

Wendy Hayes

Storyteller/Poet/Author

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Great-grandmother and retired nurse Wendy Hayes was inspired to consider creating a series of short animated 'edutainment' stories for young children following the tragic death in the UK of two-year-old Jamie Bulger in 1993.

Wendy, who was then living in the UK, says that "many good people were spurred into action" by the tragedy, but she found herself wondering why, despite all the positive safety initiatives, children were seemingly still failing to absorb and retain the safety messages they were being taught.

Along with musician and composer Steve Kirby, Wendy approached the principal of her local primary school and asked to spend time with the children there in order to research new ways of educating children aged between five and eight about important issues, such as bullying and "not always believing what strangers tell you".

'Woodpecker Wood' evolved over the course of a year, with the children participating throughout the creative process, from helping with line drawings and songs, to selecting characters and choosing their names, such as naughty

Biffer Bunny. Wendy then commissioned UK company Stork & Cradle to produce her characters in wood and artist Sue Roebuck to illustrate the stories.

Wendy's father was from Laois and she says that Ireland has "always been home". While holidaying in Galway, staying with the musician Matt Cunningham and his family, she and her husband Kevin fell in love with the place and moved to Mausrevagh in Headford in 2002.

Encouraged by Kevin to research her stories once more in a local school, Wendy says she was delighted when "they proved every bit as popular" with the children. "What I had ascertained was that they were as loved as much, amazingly, as they were all those years ago. That really was amazing," she says.

She then recorded six short stories under the guidance of Eugene Kelly in his

studio in Barna, giving local children Aimee Holden from Mausrevagh, Niamh and Sinead St John from Belclare and UK children Charlotte Chambers and Victoria Summerhill the opportunity to sing the jingles and ballads.

The next two years were spent with the team at the Ken Little Design Studio in Liosban Business Park, where her website www.woodpeckerwood.com and the animated stories with sing-along-songs were created on DVD.

The DVD was launched two years ago at the Baboró International Arts Festival for Children and the stories have since been broadcast by the award-winning Internet television company An Lar TV and Claremorris Community Radio.

Wendy describes the tales as "gentle" and "not over preachy" and says they emphasise the importance of "feelings, friendship, hon-

esty, discipline, and team spirit" in addition to imparting invaluable safety messages.

And she says that teachers both at home and abroad have found that "the diversity of 'Woodpecker Wood' would prove a valuable tool when helping children learning English and certain special needs".

"My stories reach deep into the hearts of little children, encouraging in them the best opportunity possible for a happy, safe and good life with a little help from their friends in Woodpecker Wood," says Wendy.

Wendy's future plans include making the stories available globally and special school-friendly workshops are already underway, which see Wendy and Ra-Ra Rabbit (Biffer Bunny's granddad) visiting primary schools around Galway. For further information, Wendy can be contacted at info@tichytale-productions.com.