

Prep Alum Follows Dream to Become a Novelist

By: Emily Campbell

Upon graduation from Prep, Nicole Bensch Seitz '90 attended UNC-Chapel Hill where she received a BA in Journalism and Mass Communications in 1993. After moving back to Bluffton, she began writing articles for *The Island Packet* and *The Bluffton Packet* while attending Savannah College of Art & Design for Illustration. However, Nicole took a break from writing and didn't write again until 2002 when she was expecting her first child and attempted her first piece of fiction. She wrote what she described as a "middle-grade" novel, *Where Sky and Sea Collide*, about a young girl who lives on a small island and discovers the secrets of the Bermuda Triangle as well as secrets to her past. Although the book remains unpublished, it taught Nicole that she could finish a manuscript!

Nicole's mother was and still is an avid reader. As a result, Nicole grew up around books. Her mother has been a tremendous inspiration for her and instilled in Nicole at an early age that she could achieve her dreams. She finds it sort of funny, but when she began writing fiction, one man's face and voice would pop into her head quite often: (former Prep English teacher) Dr. Fred Bassett's. She remembers that in his literature class he would often reel her back in with these words, "Focus, Nee-cole. Focus." It's become a sort of mantra for her over the years.

The idea for her first adult novel, *The Spirit of Sweetgrass*, came to her when she was expecting her second child in October of 2004. A month after she began writing the novel, she went on bed rest—she couldn't write, but was in the loving care of a family friend, an African-American basket weaver, who filled Nicole's head with stories and her incredible voice. After an emergency delivery, Nicole remembers waking in the middle of the night, grateful for a healthy child and a second chance at life and compelled to write this important story.

Nicole's debut novel, *The Spirit of Sweetgrass* is narrated by Essie Mae Laveau Jenkins, a 78-year-old sweetgrass basket weaver, who sits on the side of Hwy. 17 in the company of her dead husband, Daddy Jim. Inspired by her Auntie Leona's voodoo, Essie Mae finally discovers her calling in life and weaves magical "love" baskets, praying over them fervently to affect the lives of those who visit her roadside stand. When she's faced with losing her home, her stand and being put in a nursing home, Daddy Jim talks her into coming on up to Heaven to meet sweet Jesus, something she's always wanted to do. It's a heartwarming and spiritual tale of deep Gullah roots, strong family ties and the glorious magic of Heaven.

Her most recent non-fiction article about three South Carolina artists' studios was featured in the June 2005 issue of *South Carolina Magazine*. Of course, she would love for writing to become her full-time career *some day*, but she is fortunate to own a graphic/web design firm, Bounce Designs, LLC, and it helps to pay the bills—she supposes that she can't quit her day job just yet!

Nicole now lives in Mount Pleasant, SC with her husband, Brian, and children, Olivia and Coulter. Both children are under the age of four, so they keep her and Brian very busy! When she's not writing, she enjoys painting. Currently, her Lowcountry and Gullah paintings are on display in the Artists' Loft Gallery in Mount Pleasant.

Her novel, *The Spirit of Sweetgrass*, is coming from Integrity Publishers in December 2006/January 2007. It should be available in both mainstream and Christian bookstores. It's part of a two-book deal, and she's busy working on her next novel now, which also includes aspects of the Gullah culture. You can check her web site, www.nicoleseitz.com, for news and details.