

New Book Helps Children Find Their 'Superpowers'

S. Renee Mitchell hopes her new children's book will empower kids to find their voices

By Bruce Poinsette
Of *The Skanner News*

S. Renee Mitchell hopes to boost children's self-esteem with her new children's book "The Awakening of Sharyn: A Shy and Brown Supergyrl".

"The book is about finding your voice," says Mitchell. "If they're going into the 1st or 2nd grade not feeling like they have that confidence, they don't really have what it takes sometimes to do the work because they already assume they aren't worthy."

The book, written and illustrated by Mitchell, includes a parent workbook that attaches artwork with discussions on concepts like teacher bias, facing your fears and birth order. She says the book is more than just a "cute story". It offers the opportunity for parents to have conversations with their kids, as well as increase children's literacy.

Mitchell's story focuses on a brown girl, Sharyn, who goes to school with mostly white kids who assume she's not as smart because of the color of her skin. Sharyn feels invisible because other kids see her skin and her hair but don't see her as a person beyond the stereotypes. Once she gets

tired of being bullied, she finds her voice and becomes a "supergyrl".

"Not a 'supergyrl' in the sense that she can fly or walk through walls but super from a strength based perspective," says Mitchell. "The things that I have inside of



me right now that I exhibit like kindness, courtesy, compassion and sense of humor, all of those are superpowers we should celebrate in kids. It lets them know they can do something really great right now."

The idea for the book came about when Mitchell was working with first graders at King School. She was doing a name exercise where she would have students attach a positive adjective to their names (i.e. Brave Brian or Smart Susan). Mitchell says she was giving children suggestions but some couldn't connect because they were so shy.

She went home heartbroken and decided she wanted to do something. The result was a children's book.

Mitchell says she can relate to Sharyn because she

was a shy girl too.

"I was shy to the point that if you looked at me too long I'd start crying," she says. "At the same time I felt invisible. People would overlook me unless they wanted someone to tease."

Writing the book was personally healing, says Mitchell. In addition to the personal nature of the story, it is also the first thing she has illustrated as an adult.

Although she used to draw when she was younger, she says it was more of her brother's interest. Whatever made drawing exciting to her was lost.

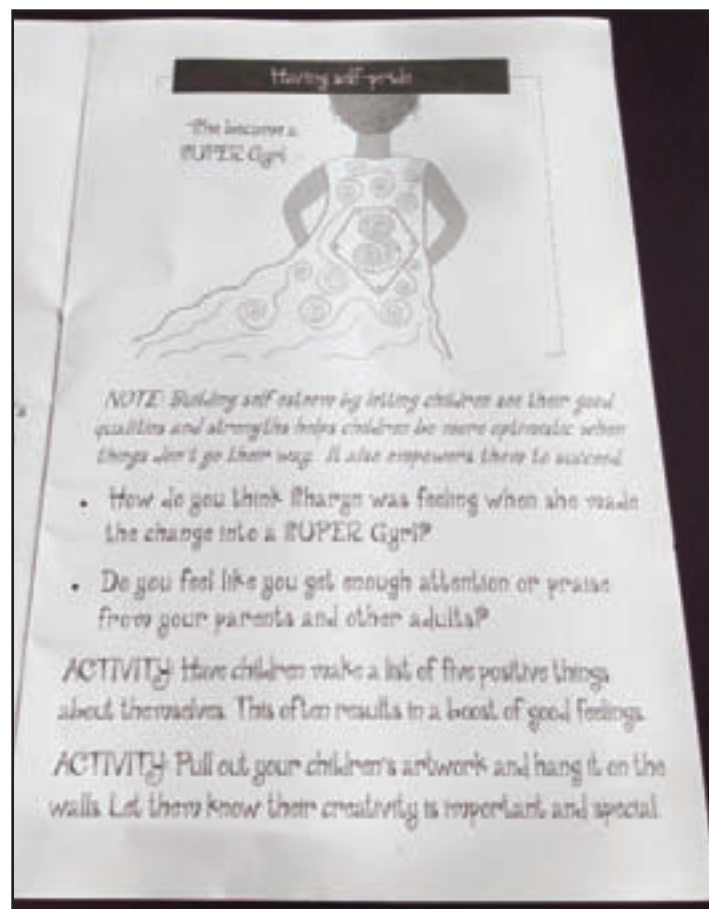
"We've lost touch with our 'yay' moments as adults," says Mitchell. "I always assumed I couldn't draw. I lost that 'yay' and found it again with this project."

In her efforts to empower kids, Mitchell has made paraphernalia to accompany her book, including buttons, earrings and affirming cards that say things like, "Sharyn says: Courage is my new bff".

She is also in the process of recording the book for pre-readers.

Mitchell hopes to bring a superhero awakening ceremony to Kwanzaa celebrations this year. During the ceremony, kids are provided capes and masks and asked to select a superpower. Once they've done that, they perform a ritual where they pose in a way that fits with their superpower and the adults gather around them to sing superhero songs.

Mitchell originally performed the ceremony to coincide with the release of another



er book (which is now out of print) that encouraged kids to find their superpowers. She says parents would tell her that their kids would go to sleep in their capes and masks because they enjoyed the ritual so much.

Although she hopes to empower Black and Brown children in particular, Mitchell says the universal message can appeal to everyone.

"Even though it's a children's book I think it has a lot of relevance for adult women," she says. "It talks about facing your fear. Fear is something we all have at any age."

"The Awakening of Sharyn: A Shy and Brown Supergyrl" is available at www.reneemitchellspeaks.org. The book will also be available at the Kwanzaa 2012 celebration starting Dec. 26 at Matt Dishman Community Center at 6:00 p.m.

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