



A Conversation with *PD Moves* Illustrator Randell Pearson

Note: This is not a flawless, word-for-word, grammatically-correct transcript, but it's close.

Jackie Hanson (Program Manager- Audio and Visual Producer, Davis Phinney Foundation):

In 2021, PD movers invited a group of black and African-American individuals with Parkinson's and their care partners to develop an educational guide for Parkinson's, designed specifically for the black and African-American community. This group of movers includes doctors, researchers, and teachers from Columbia University, Irving Medical Center, and Teachers College Columbia University. What came from those initial gatherings is a beautiful storybook filled with narratives of African American and Black individuals and care partners who are living and thriving with Parkinson's. In the following interview, you will get to meet the illustrator of the book, why he joined this project, and the importance of the illustrations on the impact of the book.

Gabriella Dimotsantos (Community Engagement Manager, Davis Phinney Foundation):

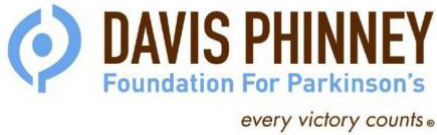
Hello. Thank you so much for joining us as a wonderfully supplementary piece to the PD Movers webinar series. We're so fortunate to have you both on screen here. So, we're going to just have a brief chat about a piece of the PD mover's work that we didn't get the chance to talk about explicitly during the webinar series. And that is the illustration and the creative side of this work and the powerful story that's told by this side that's so creative and wonderfully illustrated. So, my name's Gabby and I'm our Community Engagement Manager here at the Davis Phinney Foundation. And Dr. Shah, I'll let you go ahead and introduce yourself as well.

Hiral Shah (Assistant Professor of Neurology, Columbia University Medical Center):

Hi, my name is Hiral Shah. I'm a neurologist and movement disorder specialist at Columbia University.

Randell Pearson (Illustrator, PD Movers):

I'm Randell Pearson. I am an independent graphic designer and illustrator. I have been working as a creative since 1974, probably before many of you were even born. So, I predate the Mac computer. I come from the dinosaur age where we did everything by hand. But I've learned to use technology and work with the technology over the years and it's been fascinating and then, the blessing of my life being a creative



Gabriella Dimotsantos:

Oh, thank you. What a like, beautiful journey to be on, to be a part of this technological shift with graphic design.

Randell Pearson:

That's wonderful. Yeah. I actually fought against it in the mid-eighties when they brought the first Mac into the studio and I said, I don't want to use that. And I said, you have to use it or you going to get left behind. That's how I learned.

Gabriella Dimotsantos:

And do you feel like that was beneficial to learn? Oh, absolutely.

Randell Pearson:

I be there. There'd be no place for me right now if I had not learned.

Gabriella Dimotsantos:

Well, we're glad that you learned for the sake of the impact that you've been able to make in your community.

Randell Pearson:

Right. And that's afforded me a career and a roof over my head. So that's a good thing,

Gabriella Dimotsantos:

Yeah. Well, thank you so much for that. So, we just have a quick couple of quick questions to go over and I feel like would love to just learn more about your experience being approached for this project with PD Movers and why did you choose it, especially with such a long career? What stood out about this?

Randell Pearson:

Well, I've been an independent since 2008. Prior to that, I worked for different design boutiques and advertising agencies throughout New York City. When I went on my own, projects were coming my way started. At first, it was difficult, but by the time it was, I believe it was two 2021 when we started here. Yes. Early in 2021, I got a call from one of the hero's patients Dr. Ker I'm sorry, Kerman Smith, not to Dr. Kerman Smith, but he gave me a call and asked me, Randy, you do illustrations, don't you? And I said, yes, indeed. So, he said, well, my doctor needs an illustrator for a project. And I said, well, you know, give me her information

here. And I connected, I sent her my portfolio. She liked what she saw, and that was it. And I thought it was just such an inspirational project to get involved with, have known permit for many years, and had noticed recently a change in the way he was moving., but he never, he was very private about it, so I never asked him what was going on, and he never said. So, this was the first time I had learned that he had PD. So that was pretty significant too.

Gabriella Dimotsantos:

Yeah. What a powerful experience to be introduced through that. Yeah. And with a project at the same time.

Randell Pearson:

Right. And then when we had our initial zoom meetings, we were all getting to know each other. I was so inspired by all the PD movers that were on the Zoom meetings. Every time we'd have one, I get more inspired and more charged up about doing a project and wanting to do a really good job for these people. They sent their headshots, you know, I asked them for a front view. It was three-quarter view profiles, so that could capture their likenesses in this book. Cuz I think part of the human experience is testimony, and that's what this book is. It's a book of testimony of faith, courage, endurance, and perseverance. And all of these people seem to possess those things, and that when you have P PD and in the case of some of the couples that were on there, that the caretaker is affected as much as the person actually living with the disease.

So got to learn a lot about that. And again, now what's going on in my life? I've gotten to understand the caretaker's role and how important that is in the life of the PD you know sufferer. So, when we got started it just was so inspiring to present the illustrations and then they would see themselves and nobody loves anything more than seeing themselves immortalized and artwork. So, they were loving it, and that's all I needed to fuel me to keep going. There's a lot of illustrations in this book, and it was a lot of work, but it was enjoyable. You know, I never felt like it was working and it has never felt like work for me. I, that's one of the blessings of being a creative is it really works if you love it. And I say, no, it isn't.

You know, so, and when it becomes work for me, and I have a difficult client out, don't think God to go, I fi I fired a few clients. Not a lot. I can count on one hand, but if, if I'm not enjoying it because it's coming from my soul. So, I'm sharing a piece of my soul with all of these PD movers. And I think that came through in the illustrations. I don't know who said a pictures were for a thousand words, and it's very cliché, but it is so true. And that's why the thing that drives a children's book is the pictures. There are some great stories but imagine a children's book without pictures. It ain't going to fly, not with kids. So, and I think there's a kid in all of us when we see ourselves in a book, and it's telling a story about us, and they have, so you have a testimony and an image of the people, what's better than that?

And what better way to convey their experiences through these testimonies? And so, I got to learn, I was very impacted by the group. I didn't even know I was a PD mover until today. I kind of thought I was just a hired gun. But I guess I've been an honorary inductee and I'll, and I'll take that. You know, I couldn't, you know, couldn't be happier to be part of a group like this. So, it's been a very rewarding experience. I've had just, I could probably count on my one hand how many real highlight projects I've had in my long career. And first was when I was 13, I did a portrait of Martin Luther King. My mom, without me knowing, sent the portrait to Coretta Scott King. And she wrote me back and gave, wrote a very inspirational letter. And I still have the letter to this day.

I was 13 then early 20s about 20 years ago. I did a book, a tribute book for Jane Fonda, the Actress. And the Smithsonian Institute on Martin Luther King was a tribute book that was going on a tour. So that was great. I got to meet Jane Fonda and, you know, Nikki Giovanni, who wrote the introduction. I got to speak with her and talk to a few really important folks, and they put the illustration that I did with Martin Luther King at 13 in the book. So that was pretty exciting. It was called *The Spirit of Martin* if you ever want to look it up. I think it's still available on Amazon. But and yeah, and I'm, and I'm going to put the *PD Movers* book, you know, in, in that, in that grouping, you know, as, as highlight projects of my life, you know, it was that important.

It was such a big project. It was a little daunting at first when the girls said, we're going to need 30 illustrations. And I'm like, whoa. But it was impressive. Everybody loved what I did, usually on the first pass. So, it was a joy, you know, it was a win-win for me anyway, so that's about it. So, we got the book printed, and the printer that I found Hero insisted that the printer be a printer of color. So, I did my research and found a print printer in India, Indianapolis priority press, and they did a wonderful job. I'm sure you've seen the book, *Debbie*. And they did a very good job. And you know, if we do more books, you know, I'd like to, you know, keep that, you know, keep the team together. I think that's, you know, we've got a good situation going with them. That's about it. So, I'm ready for the next one. When you are a hero.

Hiral Shah:

Well, I think you know, kind of spoke to how you've been personally impacted by this work. Yes. So, but maybe you can share with us from your perspective as an artist, you know, how you feel that the images and visual representation help to facilitate the storytelling. Like, I remember us having conversations about the shadow in the book. Yes. And I think even people have been so struck by how clear it is, the importance of faith and family and community just by looking at the cover. So maybe you could speak to a little bit about where that inspiration came from, how you thought about even the backgrounds as you told the story with your visual, you know, with these beautiful, vibrant illustrations. Yeah.

Randell Pearson:

Well, reading each one of their narratives, I was able, able to extract enough there in terms of what is what was a feeling as well as a literal interpretation and literal being more that I was trying to capture their likenesses and what have you. But it's about expression, it's about in the picture with Lorraine, hey, when she's hugging her mom, you know, those kinds of things are so important to convey that when Lorraine is praying in front of that church those kinds of things are the visual interpretation of the written word. So that was my objective to try to, my slogan for my business is bringing your ideas to life. So, the ideas that were in those narratives I tried to bring to you know, fruition and then in the visual. So that was the objective. And I, you know, the response from the group was, I was pretty good with that, you know.

So, but that's what I've been doing. I'm doing my 14th children's book right now. And that's what I've had to do. I have to read the author's narratives and then interpret visually. I go out and go down through the narrative and pick out the parts of the story, the author's narrative that best illustrate the overall story, you know, what I feel to be the visual high points. And they would always just like in the, in, in our storybook, it's just like the children's storybook. It's, it's the image that op that's opposite that the narrative section of the narrative that aligns with it. And so that I'd use the same principle here, employ the same principle with the PD mob's book, almost like a children's book for adults, you know?

Hiral Shah:

All I can say is thank you for your artistry, your creativity, and your commitment.

Randell Pearson:

It was such a pleasure. And the group was meeting with the group. The times that we met all collectively was such a joy. They really inspired me through this, because an art, an artist loves nothing better than praise for his work. It's, it's like an offering of our spirit, of our soul. And the acceptance of that is everything. It goes well beyond a check, you know? That helps too. But, you know, but saying, I love what you did. You're amazing, da da, da, da. Oh my God, we love that. love that. It's nothing. Well, and I do it.

Gabriella Dimotsantos:

Well, and I echo the thanks because I think you achieved that so powerfully, even for someone like me and others at the Foundation who viewed your work and viewed the story and were able to feel just our hearts were just really drawn into the work because of the stories and because of the accompaniment that the illustration is just so beautifully tied in the heart of the stories. Right. And imagine that's

Randell Pearson:



Not easy. Imagine the book without pictures, without Yeah. It just becomes, you know, another document to read, and you just kind of have to imagine everything else. So, this gives you like a reference point, a visual reference point that you can say, oh, wow, yes, this and this together is complete. And it's a whole, you know, a whole thought, a whole experience on these two pages.

Gabriella Dimotsantos:

Yeah. Well, it was tremendously moving, so thank you. Because like you said, without it's almost like another webpage with a blog post.

Randell Pearson:

That it's a children's book. Without illustrations, nobody's going to buy it.

Gabriella Dimotsantos:

Yeah. But thank you so much for sharing your experience and your passion and how this impacted you. And it's so tremendously moving for me, and I can only imagine how moving it'll feel for others who are viewing this, whether they have seen the book and the illustrations, or not yet. It'll certainly encourage folks to take another look.

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