

Helping Hands

Author's Memory Concreted in Picturebook

SHARON VERBETEN

"I never actually let myself believe that he was not going to make it."

That's what author Kathryn Otoshi said when she heard her friend Bret Baumgarten—always so full of life—was fighting stage 4 pancreatic cancer. But in 2014, when he died at age 44, Otoshi could at least take some comfort that he had left behind a legacy for his two children—one which she helped make happen.

Otoshi—who had previously written and published three concept books (*One*, *Zero*, and *Two*, all under her KO Kids company)—partnered with Baumgarten to create the picturebook *Beautiful Hands* (Blue Dot Press, 2015), a loving tribute to children and their joyous spirits. Sadly, Baumgarten died before the book came out, but the process of making the book was a labor of family, life, and love for Baumgarten and Otoshi.

Otoshi met Baumgarten through a mutual friend. Shortly after Baumgarten's diagnosis, Otoshi recalls, "When I heard his story, I wanted to know what to do to help. I remembered he said he always wanted to do a children's book." She felt she was well suited to help him in that way.

The concept for the book began with the phrase Baumgarten said to his children Noah and Sofie each day: "What will your beautiful hands do today?"

"The question is so big," Otoshi says, noting that the two expanded on the idea of what little hands can do—plant, touch, lift, stretch, reach. From there, the amazing words came out, along with bright colorful illustrations—all based on



Author Kathryn Otoshi worked side by side with Bret Baumgarten on *Beautiful Hands*.
Photos courtesy of Kathryn Otoshi.

handprints and inspired and created by Baumgarten, his children, and scores of others.

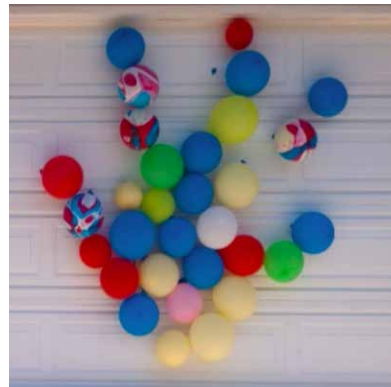
From the cover—which is embossed with the bright handprints of Baumgarten's son and daughter—to the interior pages, more than one hundred family members and friends contributed handprints. Even the Baumgartens' dog, Mocha, provided paw prints!

The handprints form everything from petals and plants to butterflies, bird wings, dragon fins, even a rainbow. All the images were then scanned into a computer to create the final art.

To help fund the book's printing, Otoshi and Baumgarten hosted a book creation party. "Why don't we just have people over to your house to a party?" recalls Otoshi. People could come and donate \$100, or whatever they chose, and they would get their handprint in the rainbow at the end of the book. The entire family, including Baumgarten's wife Deborah, got involved in the process; the party raised \$10,000 for the first print run (they shipped 30,000 copies in the first five weeks), and a portion of the purchase price of the book goes to the Baumgarten estate.



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These photos show the joy, compassion, and fun that went into Bret Baumgarten's book, a poignant legacy he left for his children.

While creating the book was a work of joy and love, it was also a bit difficult for Otoshi, who says she had a hard time talking about cancer. But things became easier with the focus on the book. "He was so excited about it; he never showed how sick he was or how sick he was getting. . . . he kept telling me he was going to beat [cancer]; he was going to beat the odds."

"His wife said he would just light up when they would talk about the book," Otoshi said.

Though he never saw the book in print, his hopes for the title have come to fruition. The book has gone into its third printing. Otoshi works in schools making Spirit Birds with kids' handprints, inspiring children to do "one kind thing."

But perhaps the most touching part are Baumgarten's own words at the end of the book that he felt so compelled to complete: "My hope is that this book empowers creativity, compassion, love, and a connection to you and yours, in the fulfilling and remarkable way it has for me." ☺