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Life

Books

Demanding Seagull Inspires Couple's Work

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Demanding seagull inspires a children's book

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In publicity information, Valerie Pettis, a Berks County native, describes herself as "an indentured feeder of a demanding seagull."

The seagull happens to be Smeagull, a name bestowed on this bird by Pettis and her writer/naturalist husband, Mark Seth Lender.

Smeagull is the hero of an illustrated children's book entitled "Smeagull the Seagull: A True Story," created by the couple, who reside in Connecticut along Long Island Sound, a bit northeast of New Haven.

Smeagull is, indeed, real, a herring gull who for many years has been knocking daily on the sliding glass door of the Pettis/Lender home for food.

The owners, a pair of good-hearted nature lovers, have succumbed to Smeagull's nutritional demands.

They even keep a refrigerator stocked with sustainable seafood — smelts, sardines, mackerel — as a routine dietary supplement for the bird, which feeds on everything from fish, crabs, shrimp and insects in the wild.

The whole story of Smeagull's unusual adoption by this duo, his persistent visits, his strange disappearance and his ultimate return to his humans all serve as the basis of a self-published \$25 book that includes beautiful full-page illustrations created by Pettis and rhyming text supplied by Lender.

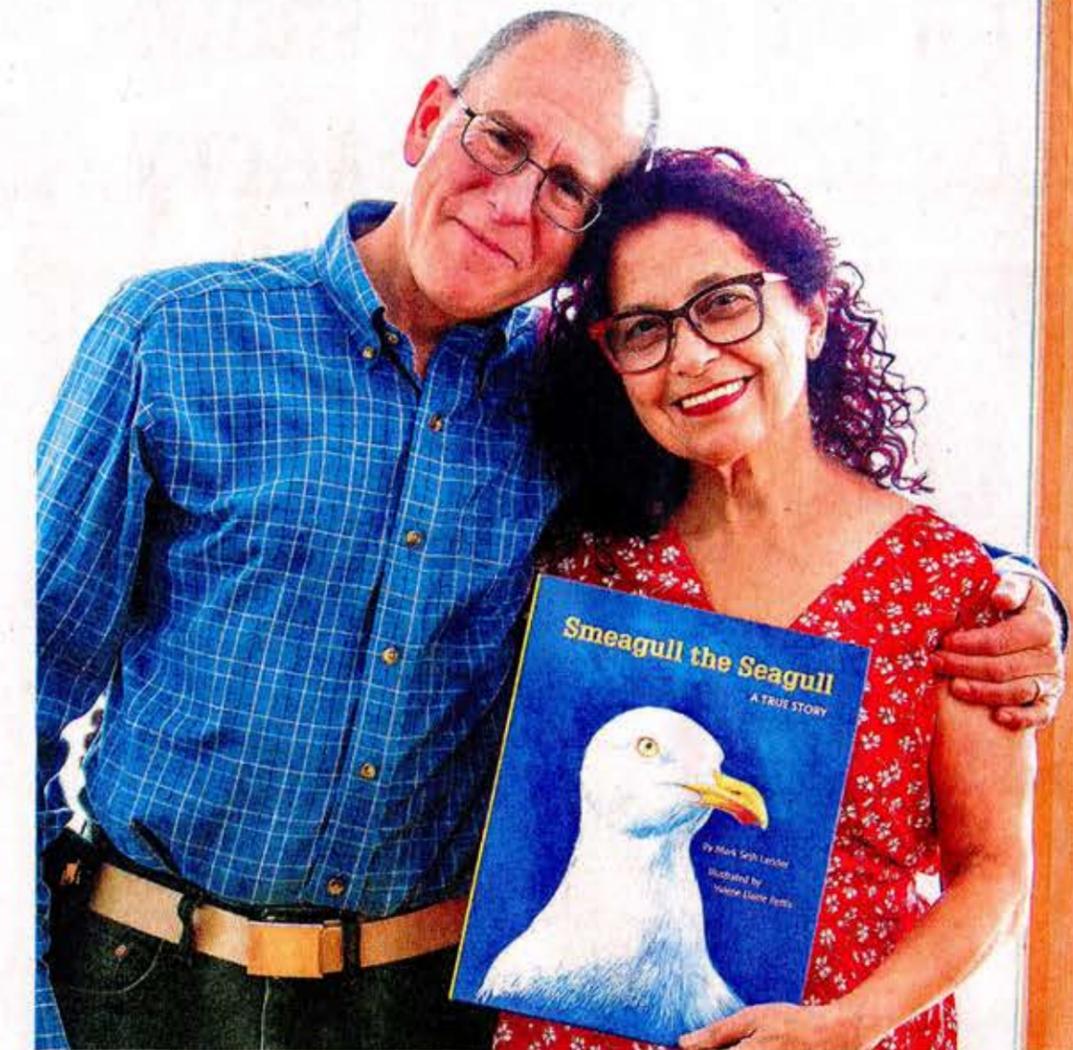
"Mark and I are really blessed to be creative people who can work together well and complement each other," Pettis said. "This is the first project that we have done together."

Secure with accomplishments

While the human collaboration will undoubtedly raise the profile of Smeagull, the reputations of Pettis and Lender already are secure with their own accomplishments.

Pettis is the famous designer of the popular 1975 International Women's Year logo that has been reproduced on coins, stamps and promotional materials worldwide.

The logo depicts a plumpish dove with an equal sign at its tail, while also incorpo-



Mark Seth Lender and his wife, Valerie Pettis, created the illustrated children's book "Smeagull the Seagull: A True Story."

COURTESY OF VALERIE PETTIS

rating the biological sign for women.

A graphic designer, Pettis is a visual communication specialist (the principal of pettisdesign.com) who has done work for corporations such as Citibank, J.P. Morgan and DeBeers as well as projects for nonprofits and international organizations, including Amnesty International, UNICEF and the United Nations.

Her human rights posters are part of the permanent collection in many international design museums.

Pettis is a board member of the American Institute of Graphic Arts and has been invited to teach and lecture at the Fashion Institute of Technology, the Parson School of Design, Cooper Union and the University of the Arts and Yale School of Art.

She has been recognized by *Ides* magazine as a major influence in contemporary graphic design, and has been profiled in *Time* magazine, *The New York Times* and *Print*, *Graphics* and *Progressive Architecture* journals.

New England native Lender, a writer, photographer and

producer, has a background in anthropology and records his own essays on "Living on Earth," a nationally broadcast National Public Radio program dedicated to wildlife and the environment.

He is the author of "Salt Marsh Diary: A Year on the Connecticut Shore" (2011, St. Martin's Press) and writes a weekly column for *The Shoreline Times*, a Connecticut weekly, and is a featured writer in *Ink* magazine.

Lender has done fieldwork and nature photography on seven continents.

Commitment to nature

As a couple married for 30 years, Pettis and Lender have made a lifelong commitment to nature, the environment, gender equality and human rights.

In a significant way, this led them to record what they observed of Smeagull's life, and to create a children's book. They purposely aimed for the attention of younger generations.

"We want there to be a future in the great divide between people and other as-

pects of nature," Lender said. "We care a lot about what happens to the world after we are gone. We don't want it to become impoverished by seeing parts of nature vanish."

In their book, Pettis and Lender emphasize a spiritual link between humans and wildlife and demonstrate that such a relationship has the dynamic potential to uplift the souls of both.

They emphasize the preciousness of all life, specifically stressing seagulls' devotion to their mates, their partnership in raising offspring and strong connection to territories.

"Because of where we live, I've probably learned more from seagulls than any other animal I've been around," Lender said, which is saying a lot considering his world travels.

For her part, Pettis, one of two daughters of the late Dr. George Pettis of Reading, a Greek immigrant and obstetrician/gynecologist, the challenge of illustrating a book about a seagull came down to capturing such a curious bird in every season.

For more information

- Those interested in learning more about Smeagull or to get the book can visit the website smeagull.com.
- Valerie Pettis said she and her husband also want to get their story into the hands of children whose families may not be able to afford the book, so they started a Kickstarter campaign to build a digital version complete with the sounds of Long Island Sound, animation and video. To learn more, individuals should go to kickstarter.com and type in Smeagull.

"I'm a total city girl, but Mark is a nature boy and a kind of bird whisperer," Pettis said. "His insights and words helped to inspire me in creating the illustrations."

Lender said there are few places on Earth, along the shore or inland, that don't boast the presence of some type of seagull.

Premium on education

As for their own background, both Pettis and Lender said their parents put a premium on education and encouraged their innate inquisitiveness and creativity in the goal of always doing something well or to the best of one's abilities.

"I always had an interest in art since I was in grade school," Pettis said. "I really wanted to draw when I went to the Philadelphia College of Art, but the line was so long to enter the program that I switched to graphic design."

That turned out to be a good decision, putting Pettis on a career path that led others to recognize her talent.

Teaching young people that animals are precious is the major theme of "Smeagull the Seagull," but it is also a fulfillment of a message Pettis' father often delivered to her.

"My father, who valued education and struggled as an immigrant to become a doctor, often said that life is not about you, but life should be about doing things for others, going out into the community and giving back," she said. "That belief was instilled into me as a child, and that's why we did this children's book."

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