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Westtown author on a mission

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By BRIAN McCULLOUGH, Staff Writer

EAST GOSHEN — Bruce Larkin invented non-alcoholic and light beer.

Bruce Larkin grew a full beard when he was nine years old.

Bruce Larkin is the chief elevator repair technician at the Sears Tower.

None of the above is true. They are just examples of Larkin, author of more than 700 books for children in pre-kindergarten through second grade, having a little fun with his audience.

Larkin, 53, of Westtown, runs his company from a rather ordinary-looking building on West Chester Pike east of Ellis Lane, where he and 10 employees produce the books used in more than 50,000 schools in 91 countries. The books are published in Tucson, Ariz.

Larkin estimates that 15 million to 16 million of his books are in print.

While he takes time to have a little fun at the end of each of his books -- "The most popular part of the Taj Mahal in India is the Bruce Larkin reflecting pool," reads one -- he does have serious ambitions about his writing career.

"I want to make a book that when teachers and parents use it, it is the gold standard of how to teach children to read," he said recently. "I want to be the most popular children's book author in the country. I want it to be, oh yeah, Bruce and Seuss (as in Dr. Seuss), with his name second."

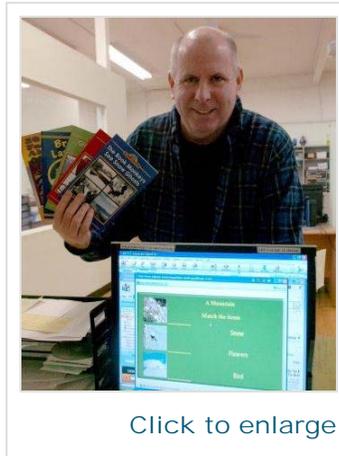
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Th Larkin is quick to add that Wilbooks' main business will always be producing books that teach children to learn how to read.

"Children who cannot read in this society are operating at a severe disadvantage," he said. "All education starts with reading. First you learn to read, then you read to learn."

Larkin's books are used as supplemental reading, the kinds students are given after they've finished a test or for extra take-home reading.

About half of Wilbooks' sales are to schools, with the other half going to individual teachers, Larkin said. The company has carved out a niche by being the low-cost alternative, he added.

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"We have grown every year," Larkin said. "I think we're benefiting from the fact that our books are better priced, especially in this economy."

The son of an Irish immigrant and middle of seven children, Larkin, who has never been married and doesn't have children, does not fit the stereotype of a children's book author.

After attending Henderson High School in West Chester, he enlisted in the Coast Guard at 17 and served four years in search and rescue.

He attended Atlantic County Community College and Stockton State College on the G.I. Bill before embarking on a series of jobs.

In the early 1990s, while working as a wholesaler of children's books to small, independent bookstores, Larkin started Wilbooks. Inspired by the work of other authors, he soon began writing his own.

"I just really thought I could do it better," he said.

Twelve years and 700 titles later, he still travels four to five months a year gathering ideas for new books. His favorite places to visit for inspiration are national parks out West.

Many of his books reflect his love for the outdoors -- "The Book Monkeys (as Wilbooks employees are called) See Snow Ghosts," based in

Montana, "Life in a Hot, Dry Place," based in Death Valley National Park in California and "Rocky Mountain Animals," for instance.

Part of the Wilbooks business philosophy is giving back.

In November and December, Larkin donated more than 400,000 of his books to schools around the country and he has a variety of programs on his Web site, www.wilbooks.com, in which schools can get free or reduced-cost books.

"My dad came here from Ireland when he was 25," Larkin said. "I have benefited in so many ways from what this country has had to offer. When you hit a certain point, you should be giving back.

"All children should have the advantage of having books of their own that they can read whenever they want to," he said.

— To contact business editor Brian McCullough, send an e-mail to business@dailylocal.com.

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