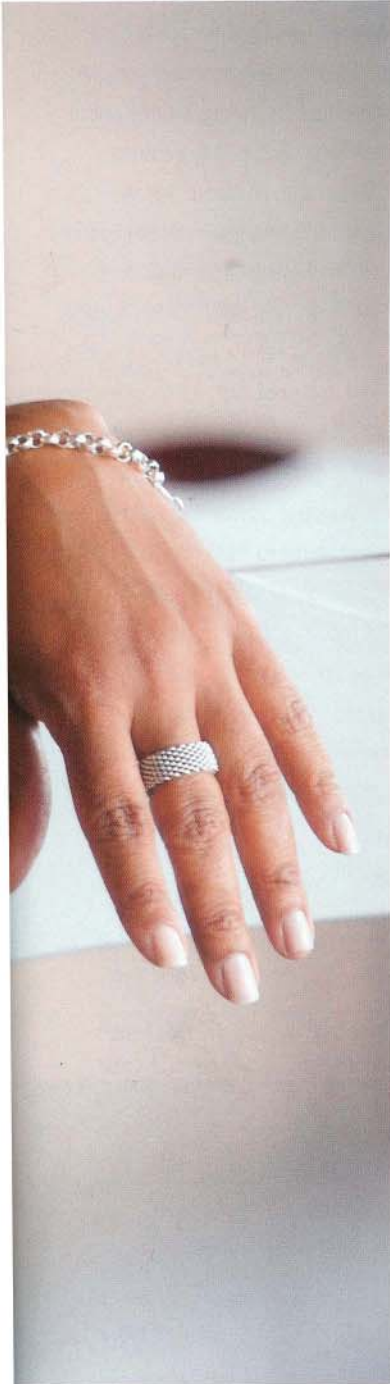


SOLAR POWERED



ROBYN RINGGOLD LIVES HER DREAM
OF TEACHING & INSPIRING OTHERS

STORY BY Dan Collins PHOTOGRAPHY BY Doug Kapustin



ROBYN RINGGOLD WAS NO ORDINARY KID. WHILE OTHER YOUNG GIRLS MIGHT CONTENT THEMSELVES WITH DOLLS, GAMES OR TV, RINGGOLD WAS PLANNING TO FOLLOW IN HER FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS AS AN ENTREPRENEUR.

"He spent a lot of time on his business, working in the basement. I remember playing with his business cards, notepads with his logo on it, and was fascinated by the whole concept of having my own business," says Ringgold, 39.

The Ellicott City resident also notes her father's propensity for giving back. "He led a 'welfare-to-work' program, was a Big Brother, and assisted former prisoners back into society," she says. And now she is following in his footsteps.

After graduating from Florida as a journalism major, Ringgold got her first taste of working with kids, teaching computers for pre-K to fifth-grade students. With stints in Atlanta and Houston, Ringgold honed her graphic-design skills while working as art director for a trade magazine in the plastics industry.

"A friend of mine from college, Zaccai Free, had written a children's book about living in Belize. I loved it and wanted to publish it, but it never got off the ground," she adds. But she did not stop thinking about it.

Returning to Baltimore in 2001, Ringgold found herself working for the Baltimore City school system in information technology. "I worked across the street from a school playground. It was just cement, torn up, with outdated equipment, and I thought, something should be done to raise money to do something here," Ringgold says.

For her, that chance to "do something" would arise thanks to a couple of chance meetings. She had become involved with an international humanitarian organization, The Art of Living Foundation, through which she met illustrator Vidya Vasudevan.

"She's Indian and grew up in Africa. I saw her illustrations of people in African villages, and Belize has a similar look and feel. I knew she was perfect. She did the illustrations for (Free's) book in six months," Ringgold said.

Armed with a vision of creating a company that would publish books about holistic living, Ringgold launched Solar Publishing (www.solarpub.com) with Free's book in 2006.

Around the same time, Ringgold attended her Maryvale Preparatory School reunion, where she chatted with a classmate, Heather Harvison, who had started a mentoring organization called My Sister's Circle.

"When I heard her talking about it, I decided right away that this was something I had to be involved in," says Ringgold.

Through this organization, Ringgold began working with students from Dallas F. Nicholas Senior Elementary School, whose dilapidated schoolyard she had spied years before.

"I became a weekly mentor, going to Dallas Nicholas on Wednesdays, where I had a group of 10 girls, fifth-graders. They were exposed to all kinds of things – healthy eating, yoga, African dance, field trips, guest speakers, and so forth," Ringgold says.

"Robyn is so committed, very even and nonjudgmental," says Harvison. "She's inspiring to the girls, the majority of whom are African-American as well. It's great that they can see how she's been so successful in her professional life."

Harvison describes Ringgold, whom she has known for 25 years, as having a "quiet strength, inner peace and sense of justice. You see the caring for Earth and for other people—that's a consistent rhythm and pulse throughout her life. You can see this in the books she publishes," says Harvison.

Solar Publishing currently has three titles in print and one music CD for children titled

"Earth Day Everyday." Three new titles – "We Dance the Earth Dance," "Mbutu Makes it Rain" and "My Mom Stands on Her Head" – are scheduled for release by year's end. Ringgold is the author of the "My Mom" series, which she says was inspired by her experiences with her daughters, who are now 10 and 13.

'Other authors might just read a story, sign books and go home, but she involves her whole self to ensure the students are engaged.'

—Erika Widmaier

Ringgold notes she is currently expanding Solar Publishing, working on eBooks and mobile apps and an animated series. She also would like to produce documentaries and write a novel for young adults.

In addition to My Sister's Circle, where she also counsels students one-on-one and advises other mentors, Ringgold volunteers with Turning the Page (www.turningthepage.org), a nonprofit organization that links Washington, D.C. public schools, families

and the community to help students access needed educational resources.

"Robyn will read stories with the kids and visit with families afterwards," says Erika Widmaier, Turning the Page program manager. "She does everything she can to involve students in the story, stories about environmentalism and healthy eating.

"When she read from 'My Mom Eats Tofu,' she brought in dried seaweed and almond milk for the kids to try," says Widmaier. "Other authors might just read a story, sign books and go home, but she involves her whole self to ensure the students are engaged."

Widmaier notes it's not just the kids who are intrigued by Ringgold.

"As a mom herself, Robyn gives great advice when she meets with parents. Many have thanked me for bringing Robyn, that she's inspired them to open their own beauty salon or to write their own book or do what they always wanted to do," Widmaier says.

"And she inspires me, too."

Carol Zika

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