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Zane, Story Book Dog to the Rescue

Zane is a celebrity in Collingswood. People regularly recognize him on the street after his modeling debut in the Rescue Pets of Collingswood calendar, but not everyone knows that the fluffy, outgoing, confident pup was once a timid, matted huddle in a cage at the Almost Home Animal Shelter.

Luckily, Zane's dad, James Donio, was inspired to share his story in a children's book published this fall called *Zane to the Rescue*. It shares the sweet and true story of how Donio and his husband Larry rescued Zane from homelessness and Zane rescued the couple after they lost their beloved dog, Zachary, to cancer.

The idea for *Zane to the Rescue* came to Donio one day while he was in the shower. "I thought, 'Wow, the story of our dog is inspirational and heart-warming,'" he explained. "In the beginning, Zane is kind of like a caterpillar in a cocoon. No one wants him. The shelter named him Matt because he was so matted. He had a lot of separation anxiety, even after we took him home. The book conveys that he needed love to become a butterfly. As we show him love, he is accepted by the community, becomes an emotional support animal and flies on an airplane and wins a calendar contest, which makes him a local celebrity that people recognize around town."

During the writing process, Donio said he stopped in Barnes and Noble in Cherry Hill and asked if there were any children's book that depicted a family with two moms or two dads but they could not find any. "That was more fuel for me. It's not the primary message, but it's a casual message. It's just a family. Children with families like ours can pick up the book and think, 'Wow! I have two dads. This is just like my family,'" he explained. "It felt really important."

One of Donio's close friends just happens to be children's book author and illustrator Mark C. Collins, so he contacted him to see what he thought of the idea and see if he would be willing to help with the process. Collins jumped at the chance.

Donio gave Collins dozens of personal photographs, which were then used to create the story's illustrations. "Mark was sensitive that this is our life and sensitive in how everything is depicted," Donio explained. "We wanted it to feel real, but still focused on the fact that it was for children, so he took some poetic license to make the illustra-



SUPERHERO SQUAD: Zane to the Rescue author James Donio, center, holds the book's title character with his husband, Larry, left, and the book's illustrator, Mark C. Collins, at a book signing at The Principled Pet in Collingswood earlier this month.

tions pop for kids."

For children who might be adopted or facing challenges, Zane is a superhero to whom they can relate. "That's the concept of the cover – it has a superhero message to it," he said.

The book also deals with some challenging topics in gentle ways. In the story, Jim and Larry's beloved pup Zachary dies; however, Donio said he spent a lot of time figuring out how that could be depicted in a way that would not be upsetting to children.

The two pages dealing with Zachary's loss show Jim and Larry sad as they look over Zachary's empty bed, but opposite that illustration is a cartoon of Zachary with angel wings and a big smile.

"We went back and forth several times until we got it right," said Donio. "It's not off-putting. You see he is gone, but he is an angel. It's very touching and sensitive."

"[Writing a book] has been a completely new experience. People have really responded in a really positive way. They are loving the messages in the book," he continued.

The Retrospect interviewed a couple of children's book experts to get their opinions on the book. Nine-year-old Evie said, "It is an important story because it shows that if something happens to a pet you love, you don't have to be sad about it for your whole

life. You could adopt another dog that you can love just as much. The book is easy to read. I think other kids will like this book because it's about a dog and everyone loves dogs." Five-year-old Rose likes that Zane gets to be in the calendar and that he is a superhero.

"Writing has always been an important part of my life and writing a book was always on the checklist of things I wanted to do at some point," Donio said. As a young aspiring writer, Donio received his degree in journalism from Temple University, but his life took some interesting twists and he ended up in the music industry for the last three-plus decades.

Donio started working for the Music Business Association in 1988 and became president in 2003. As head of the nonprofit, Donio helped guide the industry to its current digital model, even though that meant many sometimes painful changes. "Music had to transform," he said. In September, he concluded his full-time service to the Music Business Association, though he remains with the nonprofit in an advisory capacity.

As the music industry changed, many of Donio's counterparts had to adjust as well, which opened up surprising doors for Donio. At a conference several years ago, Donio ran into a former col-

league and learned he had taken a job at Monmouth University. The colleague asked if Donio was interested in teaching a course. He was, but he spent a few noncommittal months going back and forth, wondering if he would like it, if he'd even be good at it or have the time.

"Larry got tired of hearing me," Donio joked. He encouraged Donio to try it because then he would know the answers to all his questions instead of wondering for the rest of his life.

"Many nights that first semester I wondered what I was thinking. I had to build the course from scratch. It was a lot of front-end work," he said. Surprisingly, Donio found that he loved teaching. "It never occurred to me that I could change at that point. I wound up inspired. I became a better human and it opened up a lot of other aspects for me as a speaker."

Donio, who is a sought-after public speaker, said that his happy place is on stage with a microphone, but teaching was different. "I was inspired. I still do what I do, but it changed me." He is now finishing up his sixth year at Monmouth.

But teaching had one more surprise in store for him. Last year, Donio started teaching at Temple University, his alma mater. "It's a surreal experience

with Bethany Mitros



being back at Temple where I started college at 16. I'm in the same rooms and same buildings. If you told me back then that in 46 years, I would be back teaching, I would have thought there was no way that was true. I could not have envisioned this and even if I could have, it would not have been with the music business. I had no thoughts of that at all, but now I'm back and it's like a dream. I'm having such a good time. It's not something I ever thought about, but I'm getting to have these experiences in my 60s and it's wonderful. I'm very fortunate."

The classes he teaches are unique, not only because he brings his 30-plus years of experience, but because they are designed for students who are not looking to be involved in performance or technical aspects. His courses instead introduce students to the marketing, publicity and publishing aspects.

In addition to working for Music Biz, Donio has been involved in many aspects of the Mummies for decades, designing costumes and choreography and speaking at the Mummies museum, but he also provided color commentary for the television broadcast for a few years in the 1980s.

"Every now and then, when it's late at night, I'll put YouTube on and speak into my remote to see my 20-year-old self [commenting on the parade] on a 55-inch TV. It's disconcerting," he joked.

It would take a book to share the breadth of Donio's experience working in the music industry and that's exactly what he plans to do at some point. For now, the focus is on *Zane to the Rescue*. "I want to get the book out there and the message out there," he said.

Zane to the Rescue can be purchased directly from Donio by emailing him at Sir-James2505@yahoo.com or on Amazon. A portion of the proceeds from the book will be donated to the Almost Home Animal Shelter where James and Larry adopted Zane.

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