

ARTS & THEATRE

Persistence pays off for 'Pansy at the Palace'



Cynthia Bardes with her dog Pansy.

PHOTO BY BENJAMIN HAGER

BY MICHELLE GENZ
Staff Writer

It started three years ago, when Windsor resident Cynthia Bardes was hit by a car crossing Wilshire Boulevard. Laid up at the Peninsula Hotel, her poodle Pansy at her side, she started writing a children's story.

She called it "Pansy at the Palace: A Beverly Hills Mystery." The tale of its success is more like "The Little Engine That Could."

Like millions of would-be authors, Bardes had a cute idea – a story about her pet trying to catch a thief in the luxury hotel.

Unlike millions of would-be authors, she persevered, pulled strings, pursued leads, and shelled out a sizable sum to professionals. Three drastically different versions and one thoroughly exhausted Vero illustrator later, Bardes self-published.

Since then, she has managed to place her books in some of the swankiest stores in the country – Neiman Marcus and Bergdorf Goodman among them.

Add to that various book signings in book stores and private homes, and – ka-ching! Bardes sold 1,220 copies in only six weeks, at \$17.99 a pop. Not one to miss out on a sale, she even bought the iPad attachment to run a credit card so she could ring people up herself.

This, from a woman whose leisure years would otherwise be spent organizing benefit luncheons and relaxing with her husband David in their spectacular Scott Merrill-designed home. A one-time interior designer, she briefly had a small line of dresses in Saks in the 1980s.

Last week, at a book-signing at the Vero Beach Book Center's Children's Store, Bardes and her hardworking illustrator, Kim Weissenborn, sold another 120 copies. Now, she's planning three more in the series.

"She's a go-getter," says Weissenborn, a Parsons-trained illustrator who has lived in Vero Beach for 17 years.

"It's the hardest thing I've ever done," says Bardes.

Bardes was on her way to lunch in Beverly Hills three years ago when a

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car clipped her and sent her bouncing on her head. Witnesses quickly came to her aid. "When they picked me up, my leg collapsed."

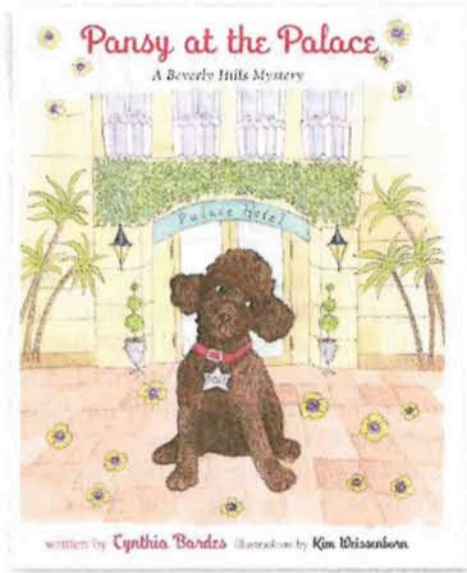
She spent her post-surgery recovery at the Peninsula. Pansy, her poodle, "became like a mascot at the hotel," she says. "So I started writing a little story about her."

Back in Vero and on crutches, she told her physical therapist about her children's book. The therapist put her on to Weissenborn, who taught at the Vero Beach Museum of Art. Right away, Weissenborn knew a book would result. "You can tell she is just driven," says Weissenborn.

"I've done illustrations for other people, but they never did anything with it. People are always talking about writing a children's book. I knew if anyone was going to publish, Cynthia was."

Never mind that they were going about it backwards. Nearly always, a publisher matches the writer to an illustrator of the publisher's choosing. Weissenborn's work was at risk of being tossed out if Bardes's book was accepted.

Meanwhile, Bardes' "little story" ran a staggering 6,000 words. "My family thought I'd written the next 'War and



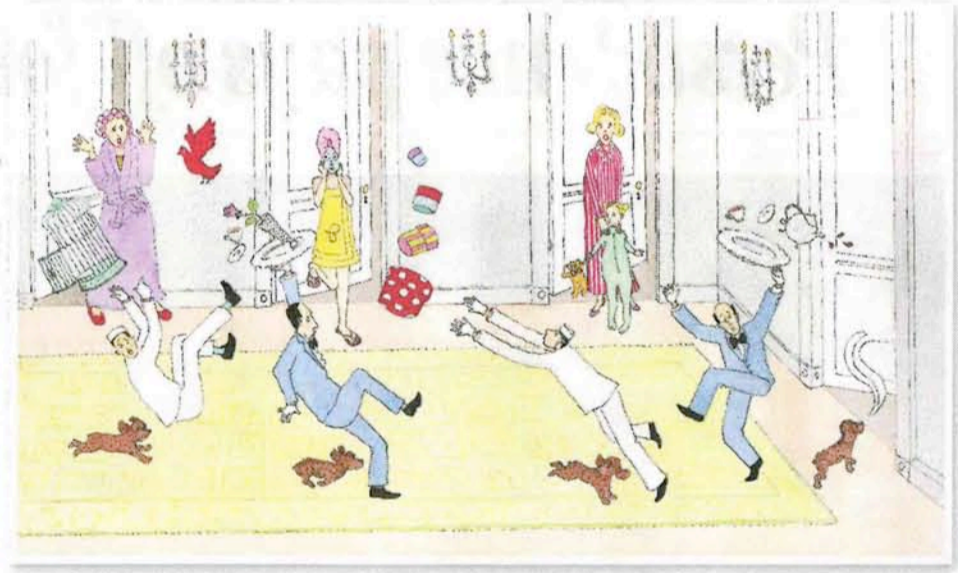
Peace," said Bardes.

"I talked to an editor in New Jersey who said a children's book has to be 32 pages and 600 words," she says. "So we started on our second book."

While Weissenborn kept painting, Bardes got the narrative down to 800 words. She sent it to "the top children's book agent" in the country, Bardes says. "She said she'd take it."

That "yes" was fleeting. As the agent circulated the manuscript, rejections rolled in.

Bardes got to seven and that was



enough. "I thought, should I just shelve it? I don't need to do this. It was a project, and I loved doing it. Finally I decided self-publishing was good enough."

She started interviewing for an art director (something a publisher would have provided). "It's not as bad as I thought, for an amateur," the first candidate told Bardes.

"Children love seeing dogs," another mentioned as she flipped through the pages. "And they love seeing children."

Bardes' book had a dog, but no children. "Back to the drawing board," Bardes said. She rewrote and Weissenborn re-drew.

That's when Bardes issued a deadline. She decided the book had to be out by October, when her annual stay at the Peninsula was wrapping up. "We just killed ourselves putting out the new book. Kim was almost crazy," says Bardes. "But I needed the P.R. If I was going to do anything, it had to be at the hotel where I wrote it."

One painting of the poodle sniffing a butter dish took 120 re-dos.

The book went to press at the end of August and came out Oct. 29. Bardes held a tea at the Peninsula as a launch, and through the manager, got a story in the Beverly Hills Courier, a small paper she calls the "32963 of Beverly

Hills."

With that, she headed to Neiman Marcus two blocks from the hotel. She took the book to a salesperson she knew, who put her onto the gift and book department manager, who said Neiman's didn't deal with self-published books. "I know," Bardes told him. "But would you just take a look?"

He sent the book to Neiman headquarters in Dallas and they decided to place the book in Palm Beach, L.A., San Francisco, and Chicago.

"So that made me legitimate," she says.

Friends threw book signings in their homes. She did a signing at an L.A. private school. She flew up to San Francisco and got the book in Gump's. Back in L.A., she placed it at a bookstore in Pacific Heights. During a book signing at Neiman's the manager came in and said, "You should be in Bergdorf. Use my name."

She heads for New York in March to do a signing at Bergdorf.

Her mind is whirring with plots for Pansy in Hong Kong and Pansy in Africa. "All the books will teach children that nobody is too small to make a difference, and that curiosity is a trait that always serves you well, particularly as a child," she says. ■