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# Milly and Molly for TV fame

## Author fulfilling dream of promoting values-based education for children

by Georgina Bond

Having spawned a series of children's books, Milly and Molly are heading for television fame now that their Gisborne creator, Gill Pittar, has sold the television rights to their adventures.

The first series featuring the multicultural friends is due for release at the children's television festival in Cannes in October, and will then be pitched to television companies around the world.

The 13-episode series is being produced by a consortium which includes Singapore animation company Scrawl Studios and Sydney-based Beyond Production — one of the world's largest producers and distributors of children's programming.

Guiding the project is award-winning Australian children's television producer Ron Saunders.

Although the TV series will boost Pittar's company Milly Molly Group, which will take a cut from all sales and merchandising, for Pittar it builds on her long-held dream to promote values-based education to children.

She said the stories drew from her country upbringing in Waikato, and aimed to inspire imagination and encourage children to lead a well-balanced lifestyle, with a key message — "we may look different but we feel the same".

"Pain, heartbreak, loss of identity, self-esteem and sound values transcend race, colour and creed. I want to help make a difference."

Since writing her first book six years ago, her aim has always been to create a children's brand such as Thomas the Tank Engine or Bob the Builder, with a strong values theme. "That is the nub of the business."

Milly and Molly had their origins

in the topsy-turvy woollen dolls that Pittar, a former medical technician, started making at home 10 years ago.

Fair-skinned Molly was at one end, and when you turned the doll over and flipped over its skirt, dark-skinned Milly was at the other.

Four years later husband John encouraged her to write a story to promote the dolls, modelled on one her grandmother had owned, and the Milly, Molly brand was born.

A mother of four and a grandparent, Pittar wanted to create stories other parents would like to read to their children.

Although initially for Kiwi kids, she quickly realised bigger opportunities lay in the market for education materials worldwide.

"If we were going to get anything out of it we had to go abroad," she said.

To do that, she set off to the Frankfurt Bookfair with four self-funded titles.

Generating enough interest to confirm she was on the right track, she returned home to "polish her penny"

for the next year.

Now, 95 per cent of the books are exported, the titles contracted for release in 100 countries and 23 languages. China is the largest market, where 980,000 books were sold in the first three months they became available last year, followed by Indonesia and Spanish-speaking countries.

Now, New Zealand Trade and Enterprise is helping Pittar with a market entry strategy for the potentially huge US market

NZTE's Hawkes Bay manager Jeannine Walsh said Milly Molly's commitment to grow internationally from the outset had given it the direction to expand.

"The topics and themes presented are applicable to a wide international



**BARRIER BREAKER:** Gill Pittar ... "we may look different but we feel the same."

audience and have contributed to the company's global success," said Walsh.

There are now 64 titles in the book series and accompanying educational resources, such as audio tapes and CD ROMs, have been translated into 26 languages.

The products target children aged 3 to 8, and cover issues such as coping with grief, health and exercise, environmental problems, and virtues such as honesty and loyalty.

"It's timely. Values education and the acceptance of diversity is kicking in all around the world. Indigenous people worldwide are trying to find their place, and the world's got a lot smaller, so we're all mixing up

together," said Pittar.

Having the right business model has been another key to the success of the business which the Pittar's run from Milly Molly House in Gisborne.

The strategy has been to license others companies to produce all the foreign language materials under strict guidelines.

However, a decision early on to retain the English language rights has paid off.

"We would not have been able to negotiate a television series without that," said Pittar.

She has been talking to key players in the international television industry since 2002, and said there was strong competition for the television

production rights.

"I the end we opted for a team approach that will be best for the brand long-term."

Along the way, Pittar has also sought advice from an advisory board chaired by Fisher & Paykel executive chairman Gary Paykel.

Daughter Kate takes care of sales and marketing from Auckland.

Outsourcing most parts of the business has helped to minimise overheads and keep Pittar free for writing — something she will have to keep up if a there is demand for a second series.

And will there be Willy and Wally for boys?

"I think not. This has been more than enough for me," said Pittar.