

Alumni in Action!

Panther Tracks keeps stumbling across talented, creative alumni entrepreneurs, and Jeni Hess, '99, is no exception! [Silly Bug Books](#) is the result of Jeni's expertise in elementary education and her desire to create fun, individualized books that bolster children's self-esteem. Colorful and playful books about silly bugs and counting are written and designed by Jeni, who personalizes each one, making your child the star! So if you know a kid who would love a book made just for him or her (and who wouldn't!), be sure to check out sillybugbooks.com to see what's available.

Full-time mother and babysitter by day and community college instructor by night, Jeni Hess recently added "children's author" to her list of occupations. After informally writing personalized books for her own children and friends' children for years, Jeni is now offering books on demand for parents, grandparents, and anyone else who wants their special child featured as the star of a picture book.

Name: Jennifer Hess (Haskell)
Hometown: Cassadaga, NY
Class Year: 1999
Major: Elementary Education
Favorite Pitt-Bradford Memory:
Air Band -- my friends and I did a performance every year
Most Unforgettable Professor:
Elga Dzirkalis -- She was so accepting, encouraging, and intelligent; I cannot say enough great things about her
Current Residence: Albia, IA



Jeni Hess, '99, with her husband & children

Panther Tracks spoke with Jeni about what influenced her decision to start writing such special children's books. A car accident took the lives of her brother and mother when Jeni was only 9 years old, an experience, Jeni notes, that left her "a sad, shy child" who was unable to believe in herself until recently. Jeni wants her children to experience life differently, though. "I want my children to be assertive and confident," she said. "I want them to be happy and accepting of themselves from the start."

She knows that featuring children in the books that they read will help increase self-esteem and make learning experiences even more meaningful. "I pick skills that they're working on and use the book as a guide to help teach them."

Her 6-year-old daughter, for instance, has a book called "Princess Tabitha Learns to Share," which reinforces both the importance of sharing and the importance of Tabitha.

But what led her to make the jump to writing and producing books from her home office full of art supplies and a book binding machine? "All it took was one person to say, 'Hey, you should sell these,' and it made me think 'Yes, I would love to do that!' That day, I wrote 'Don't Get Bit by the Silly Bug.' It is bringing me such joy to hear that I am making children feel special. Who wouldn't feel special starring in their own book!"

Jeni received an elementary education degree from Pitt-Bradford in 1999. "It wasn't until I attended school at Pitt-Bradford and made several positive friendships that I began to see my self-worth," noted Jeni, who has especially fond memories of her sorority sisters from Lambda Xi.

After graduating, Jeni went on to earn a master's degree in art therapy counseling; she currently looks forward to writing books that "will be of therapeutic value." Her favorite children's book writers and illustrators include Mo Willems, Eric Carle, Jamie Lee Curtis, and Laura Cornell. Jeni notes that Curtis and Cornell "create books together that help children to accept and appreciate who they are -- something that I would like to do." In her spare time, Jeni takes an adult hip hop class (that she loves!), and spends time playing with her children and hitting the playground. She and her husband, who works as a hunting guide, live with their four children in Albia, Iowa.