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Q & A with Phil Bildner

By Patricia J. Murphy | Aug 24, 2020

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Phil Bildner is the creator of the bestselling Slugger series, the acclaimed Rip and Red series, and oodles of award-winning picture books including The Marvelous Cornelius, Martina and Chrissie, and Twenty-One Elephants to name a few. In his latest middle grade novel, A High Five for Glenn Burke (FSG, 2020), he rallies for queer kids, acceptance, and empathy. Bildner spoke with PW about how he went from teaching kids to writing books for them, and how he thinks his latest novel can and will save lives.



Presenting at a school visit in Southlake, Tex.

Before becoming a children's author, you practiced law, and then taught for 11 years in New York City schools. Can you talk about how you pivoted from the courtroom to the classroom?

I studied law at the New York University School of Law [J.D., 1993] passed the bar in both New York and New Jersey, and practiced law at a large Manhattan law firm for a year—but law just wasn't for me. I had not followed my first passion—working with kids. So I wrote a letter to the Chancellor of the New York City Public Schools and he actually called me back! He let me know what I needed to teach, and I told him I was willing to work anywhere.

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After some coursework, I started teaching fifth and sixth graders in the South Bronx full-time, and received my masters in Early Childhood and Elementary Education at Long Island University.

What were some of the highlights or most memorable moments for you in the classroom?

Where do I begin? I developed an ELA curriculum that integrated song lyrics, music, and poetry. We wrote letters to some of the musicians and bands whose songs we were

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using, and some of them actually visited our classroom [including Blues Traveler, Dave Matthews, Barenaked Ladies, Lauryn Hill, and Wyclef Jean]. I also created an HIV/AIDS awareness curriculum there. And, then when I taught English and American History to sixth through eighth graders at P.S. 333, the Manhattan School for Children in Upper Manhattan, I once again integrated music and the arts into the curriculum, and partnered with the Lincoln Institute Center, Broadway shows [Wicked, The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee] and Off-Broadway shows, [Def Poetry Jam, De La Guarda], cultural institutions, and museums. I used N.Y.C. as another classroom.

They say, "Once a teacher always a teacher." Are you still teaching kids, doing author visits, and reaching out to your readers during this pandemic?

I left the classroom in 2005 when I had several books under contract, and wanted to see if I could try writing full-time—but I've never really left teaching. Following Hurricane Katrina, several former students asked me to take teen volunteers to New Orleans to help with the clean-up and recovery. I ended up chaperoning many groups and started the NOLA Tree, a nonprofit youth service organization.

Since I left the classroom and up until the coronavirus, I visited roughly 50–60 schools a year doing author visits. And now, like many others, I'm visiting with students virtually. As an author visiting schools, it's a different type of teaching. You're not developing close relationships with students like when you're in your own classroom, but you do reach them in different ways.

Every time I get up in front of a library or auditorium full of kids, I'm mindful that it could be the first and only time they have ever met and interacted with a real-life author. So I feel it's my duty—my moral responsibility—to motivate and inspire them. I know many other authors who feel the same way, and it's one of the reasons I started the Author Village back in 2017.

When did you decide to transition from teaching kids to writing for them? How did you begin?

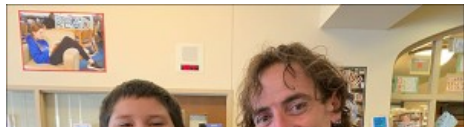
Like in many classrooms, we did writers' workshops. Often times, when my students were writing, I was writing, too. I wanted to model the behavior because many of them weren't around adults who wrote. Then when we shared what we wrote, I would share my work, too. So together we developed our writing skills, and inspired each other.

Can you tell us more about your latest book, and why it's your most personal project to date?

A High Five for Glenn Burke is about a kid, Silas Wade, who loves baseball, karaoke, the movie *The Sandlot*, and is realizing that he is gay. He decides to do a report on Glenn Burke, a major league player, the inventor of the high five who was pretty much erased from history because he was gay.

I wrote *High Five for Glenn Burke* because it's the book that I needed to read in middle school. It would have provided me with hope and the knowledge that I wasn't alone in the world. That there were other kids in the world like me who also loved to play sports.

But, the book is not just for queer kids. It's for all kids. Most importantly, it's a book that provides a lens into the world of some of their classmates and teammates who may be discovering and struggling with who he/she/they are. It's a book about accepting others, respecting one another's humanity, and living one's authentic life.



Learning robotics from Kameron Wright from the Episcopal Collegiate School in Little Rock, Ark. Kameron is recognized in the acknowledgements of *A High Five for Glenn Burke*.

***High Five for Glenn Burke* has received praise from critics and teachers alike. But you also had a school visit canceled**

Elizabeth Bluemle To Ope, Or Not to Ope, That Is the Question

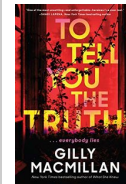
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Bidner meets a middle school reader during a Seattle school visit while on tour for *A High Five for Glenn Burke*.

because of the novel's LGBTQ themes. Can you tell us your reactions regarding these responses to your novel?

The response to the book has been overwhelmingly positive and has exceeded all of my expectations. It was even featured in the *New York Times*! And, as a teacher, I'm also thrilled that teachers are sharing the book, using it as a read-aloud, and allowing kids to learn about Glenn Burke, and to help give him the "high five" he deserves.

Unfortunately, a school in New Jersey did disinvite me once they learned the book had LGBTQ themes. It was a few loud parents—which is so often the case—who objected. Sadly, I know it won't be the last time it

happens, and each time it does, it's crushing.

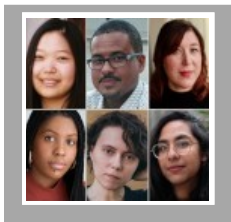
At that particular school, I wanted to tell the kids that when they got to intermediate school or middle school to look for the book. These kids are trying to figure out who they are and where they fit in, and they need to know a book like this exists. But because of their own school, there's less of a likelihood that they will. It's wrong.

Tragically, when you erase LGBTQ books and eliminate access to them, you erase these kids and their narratives. And, when you do this, lives are at stake. These kids need to know that their stories and their lives, matter. Teachers and librarians need to be caretakers—not gatekeepers—to create a safe space for all kids.

Do you have any advice for teachers and librarians who might like to write for kids?

Yes, I would tell them to write what they care about—what they are truly passionate about. And to do the work: read, write, master the craft, and learn how it all works. Join groups like the Society of Children's Writers and Illustrators and check out the Highlights Foundation. Then, write your own personal stories.

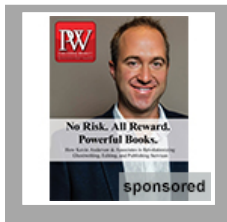
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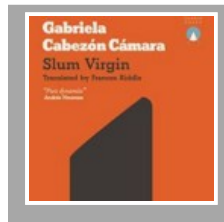
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