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Valley author and illustrator Brooke Bessesen reads her book, *Look Who Lives in the Desert!*, to first-graders from Kenilworth Elementary School at Burton Barr Central Library in Phoenix.

## Author helps kids to grasp, appreciate desert creatures

By Connie Cone Sexton  
The Arizona Republic

How do you scare away your fear of tarantulas? Drawing one wearing a tutu worked pretty well for author-illustrator Brooke Bessesen.

Before she featured the black, hairy-legged creature in her children's book *Look Who Lives in the Desert!*, Bessesen didn't want to have anything to do with them.

"I couldn't even look at photographs. They have these retractable claws," the Scottsdale writer said and chuckled.

But, heaven forbid, if one came into her path, she certainly wouldn't squish it to death. Her whole goal for writing a book about desert creatures was to get children — adults, too — to appreciate and respect nature's wonder.

Once she drew the tutu-wearing tarantula, the whimsy of the image softened her heart toward the spider.

She realized that if the picture could make her laugh, it might have the same effect on her readers.

She could help make children care about animals.

*Arizona Highways* published her book in April, and since then she has given several talks, including a reading Nov. 4 to Kenilworth Elementary first-graders when they visited Burton Barr Central Library in Phoenix.

Bessesen, 39, jumped into writing with plenty of experience. For several years, she worked with the Phoenix Zoo's medical team as a veterinary technician and treated a multitude of species.

She's long had a love for the desert and its animals.

"I moved here in my sophomore year," she said. "I went to Camelback High School. When I first came here, it was spring. I came out of Sky Harbor (International Airport) and smelled the orange blossoms

and said, 'Yes, I'm home.' I love the Valley so much."

She remembers writing many a school report on desert creatures, fascinated by the biology and ecology of wildlife. That led to becoming a veterinary technician, working in the rehabilitation and rescue of animals.

"We live in a unique terrain unlike anywhere else," she said. "There are animals that we have that other parts of the country don't. And there's a misunderstanding just about all of them."

Bessesen's book includes "fascinating facts" about the various animals, including coyotes, geckos, kangaroo rats and Gila monsters.

And what of her once-feared tarantula? Here's what she shares: "Tarantulas usually don't bite people, but you should never handle them (for both your and the spider's safety)."