

COLORING

in old-fashioned values

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Terrence Tullgren designed jewelry, starred in Brazilian commercials and decorated million-dollar homes before discovering the simple but genuine appeal of coloring books.

Not just any coloring books, however. The self-published activity books Tullgren writes and his friend Chuck Gibson illustrates seek to do more than provide entertainment for kids. He hopes they teach values that, in the age of computers and video games, are sometimes considered hopelessly old-fashioned and out-of-step with the times.

"I want kids to spend more than a few minutes with every page," said Tullgren, a

A local interior designer launches a line of activity books to children character development.



North Bay Village-based designer who grew up in Broward. "I want them to linger there, to share the story with a parent. But most of all, I want them to come away understanding that there are consequences, good and bad, to everything they do. I want them to develop that little voice that will always tell them, 'Hey, this isn't a good idea.'"

Tullgren, who gives his age as "done a lot of living," is the first to admit this may be a bit idealistic. That hasn't stopped him, though. On his own dime, he has produced six activity books and is sketching out a seventh. The "Donnie Learns" collection, named after the main character, is a series of stories about how a young boy learns certain fundamental values by watching deer in the woods near his home.

He got the idea for his first activity book, "Donnie Learns How to Make Friends," about three years ago, after a conversation with one of his sisters about her autistic grandson in Alaska. Concerned, he googled "autistic children" but couldn't find any books his grand-nephew could use. So he toyed with the idea of creating one himself and came up with the concept of an activity book that would encourage the child to interact with the story by coloring.

In the first book, Donnie moves from the city to the country, where he observes deer making friends by look-



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COLORFUL LESSONS: Terrence Tullgren, an interior designer who has worked with high-end clients, has launched a series of coloring books aimed to teach character building to children.

ing into each other's eyes, something many autistic children avoid doing. Once he finished the first draft, Tullgren approached an old friend, artist Chuck Gibson, who illustrated the story with simple line sketches that resemble the storyboards Gibson had created during his time in advertising.

"It was a lot harder than I thought it would be," Tullgren said. "It wasn't just writing the story, but it was

blocking out and making sure there was one thought and one image per page."

Gibson, who lives in Plantation, was attracted to the idea because, like Tullgren, he felt it could help children. "There wasn't anything else out there like this," Gibson said. "I really liked the idea that this was more accessible for kids and that they could physically participate in the story. It's not just about a parent reading a story or a child color-

ing in a book."

Though initially intended for autistic children, the series developed into something more. Tullgren and Gibson went on to create activity books about being grateful, about self love, about keeping one's word, about the value of time and the value of learning.

Tullgren sells the books through Amazon for \$6.95 on the www.donnielearns.com website, though they were also on sale at the Mia-

mi International Book Fair last year. Between sales and promotional copies, there are about 2,000 copies circulating, but Tullgren is hardly covering his costs or efforts. "This was always a labor of love," he said. "Profitability was never a factor."

Tullgren's main gig continues to be his interior design. He has worked a variety of venues, from a country club in Argentina to luxurious apartments on Miami Beach, and his life and ca-

reer have been as wide-ranging. As a manager of Esprit, a women sportswear firm in California, Tullgren re-connected with Richard Simmons, an acquaintance who had been in an acting class at Florida State with him. In 1972, long before Simmons became an exercise guru, the two opened a jewelry company, with Simmons doing the designing and Tullgren the marketing. Eventually Tullgren tried his hand at design, but the partnership broke up.

Tullgren also worked in commercials in Brazil — he was Superman for a bubble gum company and has the poster to prove it — and, back in the U.S., designed furniture for friends, who owned a company called Continental Classics. A 2003 Miami Herald story featured one of Tullgren's designs, a gold and platinum-toned bed with a headboard decorated with rose quartz.

Tullgren likes to talk about growing up in Lighthouse Point, where "I would take my boat and dock it along the intracoastal and go to a movie. I was all of 13." It was that kind of simple, old-timey childhood that has inspired Tullgren to revisit old-fashioned values.

Will there one day be a Donnie Learns app or a matching computer game? Tullgren laughed at the idea.

"I've gotten flak for not having that," he said, "but I don't think that's going to happen. That's not what we want the books for. We want the child spending time and understanding, really understanding the story."