January 2021

Lawrence neighbors

Lauren Murphy

Sparking Joy through Children's Books

Cover photo by Benoit Cortet

An exclusive publication for the residents of Lawrence Township

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Lauren Murphy

Sparking Joy through Children's Books

By Catherine Bialkowski | Photos by Benoit Cortet

Bringing joy into other people's lives can often bring us our own joy; Lauren Murphy knows this well. A clinical researcher by profession, Lauren finds great satisfaction in having the ability to bring good, high-quality medication to the market for the benefit of consumers around the world.

Lauren has found another way to spark joy, though—through writing books for children.

Lauren never had a dog of her own until she met her husband, Mike Toscani, but she had always loved them growing up. At the time they met, Mike had a beagle named Pepper. "The bond was instantaneous. I immediately fell in love with Pepper," says Lauren. She and Mike, who is a research professor at the Rutgers Institute for Pharmaceutical Industry Fellowships, have had dogs together ever since, for almost 25 years—all beagles.

Lauren has always had a special place in her heart for children's stories; for her, there is something special about their simplicity, their purity. The genre itself embodies joy. She often finds herself enjoying children's stories more than ones intended for adults; they are a beautiful escape from the often-stressful world. Lauren's love for dogs inspired her to ponder the idea of a creative outlet. "It got me thinking, wouldn't it be great to write a children's book?"

"It has been a joy," says Mike, referring to watching Lauren explore a dream she'd had for many years but always moved onto the next to-do list, telling herself she had no time. When something is important to you, she says, "You just make it happen."

Lauren has written two children's books so far, There's a Beagle in My Closet and Where's My Rawhide?, both centering on the adventures of a beagle named Scooter. It was important to Lauren that her stories not only be interesting to children, but also have a theme. Her first book encourages curiosity in children, and the second, determination.

Lauren and Mike were fortunate enough to have a few connections within their network; they found a proofreader and an editor for the books, then two talented illustrators, Denise O'Brien and Ross Marinaro. Mike is one of Lauren's biggest supporters. He has seen firsthand the delight her books have brought, both to Lauren herself and the children to whom she gives her stories about Scooter the dog.

"We enjoy giving them out to family and friends," she says. Although not for general sale, they have donated the books to charities, local libraries, and pediatricians' office waiting rooms, and even occasionally surprise a child at a local restaurant when they go out to eat.

Lauren's other biggest supporter is her mother, Rosemarie. They see each other weekly for coffee. Lauren picks up her mother, who lives in nearby Hamilton, and

surprises her with a coffee shop location for a hot drink and dessert. During these chats, Lauren and her mother catch up on each other's weeks and talk about life and family.

"It's a simple thing for me carving time out of my schedule and being fortunate enough to have her local," says Lauren. And Rosemarie, who will be 90 in January, has encouraged her daughter from the start to follow her inspirations Now that the books are written, she often asks Lauren, "When is the next book coming out?"

For Lauren, her and Rosemarie's Coffee Chats center on the concept of gratitude—gratitude for her mother, for their bond, for small things like the coffee they drink and the words they exchange. This one weekly meeting has shaped both women's lives towards a spirit of appreciation and giving thanks for things and people often taken for granted.

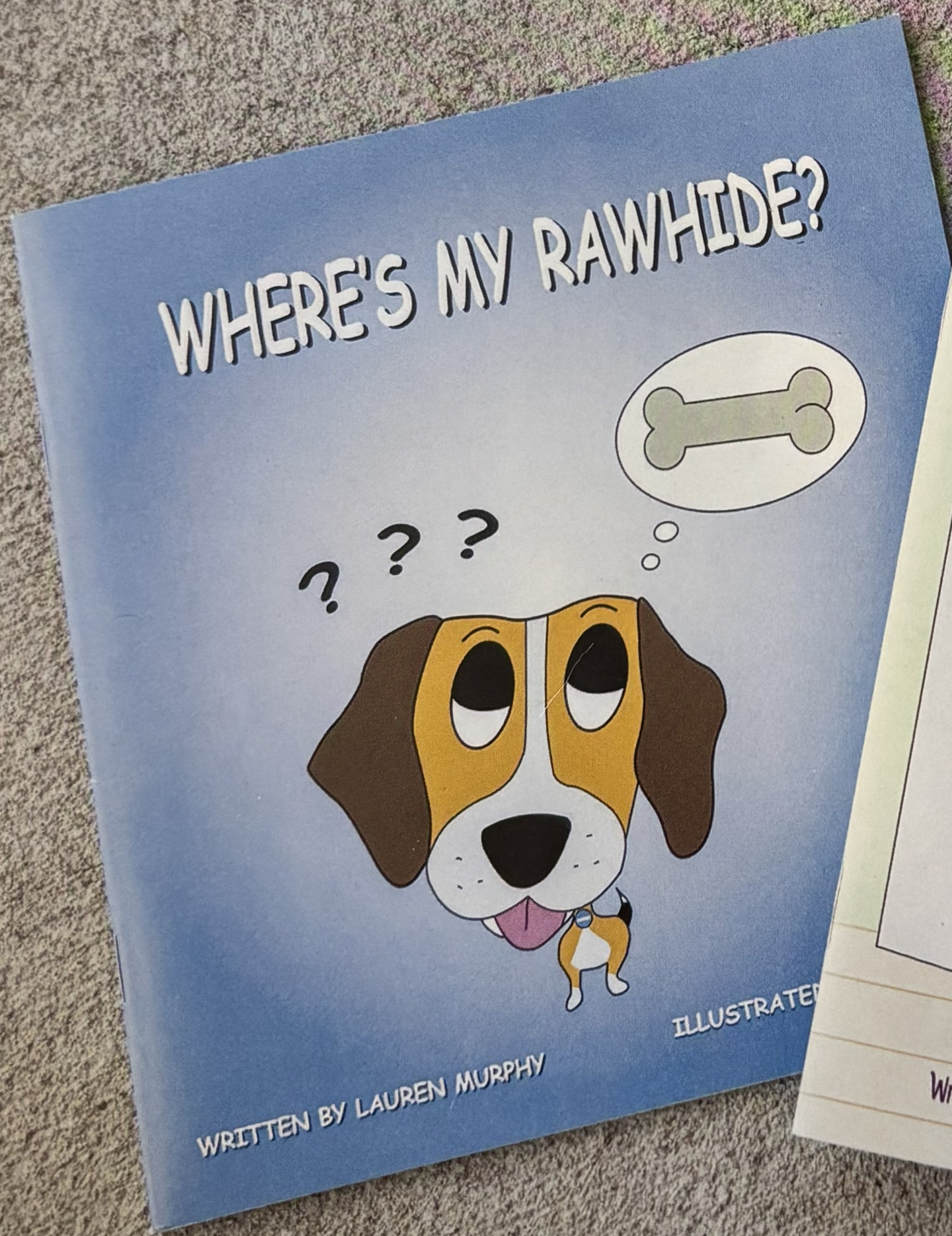
Although Mike lived in Lawrence when he and Lauren first met, the couple lived in New Hope for over 20 years before returning to the community a few years ago. They have loved every minute of living in Lawrence.

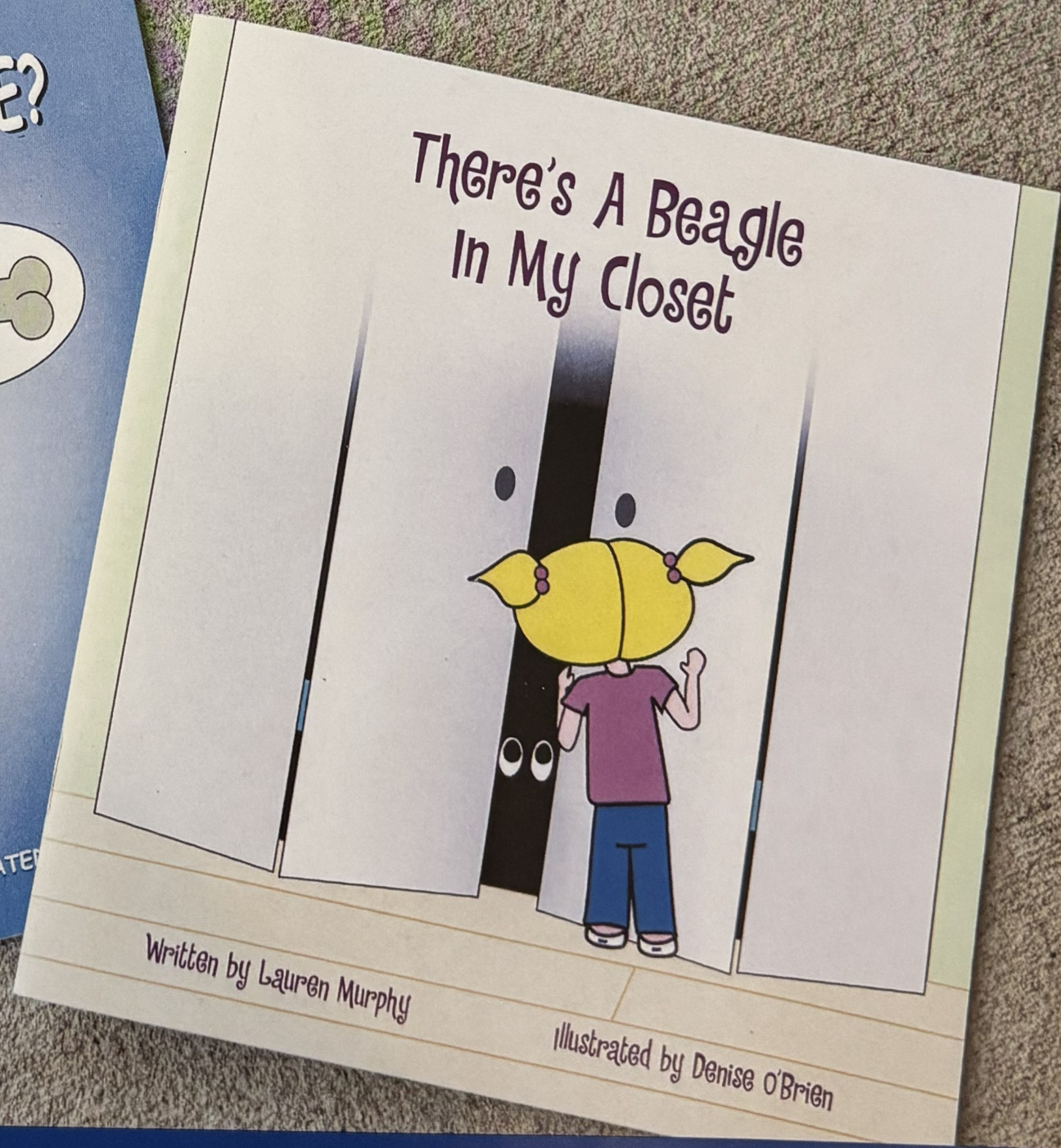
"We very much love the Village, and being able to walk everywhere," says Lauren. They walk their dog, Maggie, in the park every day, and can walk to many of their favorite local shops and restaurants. "It's a very comfortable community to be in. We are blessed with great neighbors."

A strong sense of community is important to Lauren and Mike; they belong to Rotary International, an organization whose mission is to "bring together business and professional leaders in order to provide humanitarian service and to advance goodwill and peace around the world," according to its website. The principal motto of Rotary is "service above self," and Lauren and Mike have truly taken these words to heart. They have hosted three exchange students through Rotary, and have lived their lives according to its motto.

Lauren and Mike are grateful for the lives they've made here in Lawrence Township, and for the fruition of Lauren's dream, something that once seemed out-of-reach.

"I feel very fortunate and blessed when I think about Lauren and how she always thinks of service first," says Mike. "It is a joy to Lauren, knowing there are folks out there reading her books and that they are making children smile."





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