

Hill quartet creates online kids' literature Web site

by Sally Cohen and Len Lear

Four Chestnut Hill area men — Skip Scholl, David Rivoire, James Bolno and David Lenett — have launched a new Web site, MonkeyReader.com, which they say is the “next stage in the evolution of the popular Discovery Bookshop in downtown Philadelphia, founded in 1984, and DiscoveryKidsBooks.com, which emerged in 1998.”

With MonkeyReader, the experienced group plans to expand its core area of children's literature with a huge selection of books, movies and music for the entire family. The company hopes to gain a foothold in Philadelphia area first and then build a network of supporters nationally.

“We hope to differentiate ourselves from other online sellers like Amazon and Borders,” said Bolno, 53, a Chestnut Hill resident, “by creating the sense of community that one might experience in their neighborhood book shop, but in this case it will be online.”

“The large box stores and online sellers have become so impersonal, we hope to create a following of customers who see us as an alternative to the huge conglomerates and who appreciate what we stand for,” added Scholl, 40, of Erdenheim. “MonkeyReader has a strong interest in children's literature and children's literacy, and should be a focal point for anyone interested in these areas.”

The idea for MonkeyReader was conceived by Jim's late wife,

Kathy Lynn-Bolno, who created the original art work for it. She was an illustrator and portrait artist. “We thought the children's book market was being underserved,” said Jim, who has a masters degree in government administration from Penn as well as 33 years experience in finance and management positions, “and we were very interested in children's literacy. The idea has now blossomed into a full-service business providing books, music and movies for all ages, with a strong interest in children's lit.”

“When you first enter MonkeyReader.com you are greeted by Captain Monkey Reader, our lovable mascot,” said Rivoire, 44, of Chestnut Hill, who is currently completing an M.Ed. at Arcadia University with certifications in elementary education and special education and has 20+ years experience in film and video production.

“The Captain, as we like to refer to him, is our creation: an attempt to create a fun, warm character that kids will like, who will act as a guide, showing you through the different sections of the site. The Captain is our emissary, traveling around the world promoting the joy of children's literature. He is the face of MonkeyReader.”

The site also provides a wealth of content. “Many people do not know what their children should be reading, so we offer our assistance in a number of different ways, similar to getting advice from an associate in your local book

shop,” said Lenett, 44, of Chalfont, a graduate of Carnegie-Mellon University with a degree in industrial design. Lenett has spent the last 15 years working as a toy designer and has done work with licensed toy products such as Sponge Bob, Spiderman, Sesame Street characters, etc.

“First we offer our recommendations, broken down by different age groups spanning from toddler to adult. We also offer books that were winners of prestigious children's literature awards such as the Caldecott Award, the Newberry Award and the Coretta Scott King Award, spanning back to the beginning of these awards some 50 years ago.”

The company has also developed a program for special needs children. An in-house reading specialist, Tina, who is earning her Ph.D. in reading, is available to answer questions and respond within 24 hours. The new firm will also be working with MetroKids Magazine on a book report contest. “We are inviting kids to submit their own book reports, and we will post them on MonkeyReader,” said Scholl, who has an Executive Masters degree in technology management from the Wharton School and Penn Engineering. He currently works in technology and management consulting, including web development.

Each month the quartet will pick the winning book report and reward the author with a \$25 MonkeyReader shopping spree. They will continue to add to our library

of children's book reviews so kids can see what other children liked about a book.

The firm has affiliated itself with one of the largest wholesale book distributors in the world, Baker and Taylor, to handle customer service. The website is scaled so that massive orders can be met instantaneously.

“We can handle any volume whether it is one book a day or 1,000 or more,” said Scholl. “In terms of price, we are now offering an online discount of 30 percent off retail on virtually all of our products. In terms of selection, we have over a million products.”

The four founders of MonkeyReader insist that in addition to making money, they are determined to be socially responsible. They say, for example, that they will donate five percent of the firm's annual profits to non-profit children's literacy organizations.

“We are hoping that our five percent commitment turns out to be a substantial contribution,” said Bolno, “because that will mean not only that we are doing good business, but also that we are making a considerable difference in the fight against illiteracy.”

“We know that there are many worthy non-profit children's literacy organizations right here in the Philly area and that in this financial environment, corporate contributions are way down,” added Rivoire. “We hope to become a new sustainable model for corporate philanthropy.”

For more information, visit www.monkeyreader.com