

Piedmont couple writes, illustrates children's book, *Ripley's World*

By Allyson Aleksey

Long-time Piedmont residents Connie and Mark Herrick have announced the release of their newly published children's book, *Ripley's World*, available for purchase starting November 15. Written by Connie and illustrated by Mark, the story is about the adventures of their late rescue-cat Ripley and her many neighborhood animal friends.

It features titular character Ripley, a feline who the author describes as a "tiny, feisty, funny, calico kitty with a big imagination." Ripley's story is bolstered by her many real-life friends in Piedmont: raccoon twins, baby possums, and a squirrel that plays tag. Also featured are Ripley's German Shepard sisters, Kapo and Pele, and Hariel, the upside-down goldfish.

The couple adopted Ripley from East Bay SPCA – the runt of a litter of kittens abandoned at a construction site in Oakland.

"When we took her home, she fit right in the palm of my hand, this little teeny thing," Connie said. "Well, she ended up ruling the house and living for a good 18 years. She was a pistol - what she didn't have physically, she absolutely made up in her energetics. She was tough!"

Both Connie and Mark affectionately refer to all their animals as "family" rather than pets. Connie recalled that Ripley got along well with her German Shepard sisters Pele and the younger Kapo, both search-and-research dogs, but quickly added that "Pele would *always* defer to Ripley."

Even Hariel, their Oranda goldfish, lived upside-down for a decade due to a swim bladder defect. His depiction in the story gives a message of resilience; the couple explained that Hariel is an important character in the book because, like the real-life goldfish, disability does not get in the way of a happy and healthy life.

The story arc of a blended family also plays a big role in *Ripley's World*.

"What constitutes a family? For us, Ripley, Kapo, Pele, and



Authors Connie and Mark Herrick with Kapo.

Hariel - that's our family. They aren't our pets. People can define their families however they want, and families can have very diverse personalities," Connie explained.

The onset of the global pandemic forced many of us to shelter-in-place for the majority of 2020. The couple looked at that time as an opportunity to bring Ripley's adventures to life in a published story, something they had discussed for years prior to its completion.

"Our friends would always ask about Ripley," Connie said. "As these stories came together, about nine years ago, I started writing them down. With the onset of the pandemic, [Mark and I] had worked together to bring them to life in illustration and narrative."

The publishing process took approximately nine months,

explained Connie, who admitted that having a book published "isn't for the faint of heart." The couple chose to self-publish, which allowed them to maintain the integrity of the art and text.

An important factor to consider was the inlay of Mark's watercolor illustrations. Watercolor, the artists' preferred medium, may not maintain its original color integrity and resolution when printed. It is also an unforgiving medium to work with in the editing process, Mark explained.

"The colors you get, the luminosity of the colors, and how it flows and blends really captivates me," he said. "But with watercolor – if you make a mistake, that's it, the painting is done; you can't fix it."

"[Mark and I] edit the pages and illustrations back and forth," Connie said. "We weave the whole thing together, and he's as much a part of the writing process as I am. Part of my job, in addition to writing, was art direction – and I'm very protective of his art and how it's presented."

Although the couple enlisted the help of some friends for proofreading and graphic design, the couple mostly kept the book a secret until it was finished.

"It was hard keeping it a secret," Mark admitted. "It's been super fun to work on something like this with my partner; it was a very organic process."

Now with a second book already in the works, the process begins again, starting with a storyboard and a sketch. *Ripley's Missing Locket* is due to come out in 2022, with *Ripley's Vet Visit* to be released the following year.

The current book is formally available for purchase on November 15. A signed and personalized copy can be purchased at <https://www.ripleyandfriendz.com/shop>. Ripley's Store, which includes personalized items from the children's book, donates 100% of its profits to support animal adoption, wildlife preservation and children's literacy.

Piedmont resident David Flink named CNN Hero

Eye to Eye founder discusses his student mentorship program

By Allyson Aleksey

David Flink, a new Piedmont resident and founder of Eye to Eye, has been named a 2021 CNN Hero for his work in launching and maintaining a unique mentorship program.

The company has grown from a college service project in 1998 to what is now a national program used in 150 schools in 22 states across the country and impacting more than 1,350 students each week. The program pairs college-aged and high school-aged mentors with younger students who experience learning differences that may adversely impact their successes in school. At least 20% of the students have some kind of learning difference, which ranges from Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) to Dyslexia and other processing deficits.

"It is Eye to Eye's belief and has always been our belief, that young people who learn differently are our leaders," Flink said. "The power to lead this movement rests with them. In 1998, when Eye to Eye first began, I was one of those college students with a learning difference and I believed I had a story to share that could help."

"It is our belief that young people who learn differently are our leaders."

– David Flink,
Founder of Eye to Eye

The program grew through word of mouth. When considering the mission behind the organization, Flink said he envisions Eye to Eye as a "world where young people can be seen and heard and valued." Living with dyslexia – a learning disorder that involves difficulty reading and with specific language skills – has shaped his vision for the mentorship program.

"Elementary school was an isolating and difficult experience, to say the least. I did not know other people who had learning disabilities," he explained. "When I think about the vision of Eye to Eye ... it was very much shaped around the idea that I looked for mentors [and] peers who also had learning differences."

The mentorship model targets middle school students following a multi-year study done with UC San Francisco, which shows that most students have trouble with self-identity and self-esteem in those years, especially those with learning differences.

"The study looked at where Eye to Eye existed and found the program protected students from depression and enhanced their sense of community and self-worth. We focus on middle school because we know that that's a ripe opportunity to help young people who both need the help urgently but also are receptive to the idea that they can take on greater power in owning their learning and being an advocate for themselves and making the



David Flink

best of the opportunities in front of them," Flink explained.

Rather than creating an academic tutor approach, the organization hones in on effectiveness of a mentor-mentee relationship. Mentors help their younger counterparts by being supportive through the learning process, and by offering real anecdotal leadership.

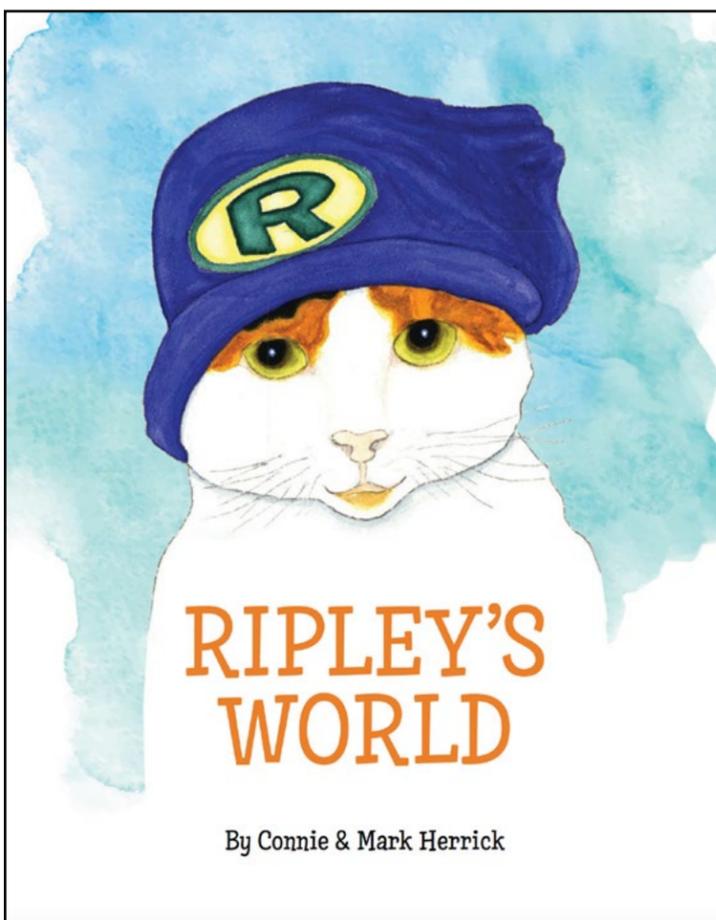
"Eye to Eye's secret sauce is that our mentors don't need to be trained on what it means to have a learning difference," Flink said. "This is really important. Our mentors always show up with a sense of authenticity and are always able to tell stories from their own lives that connect directly with their mentees' experiences. Our job is to help them understand what it means to work with young people."

Each summer, the organization partners with universities and high schools that select two student leaders for their respective "chapters." The chosen student leaders then take part in a one-week training program at Brown University that teaches them leadership skills through workshops and community building.

Flink was unaware that, for years, mentors and supporters had nominated him and his organization to be recognized by CNN's Heroes of the Year, which honors people who show extraordinary will to act on their values to improve the lives of others. All 10 nominated individuals in this year's lineup receive \$10,000 for their cause, and the individual who receives the most "votes" will receive an additional \$100,000. Flink explained that more financial resources means that the organization will be able to reach more students, including allowing Eye to Eye to reach more historically Black colleges and Hispanic institutions from which it could attract mentors to work with mentees from similar backgrounds.

"My intention is if we're able to get this \$100,000 and have that exposure on the national stage, [it would] show that people who learn differently are everywhere," Flink said. "This is an opportunity to give a spotlight to young people who were invisible before the pandemic, who were further hidden behind screens and masks during the pandemic, and who still need a safe space so that they can feel seen, heard, and valued. The opportunity to support these young people every single day has been an absolute honor. I see them as the leaders who are keeping this organization moving forward."

You can vote for Flink's organization, and learn more about the other nominated individuals, by visiting: www.cnn.com/specials/cnn-heroes.



Ripley's World officially comes out on November 15.