

Alumni Spotlight : Cathie Bellak Katz '66

Ocean currents carry sea beans – the drift seeds from tropical trees and vines – from Florida's coast to the Jersey Shore. Alumni author Cathie Bellak Katz '66, a writer, illustrator and founder of the web page www.seabean.com, has drifted in the opposite direction.

Cathie, 53, became a resident of Melbourne Beach, Fla., 18 years ago, where she has turned her delight in beachcombing into an expertise on beach ecosystems. She's now known – near and far – as “The Sea Bean Lady.” She actually combed the beach during Hurricane Floyd.

She can tell you all about lava bomblots, mermaid purses (skate egg cases) and beach foam. She also knows that Christopher Columbus and Charles Darwin used sea beans to study ocean currents, and that it was a capital crime in the Seychelles not to turn over to authorities the coco-de-mer sea bean, which was believed to be an aphrodisiac.

She began collecting unusual beach objects during summers spent in Ocean City. She continued to collect natural objects throughout the world, as she lived in Spain, Germany, Holland, Portugal, Greece and Israel. Cathie has been married since 1986 to Gary Katz, a fisherman.

“The shore,” she writes, “is the seam of the coast, connecting land with sea, the transition zone where special land-sea creatures are the threads that hold the seam together.”

Her search to identify unusual beach items led her to Dr. Charles R. Gunn, research botanist and a co-author of the only available guide to sea-beans, The World Guide to Tropical Drift Seeds and Fruit. From his file of thousands of letters from around the world, she saw the need to distribute information about this unexplored area of nature.

She has a communications degree from Florida Atlantic University and worked as senior editor at the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory in Cape Canaveral, but now pursues a full-time publishing career. She is the author of the recently released Nature, A Day at a Time, a Random House/Sierra Club book, as well as a series of soft cover wildlife books: The Nature of Florida's Beaches, The Nature of Florida's Waterways, The Nature of Florida's Neighborhoods, The Nature of Florida's Ocean Life.

Objects that float have become the anchor of her professional work. She is editor and publisher of The Drifting Seed, an international newsletter. She also is founder and director of the International Sea-Bean Symposium, a six-year-old annual beachcombers' festival in Florida that draws research scientists, botanists, park rangers and oceanographers from more than 500 people in 20 countries.

Television and radio appearances – on NatureScope, a Palm Beach TV show, on The Charles Osgood Files and on BBC radio in England – reflect her goal to connect the scientific community with lay people.

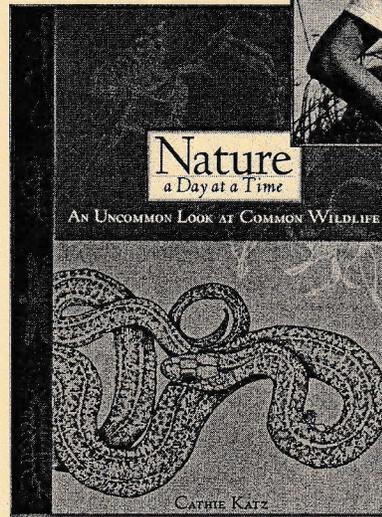
“I serve as a link between the scientific community and the lay person who loves nature but doesn't have the time to read three volumes on the history of invertebrates,” she told Florida Today. “I also knew I had to compete with attention spans shaped by ‘Baywatch,’ fast food and sound bites.”

Nature shows the connections between animal behavior and human nature. Written as a day-by-day journal, it interweaves fascinating facts about a familiar creature, appealing pen-and-ink drawings and a related quotation from such sources as Emily Dickinson, Thoreau or Joseph Campbell. “Little Larry,” her stick figure alter ego, slyly nestles with the snake that is the cover illustration.

She now is writing a second book, Beaches and Beyond: Science and Spirit from the Sea A Day at a Time, scheduled for publication later this year.

Cathie has fond memories of her days at Moorestown Friends and cites the school's ongoing impact on her career path.

“My education at MFS continues to influence every aspect of my life, particularly my writing career,” Katz notes. “I have such vivid



memories of the passionate English classes in which all of us students were involved and given the chance to be a part of the dedication of our teachers.

“My love of books and the written word is a direct result of my enthusiastic teachers, particularly Mrs. Carolyn Hedges. Working on the 1966 Cupola with Mr. (Gerald) and Mrs. Hedges gave me the passion

for the creative process from start to finish – which I applied when I created the series of Florida wildlife books.”

No stranger herself to the struggle to survive, Cathie overcame injuries from a severe auto accident in Germany at age 21. She had to learn to walk again and then battled addiction to the morphine that eased her pain during her four-month hospital stay. Most recently, Cathie has undergone a difficult journey to subdue advanced vulvar cancer.

She has donated copies of her works to the MFS library, accompanied by a note that says, “I owe an incredible journey to my years at MFS. Thanks for the foundation of my writing career – and of my spirit!” The book Nature was inscribed “To Moorestown Friends School: Thanks for giving me the foundation to follow my bliss.”

Folklore has it that sea beans carry good luck and bring magic to your life when you give or receive one. As someone who has shared sea beans with many around the world, no one deserves that grace more than Cathie.

MFS is selling a limited number of copies of Cathie's book Nature: A Day at a Time for the special discount price of \$15. To reserve your copy, visit or call the Development Office, (856)235-2900, ext. 213, or e-mail mfsalumni@mfriends.org. For mail orders, please send a check for \$18 (\$3 shipping and handling) made payable to Moorestown Friends School, in care of the Development Office, Moorestown Friends School, 110 E. Main St., Moorestown, NJ 08057.