

Dream Sequence

Through a children's book that describes a fanciful dream, an author/illustrator remembers a youngster lost to cancer — and raises funds to boost research.

By TRACY AHRENS



TRACY AHRENS has been an artist, as well as a journalist and editor for newspapers, magazines and websites, for over 25 years. She has written eight books and contributes to several publications. Her humorous monthly column on raising her pets can be found through various websites, including wagthedogUK.com. As of 2019, Ahrens had won 66 writing awards statewide, locally and nationally. She is a member of the Illinois Woman's Press Association, National Federation of Press Women, Dog Writers Association of America and Cat Writers' Association.

IN 2016 I FOUGHT breast cancer, mostly alone. I had no partner and no children, and my family, which is small, did not offer a lot of support.

I reflected on my life, the seven books I had already published, my art and projects I still wished to do. I contemplated what would happen to all of my work if I died. Would it end up in boxes in the trash or in storage somewhere and never shared? What would happen to my projects that hadn't been completed?

I have spent my life giving most of my talent away, helping humane organizations through my writing and donating my drawings to help raise funds at auctions. One of my children's books, "Sammy Sparrow's First Flight," helps 10 humane organizations in the northern Illinois area. I donate all the proceeds.

A nonfiction book I wrote, "Giant Hero," is for a family that lost their son to a rare condition called Potter syndrome. I wrote it at no charge, helped them publish and market it, and stepped away so they could carry on with using the book to raise awareness about Potter syndrome for life.

Another nonfiction book I wrote, "Raising My Furry Children," contains stories about raising my pets, including a Brittany spaniel named Speckles. Proceeds from that book helped American Brittany Rescue.

I try to find ways to let my work live on, to help in this world in some way, even after I am gone.

While I was fighting breast cancer, I came across a girl, Kate Amato, 11, on Facebook who was fighting stage 4 alveolar rhabdomyosarcoma, an aggressive soft tissue cancer that attacks skeletal muscles. Her family was rallying to help her beat cancer. Though we were states apart — I am in Illinois and she was in Florida — I followed her social media page closely.

I realized how much she was like me when I was a child and pondered why an innocent youngster is stricken with cancer. Kate lost her life in November 2016, the same month I had my lumpectomy. Her death touched me deeply. I wondered why I am still here and she is not.

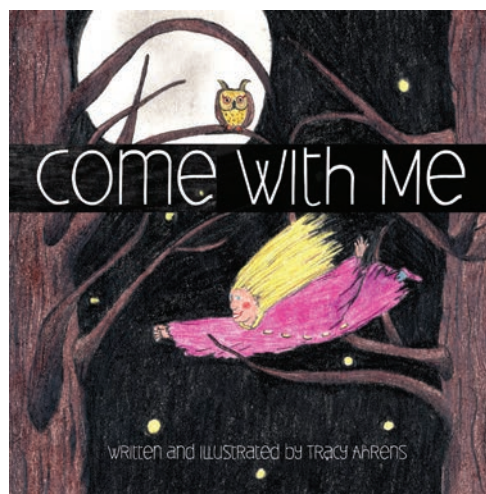
As I gained strength in 2017 and focused on some of my writing/art projects, I uncovered art and text for a children's book that I had tucked away. I realized that the book character reflected Kate Amato, including her love of music, adventure, animals and smiling.

I continued to follow Kate's Facebook page and learned that her family created the Kate Amato Foundation in her honor. The foundation has a mission to find safer, smarter and more effective treatments for children with cancer. I decided to name my book's main character after Kate and that this book's purpose would be to assist the Kate Amato Foundation.

When I asked Kate's mom, Lisa Amato, if she would accept my offer to help, she said yes.

In March 2019, my independently published book "Come With Me," for children ages 3 and older, was released. In "Come With Me," told in pictures and simple text, Kate finds herself in a dream, walking through a secret door in her closet and into the outdoors. With four steps and her arms outstretched, Kate takes flight, soaring with white doves, riding silky swans,

👉 "Come With Me" recently won *Creative Child* magazine's 2019 Book of the Year Award in the Storybooks for Kids category, as well as an honorable mention from the Purple Dragonfly Book Awards in the Picture Books 6 and Older category.





👉 **KATE AMATO**, who died of cancer at age 11 in 2016, inspired a foundation dedicated to pediatric treatment discovery.

weaving through the branches of trees and catching pink flower petals floating in the wind. She is wrapped in lullaby breezes under the moon and stars and carried higher in cloud mittens before waking in her bed.

Kate's adventure shows young readers that dreams can be fantastically beautiful. I hope it encourages children to remember their dreams, write them down and believe every night in the power of their imagination.

Although the book does not touch on the topic of cancer, its dedication page states something that I learned during my cancer fight: "Even during adversity, keep dreaming."

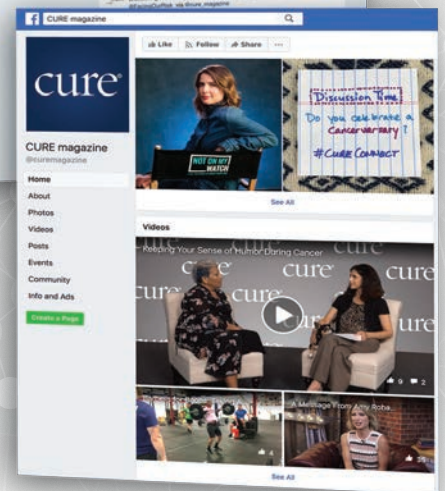
"Come with Me' beautifully captures Kate's kind, caring and adventurous spirit," Lisa Amato, a child psychologist, said for the book jacket cover. "I can see her sweet face smiling with delight as she guides little minds on a fanciful flight."

Kate captivated the world through social media with her beautiful smile and spunky spirit, her mom said. She was a ray of sunshine, warming hearts with her bright and cheerful personality. Kate was intelligent, creative, kind, funny and feisty. She loved having fun, often spearheading projects and performances and instigating adventure at every opportunity. Above all, she was compassionate, often helping others — rescuing an injured animal, coming to a neighbor's aid, comforting a friend or making cards and gifts for those she loved.

Cancer is the leading cause of death by disease in children. For those who survive, the side effects of treatment can cause long-term health problems. The vision of the Kate Amato Foundation is to support innovation that accelerates the pace of progress in pediatric cancer research. Learn more at KateAmatoFoundation.org.

"Come With Me" can be ordered for \$10 at amazon.com/Come-me-Tracy-Ahrens/dp/1798762560. All author royalties are donated to the Kate Amato Foundation. For more information, visit tracyahrens.weebly.com and follow the book's page at facebook.com/Come.With.Me.Book/. 📺

Get Connected with **cure**[®]



Follow us

 facebook.com/curemagazine

 twitter.com/cure_magazine

 instagram.com/curetoday

curetoday.com