

Alabama author to sign books Saturday

Empty nest syndrome led to first book

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Lawrence County native Jane Carroll has always wanted to write. But it took a case of empty nest syndrome ~ and a little help from a character named Bertha - to bring that dream to life.

Carroll worked as a registered nurse for more than 25 years, but maintained her love of writing by filling journals' and writing poetry in her spare time.

"Writing is something that I've always loved and always wanted to do," Carroll said on Monday during a trip to Cullman. "But years ago, it seemed more practical to go to nursing school as far as a means of taking care of myself."

An episode of "The Oprah Winfrey Show" introduced Carroll to the concept of personal coaches. She decided to train to become one while she worked as a nurse in Gulf Shores. It was then that her own personal Coach encouraged her to pursue her writing dreams.

That was in November 2002. By October of last year, Carroll held in her hands the completed copy "Bertha-Size Your Life!" She will sign copies at The Bookstore in Cullman. Carroll will also make a short goal-setting presentation called "And a Flamingo in Every Yard" at 11:30 a.m.

Carroll started writing a guide book of sorts for empty nesters, as her two daughters had recently moved out on their own. The book was comprised of exercises to help a woman through the transition.

"You don't even know what kind of pizza you like because you just eat what the kids eat," Carroll said.

But she said the book that took shape was dull—until Bertha came along.

A friend whose kids had recently left home turned to Carroll for advice. When Carroll responded, it was with more levity than in the book she was authoring.

"I jokingly said, 'Just name your nest. I'm going to name mine Bertha,'" Carroll recalled.

Just like that, Bertha was born. Instead of the more straight-forward book she had planned, Carroll's guide to life as an empty nester became a series of tales centering on a rambunctious, free-spirited character named Bertha.

Each story is coupled with a life lesson of sorts. For example, in the chapter titled "Get the Pom-Poms!," Bertha informs the narrating character that people be acknowledged on a daily basis in order to feel good about themselves.

"You can't always count on other people to acknowledge you, even though sometimes they will," Bertha says in the book. "You have to acknowledge yourself every day for whatever you've accomplished, even baby steps you've taken. There's an easy way to do it, too. I call it Bertha-Sizing your life."

The book reads like a novel with an underlying current of a self-help mentality. Carroll, who enjoys reading books of that genre, said her goal was for the book to be uplifting.

"You take all these things and you twist them around into something fun," she said.

After the twisting was done, Carroll decided to have her manuscript professionally edited, and then published by a small publishing company, The Author's Press. She said she hopes for the book to be picked

up by a larger company later, but that she was in a hurry to get it into print.

"I'd be sitting here when I'm 80 saying, 'Let's see about Bertha,'" Carroll said, adopting an exaggerated, feeble tone. "Instead, Bertha and I will be doing fun things when we're 80."

Carroll is now touring the state, promoting the book in bookstores, libraries and even the recent community health fair at Wallace State Community College—with "anybody that'll have me," she said.

And though she has sold as many as 134 books at an event, Carroll said the best experience so far was speaking to the third grade class at Moulton Elementary, in her home town of Moulton. During the visit, some of the children asked if she was famous.

"Yes, I am," Carroll replied. "I'm famous because I believe in myself."

As she left the room, she said the class whispered to each other in hushed tones, "That was Jane Carroll."

"To me, it was very important to give them the knowledge," Carroll said. "The sky's the limit. If you believe in yourself in the third grade, you can do anything."

For Carroll, that "anything" now includes a schedule of writing, motivational speaking appointments and personal coaching. Nursing is in the past, and a new book waits in the future. She has already compiled about 10 of the expected 25 chapters for her second book, "Putting Your Best Foot Forward: Bertha's Guide to Life and Shoes." Carroll anticipates the book being released in the fall.