

New children's book by Midpeninsula native encourages youth activism

By Kate Bradshaw

Marissa McGee, a former elementary school teacher, was out shopping for shampoo one day when she saw something that bothered her. The experience would later spur her to craft a children's book about it.

At this chain retailer, Black hair care products were kept locked up on the shelf.

It was wash day, and a simple errand to pick up shampoo now required her to flag down an employee for help. Curious, she said she noticed that it was only the Black hair care products that were kept under lock and key.

When she found an employee and asked why the Black hair care products were locked up, she said she was told that the products were "not just products for your people."

Yet the faces on the packaging were of Black individuals, she noticed.

She went to several other of the store's locations around the Bay Area, then one in Washington D.C., and saw the same thing. Only the hair care products traditionally used for Black hair — including those labeled for "multicultural," "textured" or "natural" hair — were kept locked up. Not every location did this, but a majority of the ones she visited did, she said in a blog post.

At the Washington, D.C., retailer, a Black woman and her daughter were also looking for products for their hair and overheard her conversation with a sales associate and said they'd noticed the same thing.

"To me, that was a turning point," she said.

As a woman in her 30s, she said, she had her own feelings about the situation, but she began to think about what was going through the young girl's mind to see products for her hair type kept locked up.

She reached out to the retailer's corporate headquarters and, in February 2020, wrote a blog post about her research.

She explained in her blog that part of why the practice felt discriminatory was in what it implied.

"By locking up these specific products, the implication is that people who purchase these products steal. My hunch is that African American people buy these specific products at a higher rate than people from other backgrounds. Therefore, locking up these products



Courtesy Corey McGee

Marissa McGee, who grew up in East Palo Alto and attended Stanford before becoming an educator, has written a children's book called "Free the Curls" inspired by a personal experience.

perpetuates stereotypes about a specific group of people," she wrote.

In addition, it can be uncomfortable as a shopper to be watched by the store employee while selecting the desired product, and can create pressure to rush to pick an item, she said in her blog.

The retailer that McGee wrote about is one of several that have recently announced their plans to discontinue the practice. Walmart, CVS and Walgreens all announced in June 2020 that they planned to stop locking up the products, during a time when many companies were facing heightened scrutiny over racial bias.

McGee said she kept thinking about the little girl she'd met at the D.C. retailer and began to think about exploring the issue through a young girl's perspective in a children's book.

As the daughter of a teacher in the Ravenswood City School District and a teacher herself, McGee has read her share of children's books, she said.

She grew up in East Palo Alto, where she attended school in the Ravenswood City School District and at Eastside College Preparatory School in East Palo Alto. She went on to attend Stanford University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in sociology and a master's degree in elementary education before becoming a teacher in Washington, D.C., where she taught kindergarten through second grade. She's now an anti-bias educator, instructional coach and lecturer based in Oakland.

Even as a kid, she'd loved writing, she said, sharing that her mom recently rediscovered some old poetry she'd written, as well as a script she'd once

written for her then-favorite TV show, "Sister, Sister."

When she sat down to write this book, she said she got stuck a few times as she processed her own hurt and frustration with the retailers.

"To me, this was a practice rooted in discrimination," she said.

What emerged was a narrative about an inquisitive 6-year-old girl named Maliyah who goes with her mom to buy shampoo when they notice that products for her hair type are locked up. Readers will have to get a copy to learn what happens next: "Maliyah and her mom must decide — buy the products or take a stand?" the book's website says.

McGee said she had completed the story and was letting the manuscript sit for a few months when she met with one of her high school mentors, who encouraged her to share the manuscript with her and another author.

"After that, the ball started rolling," McGee said. After sharing it with a few friends



Illustration by Shiela Alejandro

The Kickstarter-funded children's book "Free the Curls" by Marissa McGee features as its protagonist an inquisitive 6-year-old named Maliyah who loves to read books and watch cartoons.

who were supportive, she said that she began to think, "Maybe I do have something here."

Through one of the social media groups she belongs to, she found an illustrator.

The illustrator's first sketch of the main character, she said, brought tears to her eyes. "I was like, this is her. This is the character in my head."

McGee has used the crowdfunding website Kickstarter to self-publish the book, and is planning to have copies of the books prepared by January.

One of the promotions she set up for Kickstarter supporters asks people to buy a book for themselves and support the donation of a classroom copy to a school in East Palo Alto or Oakland.

So far, there are about 150 books earmarked for students in East Palo Alto and a total of about 900 copies pre-ordered, she said. She plans to spend time in East Palo Alto classrooms doing virtual and in-person visits, leading lessons and conversations with students about the book.

'I will be forever indebted to East Palo Alto. It made me the person that I am.'

MARISSA MCGEE

McGee launched the Kickstarter campaign on her birthday this year and so far has raised more than \$13,000 in support of the book and her mission to bring it to the community, she said.

"I think the Kickstarter was successful because we're finally acknowledging the elephant in the room and finally starting to have courageous conversations about racism," she said.

She said she's motivated to give back to the community of East Palo Alto in particular because the community shaped her.

"I will be forever indebted to East Palo Alto," she said. "It made me the person that I am."

"It's such a vibrant community of people who are doing amazing things ... so I just want to give back to a community that's given so much to me," she said.

Go to freethecurlsftc.com for more information. ■

Email Staff Writer Kate Bradshaw at kbradshaw@almanacnews.com.