

READERS AND WRITERS

## Sand blast

*Brooke Bessesen, granddaughter of St. Paul's "Poet of Laurel Avenue," puts her love for the birds and animals she has come to know in the Arizona desert into a children's picture book. Grandpa would be so proud.*

If you ever need to give shots to a rattlesnake with mouth rot, Brooke Bessesen can tell you how to do it.

"You get a Lucite tube, because they like to get into tight spaces and then they can't coil (and strike)," she explains.

Bessesen, who spent summers in Minnesota as a child, knows a lot about the creatures that inhabit the desert surrounding Scottsdale, Ariz., where she lives with her husband, Kevin, and their dog, Malki.

A former television producer and a certified veterinary technician, Bessesen has put her love for birds and animals into her first children's picture book, "Look Who Lives in the Desert!"

"I worked on the Phoenix Zoo medical team and was their on-camera naturalist for many years, taking animals on national and local TV and teaching about them," she says. "I brought these interests together for this book."

She introduces her young readers to owls and bears, tarantulas and deer through a combination of funny rhymes, facts about each creature and small photos of them in their natural habitat.

"Rhyming is for fun, but my primary concern is sharing information," she says.

Among her interesting facts: Turkey vultures cool themselves by urinating on their legs (it's called urohydrosis); mountain lions are considered small cats, but their voice boxes are so small and tightly connected they can't roar; and Gila monsters are venomous lizards that shouldn't be touched in the wild.

Describing a Gila monster, Bessesen writes: "He has a trick that is quite hard to beat: He walks upside down without suction-cup feet ..."

Bessesen says she wanted her illustrations, among them a tutu-wearing tarantula and a vulture driving a sanitation truck, to be vividly colorful and stylistically unique.

"I began with pencil drawings and eventually stumbled on using fabrics and real-world textures such as wood and prickly cactus, which I immediately loved," she says. "I did corny drawings with all kinds of humor inside, and I anthropomorphized the illustrations because humans can sometimes relate better to animals if they are drawn with human-like qualities. This fosters respect and love and draws us closer to them."



MARY ANN GROSSMANN

### 'THE POET OF LAUREL AVENUE'

Bessesen was in Minnesota a few weeks ago to sign books at Bound to Be Read in St. Paul and attend a family reunion. Her parents, Barbara Evans Bessesen and Daniel Bessesen, met at the University of Minnesota. They were living in Colorado when Brooke was born, and after their divorce, Brooke lived with her mother in Arizona. Her dad is in California.

St. Paul is familiar to Bessesen because she spent summers with her maternal grandparents, who lived at 1449 Laurel Ave.

Her grandfather, Rhys Orville Evans, was known as "The Poet of Laurel Avenue." He was the subject of several Pioneer Press feature articles because he wrote hundreds of poems about famous people and world events after retiring in 1959 from Equitable Life Assurance. Evans died at age 90 in 1985, and his wife, Berthea, died 10 years later.

"My grandfather taught me meter and rhyme as a little girl," Bessesen says. "I honestly don't think I'd have that skill if he hadn't drilled it into me."

She thinks her writer's genes also came from her paternal grandmother, Camilla Wing Bessesen, who wrote four children's books while working in the Pillsbury Co.'s public relations department. Among them was "The Talking Millstones," published in 1945 by the Pillsbury Institute of Flour. Wing Bessesen also wrote articles for the Minneapolis newspapers, including a series on Albert Schweitzer, for which she traveled to Germany in the 1950s.

"I realized that my grandfather was a poet, but I didn't realize the extent to which he was recognized for it," Brooke says. "I had been told as a kid that my grandmother did some writing, but it wasn't until I started my book, and did research, that I found so much writing history on both sides of my family. To be back here, where both of them wrote and lived, is special to me."



Young Brooke strikes a pretty pose with her grandfather, Rhys Orville Evans, known as "The Poet of Laurel Avenue," in 1968. Bessesen, left, says her grandfather "taught me meter and rhyme as a little girl. I honestly don't think I'd have that skill if he hadn't drilled it into me."



**Title:** "Look Who Lives in the Desert! Bounding and Pouncing, Hiding and Gliding, Sleeping and Creeping"

**Author/illustrator:** Brooke Bessesen

**Publisher:** Arizona Highways Books

**Cost:** \$9.95

### THE WILD LIFE

Before Bessesen turned to full-time writing, she was an award-winning TV producer who created a children's show, wrote wildlife segments and hosted the Emmy-

winning series "What's Up" and produced a weekly program, "A Brighter Day." She also did a series for National Geographic on the black-footed ferret, the most endangered mammal in North America.

Bessesen and her husband are licensed pilots, and they often fly to book signings and family events in the four-seat plane they built themselves.

She continues her longtime work as a wildlife rescue volunteer, assisting sick, injured and orphaned animals through rehabilitation organizations in Arizona and California. That's how she ended up nursing that sick rattlesnake for several months.

"My mom came to visit around Christmas, and the snake was in a tank in the spare room," Bessesen says with a laugh. "The room was dark, and he rattled. I was, like, 'Oops, Mom, I forgot to mention that you have a rattlesnake for a roommate.' She was cool enough to let him stay with her."

The snake fully recovered and is back home in the desert.

Mary Ann Grossmann can be reached at mgrossmann@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5574.