

# Greenwich Schools coach's book celebrates dancing, diversity

BY JO KROEKER



Tyler Sizemore / Hearst Connecticut Media

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GREENWICH — With her first picture book, "Let's Dance," which celebrates dances and the diverse children who love to move, author Valerie Bolling hopes kids can look at the pictures and say, "There I am."

Bolling is a Greenwich Public Schools instructional coach and Stamford resident. Her first book, illustrated by Argentinian artist Maine Diaz and published by Boyds Mills Press, is hot off the presses and will go on sale on March 3.

Bolling has always loved to write and dance. She remembers learning how to write from her grandmother when she was 4 years old, and writing short poems in her marble composition book in first grade. In college, Bolling submitted pieces of writing to literary magazines, and during those years, she also learned the kuku, a dance from Guinea in western Africa.

By watching people dance at weddings and her nieces move their bodies to music, Bolling realized that everyone — regardless of age or ability or personality — has the instinct to dance. She calls dancing a universal language.

“We all dance, and we have different accents based on our race or ability,” Bolling said.

Her experiences became the concept for “Let’s Dance.” The book has only 60 words, but Bolling chose each word with care and precision, and each phrase rhymes.

Bolling wanted her book’s characters to be diverse in terms of race, ability and gender, and her editor took her request a step further when working with the illustrator. The drawings show children from around the world performing global dances that match the wording.

Kids tap their feet, and one blind boy taps his cane. Hispanic children dance the flamenco. Little Chinese girls glide in long-sleeve folk costumes. Indian girls in traditional saris whirl about in the kathak. White, Black and Asian American kids who are skinny and fat, typically able and in wheelchairs, disco dance and break dance. And Cuban kids perform the cha-cha.

“I wanted kids, particularly kids who are marginalized and underrepresented, to see themselves in this book,” Bolling said.

She is especially proud of the ballet illustrations. Most imagine slender white girls in pink tutus when they think of ballet, but her ballet dancers include a girl

wearing a hijab, a black girl — who reminds Bolling of Misty Copeland — and a person who does not look like a stereotypical boy or girl, and wears a blue tutu.

She told her editor, “I want there to be a lot of brown kids in this book.”

As an African-American, seeing characters who look like her is personal. “I loved being read to and reading books, but I never got to see books where kids look like me,” she said.

Bolling debuted her book Wednesday with a reading at Western Middle School, which was a homecoming of sorts, since she taught English there for five years. She has spent the last 10 years in the district as an instructional coach, working with teachers in grades 6 through 12 — new and seasoned — and helping them improve their craft and student outcomes. Before teaching at Western, she had taught at Hamilton Avenue School for 12 years.

Despite a lifelong love of reading and writing, Bolling only recently began pursuing writing stories for publication. In 2016, she began writing little stories with her nieces as the protagonists. That year, she sat down with her husband, Sheldon, to write personal goals for 2017, including a vague goal to “look into picture books.”

That year, she took a course at Westport Writers’ Workshop, and she started querying stories as soon as the course ended. She first pitched “Let’s Dance” on Twitter in January 2018, and in July, she got a call from an interested publisher.

Bolling has concepts for more than a dozen more picture books, including three that rhyme and one that tells a nonfictional narrative story. One is based on the experience of a good friend’s autistic son as he tried to make friends with neurotypical children, and made his first friend in second grade. The other follows a girl and the loss she feels because her mother is incarcerated.

“To me, these are topics I’ve always been interested in,” Bolling said. “I want children’s voices to be seen and heard.”

Social media in many ways changed the landscape for authors looking to get published in the 21st century. Through Facebook and Twitter, Bolling found her voice and her platform.

She joined Facebook groups dedicated to writing, and pitched “Let’s Dance” on Twitter, where aspiring authors often pitch their ideas.

Editors and publishers periodically check these channels and “favorite” pitches that interest them. Aspiring authors can then send one-page letters summarizing their books to literary agents, hoping the agents will request a manuscript.

Twitter authors indicate book pitches with hashtags such as: #writingcommunity, #amwriting, #amquerying, #pbpitch (picture book pitch) and #divpit (diversity pitch). Some agents and publishers want diverse kids represented or pitches by diverse authors, Bolling said, which Twitter users denote with the hash-tag, #ownvoices.

“To me, there are so many stories to be told, and there is always space for a diverse story,” Bolling said. “We need to be mindful of quality books that kids can read and say, ‘There I am.’” [jo.kroeker@hearstmediact.com](mailto:jo.kroeker@hearstmediact.com)