

Interview with Mom's Choice Award-Winner Clara Denise West, Ph.D.

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Mom's Choice Awards is excited to announce another post in our interview series where we chat with the inventors, designers, publishers, and others behind some of our favorite family-friendly products.

Hello, Mom's Choice readers! We're so happy you all could join us for another interview in our ongoing series. For this interview, we were able to speak with Clara Denise West, Ph.D., author of the Mom's Choice Award-winning book, **Koko and Friends: The Long Shots**! Koko is an acronym for "Keep on Keepin' On!"—the very essence of perseverance–they never, ever, give up! Koko and Friends is a book about just that, pursuing passions and doing what is right, no matter what life may throw at you. **Koko and Friends: The Long Shots** is a great book to read to your kids, grandkids, nieces, or nephews filled with important lessons and entertainment from start to finish! Keep reading to find out more about Clara Denise West, Ph.D., and her award-winning book, **Koko and Friends!**

MCA: Hi Clara, thank you so much for joining us today, and a big congratulations on winning a Mom's Choice Award! Koko and Friends: The Long Shots is such a delightful read that is such a great tool for any parent, educator, and caretaker wanting to start an important conversation on how to treat others. I'd like to first start the interview off by finding out a little bit about yourself!

Clara: I hold a Ph.D. degree in Systems Engineering and a Master's in Electrical Engineering from the University of Alabama-Huntsville; a Master's in Business and Security Management from Webster University; and Bachelor's degrees in Electrical Engineering and Applied Mathematics from the University of Memphis. A native of Memphis, TN, I relocated to Huntsville, AL to accept a position at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration as a Test Engineer. Following that, I transferred to the U.S. Army Aviation and Missile Command as a Missile Flight Test Engineer, where I retired in 2012.

MCA: Wow, you have had quite an interesting and accomplished career! What then lead you from that career to a career as an award-winning children's book author?



Clara: A major aspect of my job was to generate test scripts, reports, and white papers in the areas of radar and missile systems testing. After an unexpected turn of events, my chosen career path abruptly ended when I encountered an enemy neither my education nor training had prepared me to face. Imagine walking in on your eight-year-old with a handful of pills wanting to sleep and not wake up, to escape daily bullying at school. Now, picture being an eight-year-old, feeling so helpless and hopeless that suicide seems like the only way out. I was that parent, and that eight-year-old was my daughter—my little girl. All I knew was that I wasn't going to bury my baby due to children being cruel to children.

Unable to find age-appropriate resources to help her heal, I quickly realized it was on me to save her life. My "aha" moment came when I discovered that she absolutely hated bugs. I had to get her to understand that bugs had a right to be. Just like her classmates disliked her without cause, she disliked bugs without cause. So we embarked on a research trek to find a reason for her to respect bugs, even if she never

loved them. We discovered how resilient bugs are and that they thrive in 'unfriendly' environments that would annihilate other animals—traits I wanted her to acquire.

We began creating stories about a family of young bugs who were being bullied and belittled by the "cool elite" house bugs. My daughter connected emotionally with the bullied bugs and began to express how she really felt. It was then that I was able to enter her world, see life through her eyes, and start restoring her broken heart. Thus, Koko (an acronym for Keep On Keeping On) and his cousins were born. I eventually realized that many of my daughter's classmates never learned the importance of The Golden Rule or the destructive power their words can have on others.

MCA: It is truly heartbreaking to hear about your daughter's story and what she experienced, thank you for sharing that with us. A lot of people don't know how much of an impact bullying has until it is too late. That is why books such as Koko and Friends: The Long Shots are such an important resource for both children and parents. Can you share with us how Koko and Friends came to be?

Clara: I reached out to several parents of children who committed suicide due to bullying to find out how we, as a nation, could eradicate bullying by telling our stories. Most were still mourning the loss of their children. Without exception, every parent I spoke to told me, "I never saw it coming!" They were blindsided. I promised them I'd never let their children be forgotten and gave them a voice through the Koko and Friends characters.

This book was inspired by all the children who were bullied to death. My heart yearns to turn back time and whisper into their hearts that their lives mattered and the world was cheated by losing them so soon. They will always be in my heart and Koko and Friends: The Long Shots.

MCA: What are some of the key lessons found in Koko and Friends: The Long Shots?

Clara: Koko and his cousins learn why the Golden Rule—treat others the way you want to be treated— is important to their family and that all choices have consequences. After they are bullied by the "socially acceptable" house bugs, Grandpa Jack teaches them how to release their anger and hurt through forgiveness. They learn lessons about integrity, values, and principles. They also begin to understand the importance of choosing friends wisely.

MCA: Those are such important lessons that transfer well into adulthood! What kind of response from readers have you received?



Clara: The response to Koko and Friends: The Long Shots has been very favorable. Several readers praised the life lessons and family unity in the storylines. One reviewer stated, “Great book to help teach kids how to deal with bullying, peer pressure, and keep their moral center! Well written and easy for younger readers and parents to read to their kids. Plenty of pictures to keep kids engaged. And, best of all, girls play basketball, too! Often overlooked by the media, girls also long to play basketball and get on the court. All-inclusive, these are truly “The Only Bugs You’ll Wanna’ Hug!”” Several readers commented on the tidbits of wisdom weaved throughout this book. It doesn’t matter what others say about you; words only have the power you give them. You are a WINNER! Be strong and “Keep On Keeping On!”

MCA: Tell us the importance of sharing underdog stories, especially for younger readers

Clara: We all love the tragedy-to-triumph story where the underdog comes from the bottom to the top. It is important to share underdog stories with young readers because growing up is emotionally challenging. Many young readers may feel underestimated and can identify with the underdog story. They can relate to the underdog’s situation and realize that if an underdog can overcome challenges when all odds are against them, they can do the same. In underdog stories, the young reader sees the hero come from major disadvantages as they struggle toward their goal. But, they also see the hard work, passion, and sheer determination underdogs

put in to reach that goal. Young readers see in themselves the capacity to accomplish great things if they push through their fears and give their best.

MCA: If you could ensure readers of your book walk away with one main lesson, what would it be?

Clara: There are times you may feel that you're not good enough, smart enough, strong enough, or simply not enough—for whatever reason—feelings are subject to change. So, regardless of how you feel right now, you are more than enough. Greatness lies within you and your best is still yet to come! Just "Keep on Keeping On!"—Never, ever, give up!

MCA: Thank you for leaving us with that and for such an insightful interview, Clara! Please keep us posted on what you come out with next.

You can learn more about Clara Denise West, Ph.D., and her award-winning book, ***Koko and Friends: The Long Shots*** *by visiting her MCA Shop pages.*