

Blending Technology and Art

By ANN BYLE, Grand Rapids Magazine
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Wimee the Robot began life as an app designed to translate spoken and typed words into images. Now, he's the star of a new book and the face of the Wimage app that helps children (and adults) create pictures of their own.

"Wimee's Words: Vehicles and Colors" is a concept book for ages 3-8 that combines simple images, descriptive verbs and adjectives, bright colors and lots of vehicles to create visual stories. Grand Rapids resident Stephanie Kammeraad is the author, with creative help from her husband Kevin and their children, Carlos and Maria.

Michael Hyacinthe, entrepreneur behind a nonprofit called [Has Heart], which helps wounded veterans heal through art, created the original Wimage app. He made Wimage to help veterans translate their words into art.

Hyacinthe was looking for ways to take the Wimage app to a wider audience when he invited the Kammeraad to get involved in the project. Kevin, who is well known in West Michigan for his books, music, art and performances for children, immediately set out to create the puppet/mascot named Wimee "to help the app have more character," he said.

"First, the puppet unfolded, then illustrations for the app, then a workshop at Artprize and then the idea for the book," he said.

Stephanie had a manuscript she'd written while she was a preschool teacher. They dusted it off, changed the character to Wimee and added illustrations.

"Wimee's Words' is a concept book written intentionally for educational exploration," she said.

But it's way more than just a book. Download the Wimage app to your iPhone or iPad and create illustrations by either saying or typing a word. Users can change the size and color, move the image and add other images to create a unique illustration that can be seen on the app and printed.

"Our dream is to offer the app on Android and to implement a process for making print and digital books," Kevin said.

The Kammeraad and Hyacinthe also dream of deepening the app by adding multiple languages - Spanish and Swahili will be first - to empower even more kids and adults to engage with the Wimage technology. They see applications for English Language Learner (ELL) students, refugees, immigrants and language immersion programs.

"Tech isn't going away, so if we can be part of providing valuable resources to empower creativity, that resonates," Kevin said.

"Wimee's Words" is available at Hopscotch Children's Store, Grand Rapids Children's Museum, and Schuler Books & Music. Learn more about Wimee at wimee.tv.