Too many to mention.

