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When Scott Benarde gives author talks to kids, he often starts by asking them, "What do you need before you can write a book?" He says the smart ones know you need more than pencil and paper – you need an idea. What makes Benarde's family unique is not so much that they have lots of ideas, but that they recognize the good ones and write a book. >



THE NEXT GENERATION? Above, Dana Lichtstrahl with sons Jacob, left, and Zach, a budding writer. Below, Scott Bernarde with his son Michael Dov.

Once, they turned a family vacation into a publishing project, traveling and researching Mediterranean beaches together for *Beach Holidays: From Portugal to Israel* (PMA Communications, 1974).

"It's not like we're all working in the same department store, but in a way we all went into a family business of sorts — communications," says Scott, who is media relations director at the Kaplan Jewish Community Center in West Palm Beach, Fla.

Scott's parents, Melvin and Anita Bernarde, who have lived in Princeton since 1961, just published their twelfth and eighth books respectively, and two of their three children are also published authors. Scott, 54, wrote *Stars of David: Rock 'n' Roll's Jewish Stories* (Brandeis, 2005), and Dana Lichtstrahl, 51, a Princeton communications consultant, has self-published two inspirational tomes, *Will My Real Family Please Stand Up* (2005) and *The Handbook* (2006). (Andrea Spirito, 53, a psychoanalyst, hasn't published a book yet, but is considered by the others to be a terrific writer and valued editor.)

Before a manuscript or book proposal is sent to the publisher, family members get a first look, acting as sounding boards and editors. Dana recently reworked a book proposal based on her sister's suggestions, and as Scott finished chapters of his book, he sent them to Dana and his father. "I knew that if they liked what I wrote, then I was okay," he says.

"It's been great to be able to bounce whatever you've written off everybody else," says Anita.

CHAPTER ONE

Melvin, the former director of Temple University's Environmental Resource Center, acting chairman in the Department of Community Medicine at Hahnemann Medical School and associate director of the Environmental Studies Institute at Drexel University, has spent a lifetime writing about the hot-button issues of our time, from hazardous waste to global warming. He says it was Anita, however, who got him started in the book business. A phone call she made more than three decades ago led to a weekly half-hour ABC television show that became the basis for

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IT'S IN THE GENES A sampling of titles by Benarde family members

his 1970 book, *Our Precarious Habitat*, now in its fourth edition, *Our Precarious Habitat: It's in Your Hands* (Wiley-Interscience, 2007). Using epidemiological data, his books separate scientific fact from environmental doomsday hype. "I was cutting across the grain," he says.

All of Anita's books are related to art. She's a painter, printmaker and mixed media artist, whose work can be found in private and corporate collections, including AstraZeneca, Bally's Park Place and GlaxoSmith-Kline. When a Van Nostrand editor asked if she'd ever thought of illustrating children's books, she jumped at the chance, eventually writing and illustrating her own books, including *The Popskin Swander* (Walker & Company, 1972), based on children and events in their Princeton neighborhood.

Her most recent book, *Spanish Patterns & Designs*, is one of three design collections she created for The International Design Library. "I'm really an idea person," she says. "I have that 'I can do it' attitude — even things I've never done."

NATURE VERSUS NURTURE

Scott and Dana didn't grow up thinking they'd write books. So why did they each choose writing as a creative outlet?

"It was what your family did and what you were exposed to," says Scott, who wrote poetry as a child and dreamt of being a singer/songwriter.

Scott earned a masters from the University of Missouri's journalism school, which led to a 21-year career in journalism, including stints as the pop music columnist for the *Star Sentinel* and *Palm Beach Post*. *Stars of David* combined his love and passion for journalism, Judaism and rock 'n' roll. The idea for the book developed over a decade in response to his coverage of the Christian rock phenomenon and his discovery that David Lee Roth learned to sing while studying for his bar mitzvah, and that Bob Dylan shut down his tour to pray on Yom Kippur.

After studying fine arts and communication at the University of Maryland, Dana worked as a television news graphic artist, eventually branching out into marketing and communications. When she started writing about 20 years ago, she found that words could be "as playful as any color or shape, with rhythms, tone, flow and movement." *Will My Real Family Please Stand Up* is a collection of essays that provide a new perspective on the meaning of family. She says she wrote it after her divorce so that her sons could under-

stand that their family was reconfigured, not broken. *The Handbook*, created as a leave behind for her sons, is a collection of "wisdoms" culled from her two decades of journals. It's designed to be randomly opened and used as a starting point for contemplating life issues.

IN THE PIPELINE

The ideas just keep coming. Melvin's next book will deal with the public's fear of germs. Scott has started a humorous primer for new fathers, but it's on hold until his kids are older. Dana has two projects in the works: *In Good Company*, a sequel to her first book, explores the family paradigm in the business environment; *Reality Unraveled* relates her experience of self-identity based on the six components of reality developed by Princeton resident Ravi Arupurakal.

And now the grandkids are showing interest in the family biz. Dana's eldest son, Zach, writes about music on his blog (audiogypsy.com) and for *The Daily Targov* at Rutgers, where he is a junior studying anthropology and musicology.

For the Benarde family, writing books is fun and deeply satisfying, providing a sense of purpose and accomplishment, with the occasional bonus of affecting another's life. ■

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ARTS AND SCIENCES
Melvin Benard's books deal with environmental issues, while Anita's tomes have been art-related.