

Published October 4th, 2017

Cancer-fighting superhero pens empowering book for children

By Kara Navolio

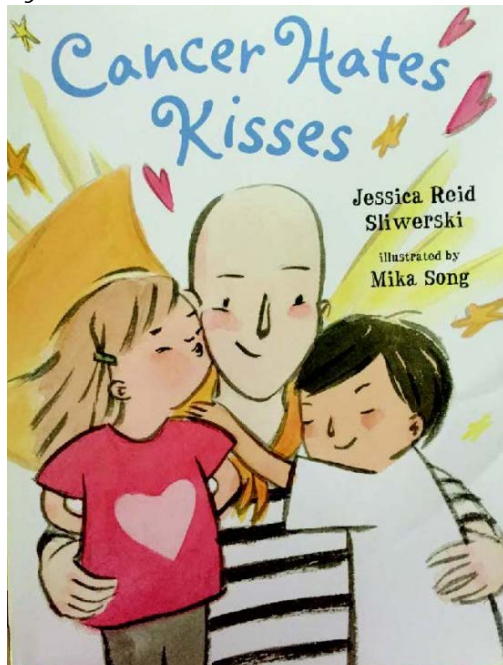


Photo provided

When Jessica Reid Sliwerski discovered the lump in her breast, her baby girl was only 3 months old. The 2000 Acalanes graduate was only 30.

"Just two weeks before I discovered the lump I remember thinking, 'My life is perfect: My career is going great, I love being a mom, I can't believe how lucky I am,'" Sliwerski said.

Her life didn't take the path she had planned, but now she sees her path differently. "After my diagnosis and treatment I knew I would do something to help other cancer survivors, I just didn't know what yet." Her ideas began to take shape in the form of a book for children. "I wanted to write a book that would help women feel empowered, that would remind them that they are brave, beautiful warriors, a book that would remind those who love them that they are a part of the healing process. Love and joy are essential to healing."

"Cancer Hates Kisses" (Dial Books 2017) was released in September. The picture book, illustrated by Mika Song, is geared for children 5-8 but will appeal to children of all ages. It starts out: "Mama is a cancer-fighting superhero." It demystifies cancer and puts it in terms kids can understand. She doesn't shy away from terms like chemo, radiation, and surgery. The book helps kids feel empowered to help mom or dad fight. Sliwerski

adds, "Children give us the courage to keep fighting; their kisses and hugs keep us going."

Her prior work as an elementary school teacher, a principal, and a literacy advocate all came together with her joys of writing and motherhood to create this book for children, which also speaks to adults. Mitch Center, a reader of an advance copy stated, "Thanks to Jessica for writing this beautiful book and for continuing to share the power of her story. I am wiping away tears. I lost my dad to cancer at 15 - a cancer that would probably be treated now but that he could not overcome in 1989. So kids with parents fighting cancer is real and raw for me, as it is for so many. I love that she wrote this, and that she shared this, and most importantly, that she kicked cancer's butt and that her daughter has been her inspiration and fighting partner."

Laura Maestrelli, a cancer survivor from Piedmont, added, "The first time I read (this book), it had me in tears with its combination of empowerment and honesty - it somehow perfectly captures what my husband and I wanted to say to our 4-and-a-half-year-old son when we talked to him about my cancer. And on behalf of all of us with young children who are fighting this disease, we thank Jessica for writing this beautiful book."

Sliwerski was diagnosed in 2014 with stage 1A breast cancer that was still small but very aggressive, a rare form called pregnancy associated breast cancer and affecting women in their 30s during pregnancy or within one year post-partum. The pea-sized lump was almost dismissed by her obstetrician at her 3-month post-partum checkup. But Sliwerski remembered a video she had seen at Acalanes High School about breast self-examination. The message from the film nagged at her: If you feel anything unusual you should not ignore it. "That video may have saved my life," she reflected.

After her treatment, Sliwerski and her husband, who had been living in New York, made the decision to come back to the Bay Area to be closer to her family in the Lamorinda area and to have more organic food choices.

Parents have asked her for another book, one that can help children who are fighting cancer themselves. Since the market for such a book is small, she is planning to self-publish this second book. She is in the process of setting up a Kickstarter campaign to raise the money needed for illustrations, printing and marketing. For updates, visit her website: www.msreidreads.com.

"I want to write books that are going to help people, that will change the world," stated Sliwerski. That's what superheros do. "Cancer Hates Kisses" can be ordered from local book stores or purchased on Amazon.

Sliwerski will be reading her book at 3 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 14 at Diesel Books in Rockridge.

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