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## FEATURE STORY — ALUMNI

## Realizing A Dream

by Jaymes Pyne

Ashley Hankamp and Bobbijo Zoerhof showing off their first Children's Book *Me and My Cowgirl*

A chance encounter at Grand Valley State University turned out to be a windfall for Bobbijo Zoerhof and Ashley Hankamp, both former College of Education students at the university. The first product of their partnership has come in the form of a 32-page, fully illustrated children's book entitled: *Me and My Cowgirl*.

The two met serendipitously in the winter of 2005, when they were grouped together in an undergraduate math class.

Bobbijo, a social studies major, had penned and copyrighted several books previous to their meeting, and was looking for someone to create illustrations to follow her stories. Two years earlier she had attempted to complete a Christmas book, but the illustrations by another artist were never completed. Because of this setback, Bobbijo was relieved to find a talented artist just one row away in college.

Ashley, an art student with a minor in education, aspired to illustrate children's books someday. "As a child the first books that I always picked up were books that

intrigued me either visually or personally, and I believe this is also what children do today."

As the two conversed in their math group, Bobbijo noticed the beautifully drawn artwork of Ashley's. It did not take long for both to discover their complimentary passions in children's literature. In the following weeks, the two collaborated on possible layouts, and in the summer of 2005 Ashley began taking photographs of scenes on the horse farm that would become the inspiration for the book's illustrations.

The storyline for *Me and My Cowgirl* was inspired by the true relationship between Bobbijo's 9 year old daughter and her horse, Cowgirl.

"I was inspired by [my daughter Josie's] love for horses and the love she found in an untamed horse that no one could ride," Bobbijo recalls. "After many grueling hours spent with Cowgirl, Josie and Cowgirl became a team." The two would go on to win the overall 2005 Championship in the Michigan Affiliate Foundation Quarter Horse Registry.

Ashley was drawn to the project for personal reasons as well. Growing up in rural

Onekama, Michigan, Ashley was inspired by the lifestyle of her family's fruit tree and honey bee farms. "I often chose books [to read] that were about farm life..., which is why this book was such a perfect fit for me."

The story highlights the remunerative qualities of a good work ethic. "I feel sometimes kids are spoon fed and need to be reminded that good things come to those who work hard," Bobbijo explains. "I want to send a message of working hard to the kids I teach." She strives to translate this theme to all areas of her students' lives, especially schoolwork.

In addition to the themes of perseverance and camaraderie, Bobbijo wanted to send another message through the story as well. "I also wrote this book to bring culture of a different kind to the classroom, and expose underprivileged children to the rodeo life." Growing up in the urban atmosphere of Grand Rapids herself and having no contact with farm life, horses, or rodeos, Bobbijo felt it was important for her students to be familiar with environments other than their own. "This book explains how to take care of horses, what events are in rodeos, and that close relationships come from participating in rodeos."

New Branches School in Grand Rapids, where Bobbijo teaches, uses the book during "Friendship Week."

As an art teacher, Ashley uses the book for both artistic and motivational purposes. Identifying self-pride as a deficiency in many students, she teaches from the story to identify taking ownership for hard work in fulfilling personal goals. And of course, there is the strictly artistic aspect she can work with. "I use [the book] to display drawing, painting, and watercolor techniques."

The book has another Grand Valley link as well. Upon completing the illustrations, the two met another GVSU graduate, Jamie Lohrberg, who used the GVSU Art Center to do the layout for the book. It was then printed through a local print shop, Fischer Graphics. Upon stocking *Me and My Cowgirl* at Millbrook Tack & Trailer in Cutlerville, they sold 200 copies in just three weeks.

Bobbijo is ecstatic about the results. "We are very proud of our book. It turned out absolutely beautiful, thanks to Ashley." Bobbijo is currently working on selling the story to horse stores in the South.

"My students think that the fact that I have illustrated a children's book is the neatest thing," Ashley quips.

Bobbijo and Ashley still keep in contact, and are currently working on a second project for the near future, entitled *Love You Forever*. It is themed around 4-H, and is a sequel to the first book. ♡

Information on *Me and My Cowgirl* and the creators is available at <http://thebarnseries.tripod.com>.