

# THE HARBINGER



PG 4 ▶ Read about the Cunninghams' Farmer's Market



## A NEVERENDING DREAM

Junior uses creativity and imagination to write and illustrate novel

▶written by Julia Poe ▶photo by Jake Crandall

**D**reamtopia and Nightmareland. Where the forests are fraught with over-sized crocodiles and crawling rats. Where the people are championed by a young boy with telepathic powers and a beautiful princess who dresses like a woman yet fights like a man. Where the villain, the Nightmare King, holds power over armies of goblins and ogres.

This is the world that lives inside junior Nicole Bretell's head. After all, she created it.

Nicole spends most of her free time in this dream world. This world overflows into every aspect of her life.

This world is in her art workshop at home where she transfers its story from her head to the sheets of paper before her. She details the leaves of her world's trees in different shades of green, forms ripples in its lakes with light blue pencil, adds creases to the corners of its hero's wide eyes.

This world follows Nicole to her kitchen every night. If she has enough time tonight, Nicole will spend an

hour, maybe two, before the computer screen in her kitchen. She's writing, working on a fantasy novel, a dream and a goal that is two years and 700 pages in the making.

Those 700 pages are a huge step for the aspiring novelist who didn't speak in full sentences until second grade.

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Chaos. That's what Nicole remembers the most from her childhood.

"My brain was just everywhere at once," Nicole said. "I couldn't focus. I was just like, 'Oh, look at this, and this, and this,' and there was no stop to it."

As a kindergartener, Nicole's education wasn't focused on the alphabet or the color wheel. Her mom, Claire, and a team of specialists were concerned with one thing — getting Nicole to talk.

At 3, Nicole was diagnosed with autism. Doctors told Claire that Nicole's development would plateau at 6. Claire sold her dental practice to become a constant companion

for her daughter who, she was told, would never speak in full sentences.

Her daughter is a junior at Shawnee Mission East now. She has almost straight A's in a typical junior curriculum, with a B in jewelry. She and Claire go out for Claire's birthday dinner at Johnny Cascone's and Nicole can order for herself — spaghetti with meat sauce, cheesecake for dessert. She reminds Claire that their dog, Stella, needs to go on a walk when the 5-year-old labrador chews on a pair of tennis shoes.

It was a miracle. That is the only way that Claire can explain Nicole's improvement.

She remembers the days when Nicole was different. When Nicole said her first word to her, Claire was cutting tomatoes in the kitchen. At the sound of her daughter's voice, she startled, slicing her finger.

Nicole was four.

▶continued on pg 12

# forever DREAMING

▶story continued from the cover



▶photos by Jake Crandall and Caroline Creidenberg

There were times when her daughter's progress seemed painfully slow. When Nicole was 6 and Claire would guide the fat red crayon clenched in her daughter's fist in wide circles, repeating the shape's name over and over. When Nicole was 7 Claire would practice four-square with her daughter in the backyard, so that the girl would know how to play at recess. When Nicole was 10 and the two watched hours of "Everybody Loves Raymond" to teach Nicole humor.

The progress was slow compared to other children who attended Westwood View Elementary School with Nicole. But her development didn't stop at 6, as the doctors had predicted.

"It was the grace of God, that's the only way to describe it," Claire said. "I don't know why it happened. I was doing everything that all the other moms were doing, but I was praying like a crazy woman. I'm beyond thankful."

The chaos has died down. But that doesn't make the world any less confusing for her.

School, for instance. There's a lot that confuses Nicole at school.

She doesn't understand why people jostle her in the halls and don't apologize. She doesn't understand why students ignore couples making out in the halls, since it's against the rules. She doesn't understand why kids her age swear when her mom tells her that it's wrong.

But her novel, *The Neverending Dream*, isn't confusing.

She knows the good guys — Collin Sparrow, the telepathic hero, and his love interest, the fiery Princess Camille. She knows the villain — the Nightmare King, the only character she hasn't drawn, but describes as "tall and gaunt" and backed by goblins and ogres. She knows which characters can be trusted, like the Crocodile King, and which genie is the funniest.

At school, loyalties aren't always solid. At school, the rules are explained, but Nicole doesn't always see them being followed. At school, she tries to be the enforcer, but no one seems to listen.

Claire doesn't know how to tell her daughter that she must follow the rules, even if she is the only one doing so. Claire doesn't know how to tell her daughter not to tattle. She's not even sure if being a tattle is such a bad thing, anyway.

In *The Neverending Dream*, Nicole is in charge. The rules are enforced. Right triumphs over evil. Wrong is defeated.

The book has been an anchor in Nicole's life for over two years. She began her book on her 15th birthday, and since then, it has encompassed her.

"My mom had gotten me a drawing pad, and I started drawing," Nicole said. "And all of a sudden it just hit me. It was like — BAM."

She began to sketch a story:

An ashen boy lay asleep in a monochromatic bedroom. Above him, the world he was dreaming splattered the ceiling with the vibrant colors of towering castles, rolling hills and beaming princesses.

As she drew, she realized it was more than a drawing; it was a story. A full story, a plot to be completed, a world to be explored. She had to write it. She didn't tell her mom what she was doing. She just started writing.

When Nicole speaks, she pauses. She thinks over each word. Her speech is halted.

When she draws, her hands move fluidly. Without pause, a character is formed from colored pencil lead. When she writes, the story flows without pause. When it's just her and her story, Nicole has confidence.

Around 20 pages into *The Neverending Dream*, Nicole told her mom that she wanted to get this story published. Around 100 pages in, Claire began to believe that it could really happen.

This wasn't the first time that Nicole had told her that she wanted to be published. She'd written a story called *Pan and Bellina* that she'd been ready to publish, until Claire gently told her that it was too close to *Tinkerbell* to make it. Nicole took the critique in stride and began to look for

something more original.

"My mom told me that I should try to find something that was mine," Nicole said. "It needed to come right out of my head. And I just kept drawing, and all of the sudden, I just got it."

And it is her own. Collin is her own, Camille is her own, the genie, the Nightmare King, the goblins and the crocodiles — they are all her own creations. She spends hours on their plots and character quirks, giving them depth with her colored pencils and adventures with her words.

Those characters are a welcome escape on the days when the chaos returns. When unexpected confrontation flusters Nicole. When she comes home with tears and asks questions that Claire doesn't know how to answer. When her stress causes her to snap at her mom and refuse to listen to her paras.

The *Neverending Dream* takes that away. For Nicole, focus is no longer a problem. Quite the opposite. The junior has acquired extreme focus. This is a common tendency of autism and can lead to an autistic child playing with the same toy, watching the same movie or reading the same book for hours. It allows Nicole to write or draw for hours with unbroken focus, not wavering from the task at hand unless her mom interrupts her.

Nicole's fixation is her story. Claire knows this and is careful to moderate her daughter's fascination — only two hours of writing or drawing a night. If left alone, Claire isn't sure how long Nicole would stay, typing and drawing. It's not something that the mother wants to test.

"I watch her and make sure that she breaks it up with doing homework and having dinner," Claire said. "I do think that if I let her be, she'd just stay there, writing and writing."

Nicole gets an hour or two every day with her world. The rest of her time is split between schoolwork and Claire. Homework comes first — before writing, before art, before anything else. Nicole has goals, after all.

She has goals of graduating in 2014 with straight A's. She has goals of attending Emporia State University and after that, a liberal arts college. She has goals of becoming a screenwriter, a voice actress and a Pixar animator.

Her goals have a common requirement: independence. It's something Nicole and Claire are striving for.

It's why she answers the door at their house and why she picks up the phone when it rings. It's why Claire is teaching her to cook and wash dishes. It's why Claire stresses the importance of different social skills whenever the opportunity arises.

Someday, Nicole will be independent.

For now, however, Nicole and Claire cherish their time together. They read together. They go to T-Rex Cafe, Nicole's favorite restaurant, and smile when they remember how scared Nicole was the first time a paper-mache dinosaur roared. They take Stella on walks and talk about school and friends and, most importantly, *The Neverending Dream*.

It's one of their favorite topics. They talk about the latest plot twists. Nicole gives her pages to look over and Claire points out sections that need clarity. Listening to Nicole read the story out loud, Claire will offer suggestions and tips. She loves to watch her daughter draw a character, producing a willowy princess in less than an hour with her pencils and imagination.

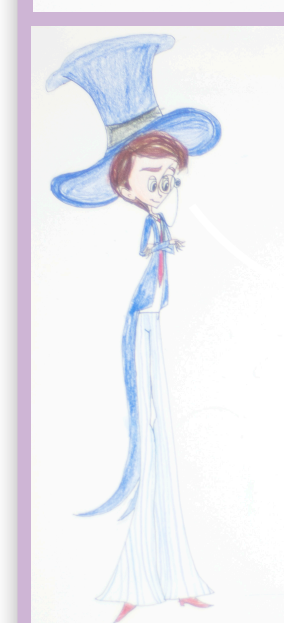
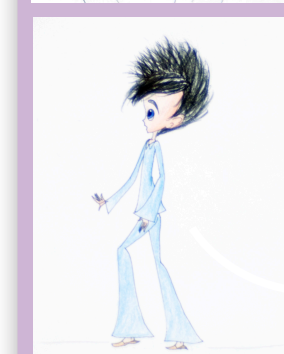
*The Neverending Dream* has become their story.

Although the completion date has been pushed back several times, the pair has settled on the summer of 2014 as the deadline for completing Nicole's book. Once the book is finished, Claire and Nicole aren't worried about the likelihood of having it published.

"Nicole is a fighter, she's determined," Claire said. "I've had so many people say, 'Oh, she can't do this, this is beyond her ability,' and she's always proved them wrong, and she's going to keep proving them wrong, for the rest of her life."

## from the PAGES to the BIG SCREEN

Nicole casts actors to play the roles of her characters should it become a movie



Johnny G and Serafina can be seen on the pages of Nicole's book.

**character:**  
**PRINCESS CAMILLE**  
Nicole enjoys the idea of being an actress and she thinks she could play the lead role well.  
**played by:**  
**NICOLE BRETELL**

**character:**  
**PROF. ARBUCKLE**  
The character is a stoic man and Nicole thinks Harrison Ford plays a nice strong male character.  
**played by:**  
**HARRISON FORD**

**character:**  
**JOHNNY G (GENIE)**  
The genie is a funny character and Nicole thinks Bill Cosby is hilarious.  
**played by:**  
**BILL COSBY**

**character:**  
**SERAFINA**  
Celine Dion is her favorite singer, and Nicole says Serafina would be singing a lot in the movie.  
**played by:**  
**CELINE DION**