

Dimensions of living

Mermaids' messages

Author pens children's book teaching importance of protecting environment

By FRAN EVANS

Former St. James resident Laura Mancuso has channeled her love of the beach and marine biology, as well as her dedication to the environment, into constructive action with her first children's book: *The Fin-Tastic Cleanup*.

The book tells the story of three mermaids living happily in their coral village until they come face-to-face with pollution, which is damaging their environment and harming their ocean-sharing friends.

The mermaids, Sara, Alix and Lucy, recognizing the dangers, spring into action; gathering the harmful trash surrounding their village and bringing it to shore where they get assistance from environmentally-conscious humans who are also concerned with protecting the sea.

"Living out here, we're at the beach all the time," said the mother of two girls, Sarafina, 9, and Lucia, 7, who now reside in Hampton Bays. "My daughters are very aware of the pollution on the beach. We always clean it up, even if it isn't ours. It breaks our hearts that it can hurt the animals and damage the environment. That's how the story unfolded."

Ms. Mancuso said her seven-year old daughter's passion for mermaids made her aware of the dearth of children's picture books on the subject. "If I ask her what she wants to be when she grows up, she says a mermaid."

According to Ms. Mancuso, whose extended family still lives in St. James, seeing water bottles, bags and other assorted plastic washing up on the beach combined with her daughter's desire to be a mermaid ignited a spark that resulted in the book whose pictures and words can be enjoyed by children as young as two and up to around age of 10.

The book is illustrated by Jenna Guidi, a St. James resident and longtime friend. Ms. Guidi studied illustration and animation at the School of Visual Arts in New York City and recently earned an MA in Art Education from LIU Post in Brookville.

With a love of Disney and Pixar films, Ms. Guidi said working on this book fits perfectly with her talents and interests that took root in her early years and sparked an interest in art.

"I have always had an interest in animated movies and books. I read a lot of books so this assignment was a dream for me. I love mermaids and fairytales. It was like fate," she said.

Ms. Guidi, who is on assignment at Setauket Elementary School where

she is teaching art, started off doing computer art and animation, switching to illustration to follow her heart. "I am trying to build my portfolio. I have a few other projects in the works and a small Etsy shop," she said, adding that she recently illustrated three ebooks for Readworks which supplies free reading materials for students and teachers online.

It was a perfect match said Ms. Mancuso. "I wrote the book and knew how brilliant she was as an illustrator. It was great because we worked on everything together. This is a whole new world for me. I'm having a lot of fun working with Jenna."

Ms. Mancuso, who remained in Buffalo for a few years following college graduation working with children and adults with disabilities, said she found that she missed the ocean, her family and her friends so she and her family packed up and moved back, settling into their Hampton Bays' home where the bay and the ocean are an equal one and half mile distance.

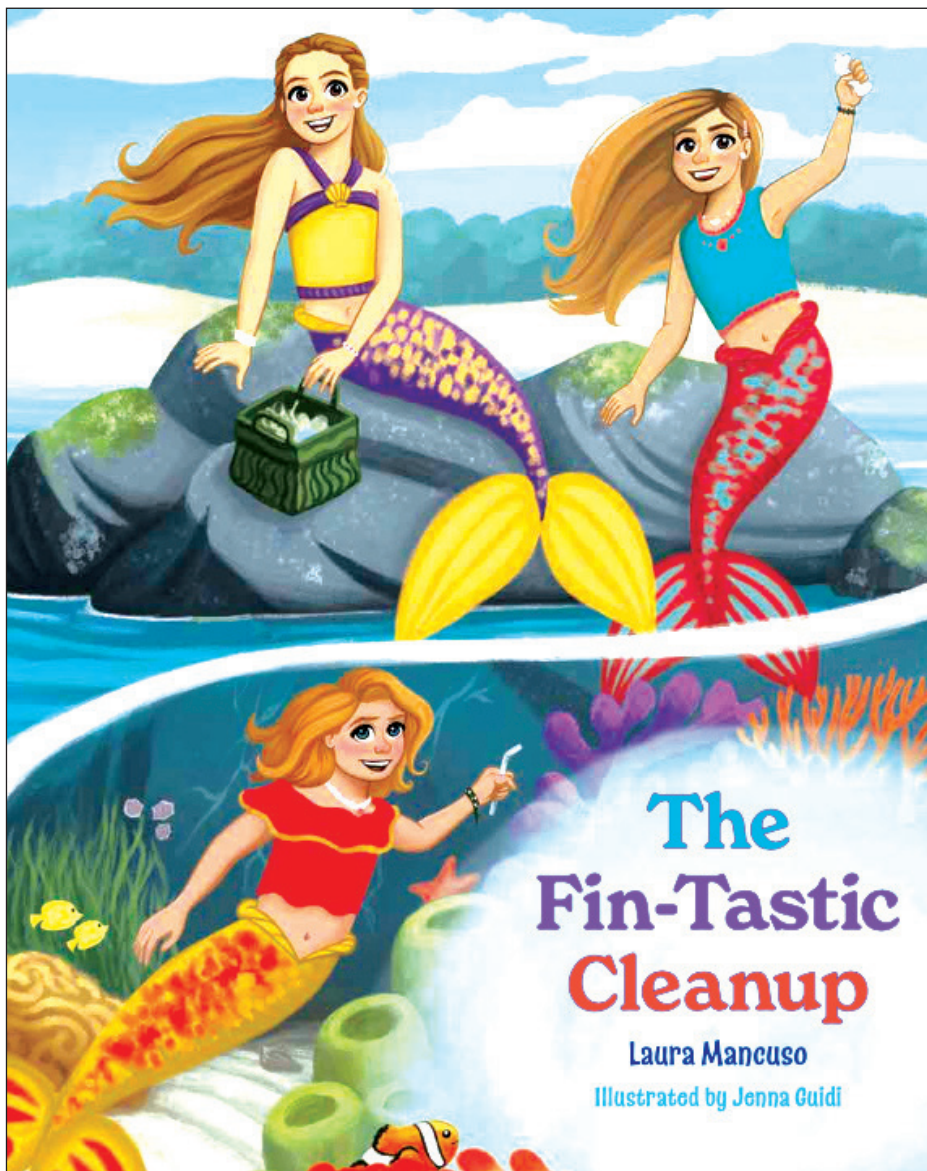
She spent a few years as a personal trainer after returning to Long Island and began writing a fitness article for Dan's Papers and the Montauk Pioneer on the East End; where she caught the writing bug.

"I'd been home with my girls and I needed something for myself so I took a writing course for children's books," said Mancuso who graduated from Smithtown High School in 1995 and the University at Buffalo in 1999. "As long as I can remember, I loved marine biology. It's been a lifelong interest for me."

She put her writing skills to use with *The Fin-Tastic Cleanup* and has a second book in the works called *The Fin-Tastic Rescue*; a mermaid adventure in which they assist animals in distress. "I actually went to school thinking I would be a police officer. My career path has changed 1,000 times."

The *Fin-Tastic Cleanup* is published by Mascot Books and has an official release date of May 4. Ms. Mancuso said she will be part of a May 22 Kids' Day Book Sale at the Hampton Bays Public Library and a second event at the Library hosted by the Children's Room that includes an author's tea and Q&A. In addition, she has a visit to Shock Kids store in Westhampton on her schedule.

She said she has done outreach to brick and mortar stores, independent bookstores and novelty shops and already has some orders. The book is also available online at Amazon and Barnes and Nobel and through retail



Author Laura Mancuso (left) and Illustrator Jenna Guidi (right) have teamed up with a new children's book, *The Fin-Tastic Cleanup*.

stores. "I also have many teacher friends and I know that some schools are interested," she said.

"It's been so well received," she said. "I was home with the pandemic so I had

more time to write and I have my two biggest fans living in my house. I read it to them and see what their reaction is," she said referring to Sarafina and Lucia. "I get great feedback."

Chamber returns to in-person meetings

The Kings Park Chamber of Commerce will hold its first in-person general membership meeting Wednesday, May 19 at Cafe Red, 107 Main Street, Kings Park under the tent beginning at 11:45 a.m. Cost is \$25 per person members, \$30 per person non-members. All COVID protocols will be followed and the chamber requests those planning on attending pre-pay at www.kingsparkli.com to avoid a line. Checks payable to the Kings Park Chamber of Commerce can be sent to PO Box 322, Kings Park, New York, 11725. You will receive a full refund if the meeting is cancelled or you are unable to attend. If you are interested in sponsoring this event (sponsorship fee is \$100), contact Diane Motherway at 631-269-7678 or diane@kingsparkli.com.