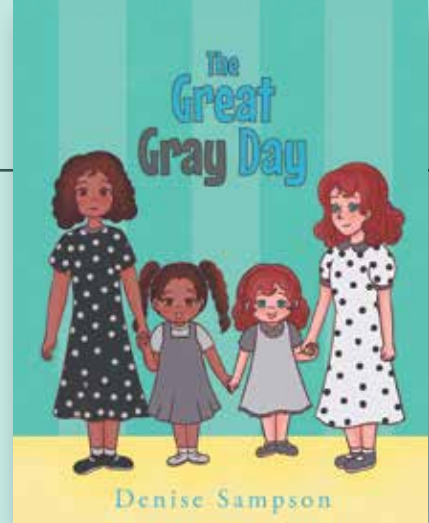


CNR Alumna and Children’s Author Speaks to the Power of Diverse Friendships



Denise Sampson CNR SNR '90, never set out to become a published children’s author. But she felt the pull to send a message of friendship and acceptance out into the world.

Her first book, “The Great Gray Day,” which was published in 2021 by Fulton Books, tells the story of two girls—one Black, one white—who meet because of their shared



The story was inspired by Sampson’s granddaughter, Kirsten, who was very accepting of all kinds of children from a young age. In preschool, Kirsten became friends with a little girl from a different race and culture. Despite their differences, they developed a strong bond and are still friends today at age 21. “You have to love everybody, Grandma,” Kirsten told Sampson when she was preschool age. “You have to talk very nicely to them, and they’ll be nice to you too.”

A teacher for over 20 years—first in Head Start and now in a daycare in East Harlem, New York City—Sampson has always made up stories for her students. While teaching remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, Sampson started writing them down, and as the Black Lives Matter movement gained steam in 2020, she realized that it was the perfect time to get “The Great Gray Day” out into the world.

love of the color gray. They discover that they have a lot in common despite their outward differences, and they become lifelong friends.

“My book is about two friends of different races who find a connection, and I hoped that’s what would happen in the world,” Sampson explained. “I hoped that parents would read this book to their kids and realize that no matter what race you are, you may find out that you have something in common with someone completely different. You may find out that you can be the best of friends.”

Becoming a published children’s author was never in Sampson’s plans. After growing up in the projects in the South Bronx, she had her first child at age 17. “I was determined that my kids were going to respect people and the community. I was determined that no one would have anything negative to say about them or me because I was a young parent,” Sampson said.

College was not even on her radar until she had four more children—and was raising them as a single mother. She applied and enrolled in The College of New Rochelle (CNR) at the suggestion of a friend, not expecting to make it past the first semester.

However, as soon as she attended her first classes, everything changed, “When I got to CNR, oh my gosh, it was like a whole new world opened up to me. I could not believe some of the things that I learned. Professor P.J. Gibson gave me a whole new outlook on how to look at the news. I still think about what she taught me. And I admired Dr. Gillespie so much. I made sure to do my work so he would not think negatively of me. And that was my experience with one of my psychology professors, Dr. Hill, as well.”

Her time at CNR was deeply inspiring and set her on a different path, “It was a pleasure to attend CNR. To be around other women

who were older like me. To see that we could learn new things. I came out of the projects—I lived there growing up, and I lived there after I had my children. So I didn’t have any experience with college. CNR was a whole new world, and I really appreciated it.”

After earning a bachelor’s degree in psychology from CNR, Sampson went on to earn a master’s degree in education from the City College of New York and start a career in early childhood education.

Along the way, the Girl Scouts was another positive force for Sampson and her family. Over the course of Sampson’s more than 30 years volunteering as a Girl Scout leader, many family members—including her two daughters, two of her granddaughters, several nieces and their daughters and her cousins’ daughters—have all come through her troop. Now, some of her first Girl Scouts are grown and returning to the community to lead their own troops—inspired, no doubt, by Sampson’s leadership and tireless passion for teaching children.

As Sampson thrived, so did her family. She has seven children and seven grandchildren who are all on their own paths to success. For example, one of her sons, Jerrell Stephens ’08, is a proud Mercy graduate who now works for FedEx, and one of her daughters, LaToya Stephens, is an assistant district attorney with the Bronx District Attorney’s Office.

Despite everything on her plate—a full-time job, a Girl Scout troop, a large family—Sampson is already at work on her next children’s book: a story about a tall elephant and a short giraffe who become friends despite their very different sizes. The universal message about the power of friendship wins again.