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Learning to love the wildlife

By MARGO WILSON Chronicle Correspondent
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ABOVE: Deb Gay of Citrus Hills displays the hunting and fishing children's books she's written, as well as the books' watercolor illustrations. She learned how to hunt and fish after marrying her husband, Doug Gay. She's showing the three children's fishing-oriented books she's written that are set along the Nature Coast. **LEFT:** "Daddy Took Me Fishing on the Homosassa & Chassahowitzka Rivers" is one of three fishing-oriented books she's written for children. The books are set along the Nature Coast. The author also written three hunting books for children.

Photos by Margo Wilson / Pinnacle Correspondent

One morning, the love of Deb Gay's life, her husband, Doug, left on a hunting trip outside Olney, Ill. Although Deb had joined Doug on the excursion, that morning, she decided she'd stay behind.

While Doug was in the woods, Deb whipped up a batch of children's books about hunting and fishing, quite an accomplishment for a woman who'd spent her early years growing up in the shadow of New York City on Long Island. Doug was pleased.

But when Deb showed her writing to a friend who's a publisher, the woman said, "These are good. I'll do it."

Deb published three in a "hunting series" of books last year under the name "Deb Hamel," her pen and maiden name. This year, she's published three in a "fishing series." Two of those books feature local fishing charter captains and marinas, and one is set at Ellie Schiller Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park.

If all of this sounds sort of like a fairytale, it isn't, because life for Deb hasn't been as easy as it may appear.

The magical part, according to Deb, is reuniting with Doug after they both had gone separate ways after first meeting at a bonfire when they were teenagers in New Hampshire. Although Deb said there were "fireworks" between them at the bonfire, Doug was a year older at Fall Mountain Regional High School in Langdon, N.H., and life took the couple in different directions.

After marriages to other people didn't work out, Doug and Deb tied the knot.

Doug "fills a hole in my heart," Deb said. "He's kind and gentle and a place of safety. He cares about me. He adores me. He supports everything I do."

What that means is that Deb adores Doug, too. And she wants to support his interests. But that's been a learning experience for Deb.

In New York, Deb got more exposure to shopping and city life than to wildlife.

She has a seven-part blog series on her website, www.debhamel.com, titled "How I Went From High Heels & Pearls to Camo!"

She jokes that she and Doug are like Eva Gabor and Eddie Albert in the former TV series, "Green Acres." In that show, New York socialite Lisa Douglas (Gabor) reluctantly joins her once wealthy and prominent New York City attorney husband (Albert) when he decides to buy a rundown and remote farm.

The parallels aren't that strong. Doug has known how to hunt and fish since he was a boy. Albert, as Oliver Wendell Douglas, had to learn how to farm as an adult. Gabor didn't know the basics of running a household. She'd toss dishes out of the window instead of washing them. But Deb has polished her outdoor skills. Doug taught her to bow hunt and fish, and Deb is quite proficient at target practice and has hooked a 5.5 pound kingfish off Key West.

She's learned that when you enter the woods, "There is no perfume and no pretty sandals," she said.

She's dedicated her book, "Daddy's Hunting Story," to Doug, whom, she writes, has introduced her "to hunting, archery, nature, wildlife, and happiness!"

Her other hunting books include: "Fall at Camp" and "Daddy Bought Me a Bow & Some Arrows."

Three books are set along the Nature Coast: "Fishing With Daddy on Crystal River & Kings Bay," "Daddy Took Me Fishing on the Homosassa & Chassahowitzka Rivers," and "Daddy & Mommy Took Me to Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park."

Deb's illustrator is Alena Karabach, originally from Belarus, who now lives in the country of Georgia.

Making the transition

Making the transition from someone whom she describes as having a "go-go personality" to a writer who sits still and ponders her words has been a unique journey for Deb.

She said she hated school but loved to read. She always was active in a myriad of activities.

After graduating, she did many things. She co-hosted a morning radio talk show in Keene, N.H. She served on the New Hampshire State Board of Education. She worked with President George W. Bush and U.S. senators Ted Kennedy and Judd Gregg to promote "No Child Left Behind" legislation.

But her life changed after having two strokes and a Transient Ischemic Attack (TIA). The first incident was at age 40. Then, another at 45, and the most recent, at 50. The last one caused a brain bleed. She's had to relearn how to walk, talk, and do basic things.

However, she said the strokes have calmed her down, made her imagination more childlike and vivid, and have made her appreciative for what she has.

She and her husband own 122 acres in New Hampshire, including a home with a cathedral ceiling. Two elk and a moose that Doug shot and had preserved share the space with Doug and Deb.

In Citrus Hills, there's a 450-pound preserved bear in a front room. Deb said another is down the hall.

The couple recently purchased 32 acres of Tiger Island, not too far from Cedar Key.

Doug and his cousin, who co-owned a Vermont trucking business, recently sold the company. When Doug and Deb are in Florida, the Tiger Island land will give Doug a spot "so he can play," Deb said.

Deb is a board member of the Citrus County Education Foundation and formerly co-hosted "Citrus Today," on WYKE TV

Deb said she's not killed an animal and is not sure she can do it. Learning to be quiet and observe nature are skills she is grateful to have learned.

When she is with Doug, up in a tree stand in their New Hampshire woods, she's learned to enjoy such woodland visitors as pileated woodpeckers, raccoons, chickadees, and screech owls.

Larger animals are a bonus.

"If you can get a bear to come within 10-15 feet of you, then you have succeeded," she said.

Talking nature for kids

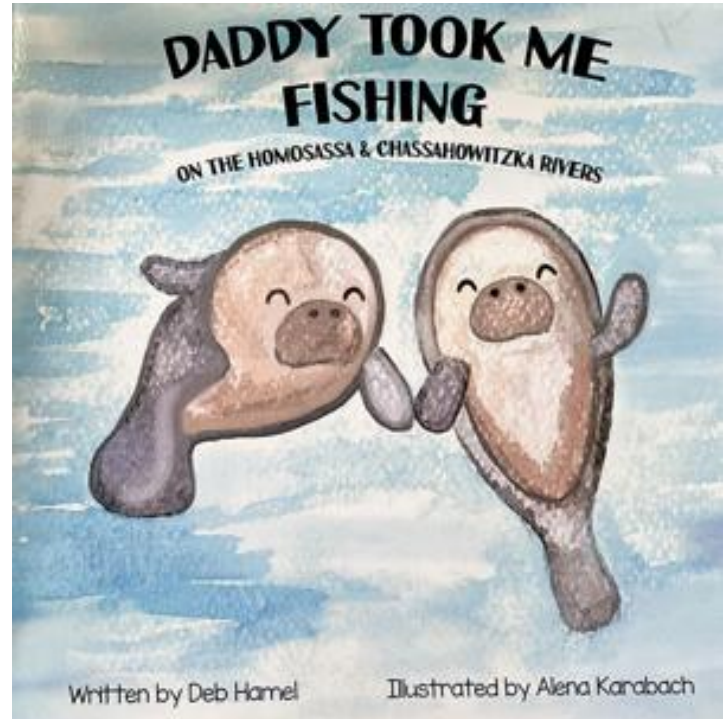
She discusses what she's learned about hunting, nature, fishing, animals and people in her books, which she said are aimed at children ages 0-8.

In the hunting series, 7-year-old Debber learns about wildlife, the outdoors, and archery. In the fishing series, Debber is now 8 and learns about fishing, boating, manatees, and fish.

"Daddy Took Me Fishing on the Homosassa & Chassahowitzka Rivers" is about a day spent fishing with charter Capt. Mike Baize of MacRae's Marina – a real-life captain.

"Fishing With Daddy on Crystal River & Kings Bay" has its own real-life captain, as well – Capt. Dom of Capt. Kyle Messier's Reel Florida Fishing Charters. Twin Rivers Marina also makes a debut.

Deb said the marinas are selling her work. Her books also are available through her website and from such booksellers as Amazon.com. She said a portion of the proceeds of her fishing series books will be donated to the Citrus County Education Foundation. A portion of the proceeds of her hunting series books is donated to Hunt of a Lifetime, a nonprofit group providing hunting and fishing experiences to those 21 and under who have life-threatening diseases and/or disabilities.



"Daddy Took Me Fishing on the Homosassa & Chassahowitzka Rivers" is one of three fishing-oriented books she's written for children. The books are set along the Nature Coast. The author also written three hunting books for children.

Deb, who's been visiting Citrus County since she was a child and her great-aunt lived in Beverly Hills, recalls loving to spend time on Fort Island Trail and at the former Crystal River Mall.

"I want people to know about Citrus County," she said. "I want them to see the awesomeness, and not just the manatees, but the rivers, the boating. ... When you are here, you can kick back and relax. There are not a lot of judgments being made, and there's great food."