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Former Cabrini Resident Finds Her Niche with Novel

“Billion Dollar Winner” is positive story that strays from the traditional

Arlene Jones, a former public housing resident and proud Chicagoan, had seen enough of the typical literary accounts of life in the big city – crime, drugs, hopelessness, misery.

So she wrote her own account, a 319-page novel that focuses on life’s happier side: humor, inspiration, surprise, hope.

“Billion Dollar Winner” tells the tale of a community activist who protests a giant fictional national lottery – until the day the activist wins that lottery.

Then, Jones says, things get really interesting.

“It’s funny, humorous and feel-good; very positive,” she said. “These days, all of the urban literature is about drama and gangs. I’m trying to say that there are thousands of stories out there that are funny and positive, and don’t have to necessarily be negative toward inner-city residents.”

“Billion Dollar Winner” will be used as a textbook in an Upward Bounds program this summer to teach financial literacy to 15 teenagers. It was selected by retired Chicago Public Schools educator and certified GreatBooks Foundation instructor Dr. Louverta Hurt, the head of Congressman Danny Davis’ Educational task Force.

The GreatBooks Foundation strives to make students avid, independent readers.

Besides its ironic storyline – and the awkward, amusing, contradictory circumstances that arise from it – the book implements elements of financial literacy, economic development and entrepreneurial opportunity.

Jones said characters were inspired by people at Cabrini-Green, where she lived from 1958-68. Even though her old development is almost all gone – she supports the Chicago Housing Authority’s “Plan for Transformation” that has replaced the high-rises with mixed-income communities – she has memories that will last forever.

“There were issues, even back then,” she said. “There were people who did silly things, but there were good people, too. It was a community. I know it needed to change, but it was still my home.”

Today, after 33 years in the insurance industry, Jones is a full-time writer who lives on the West Side and writes a column for the Austin Weekly News. She is fluent in Spanish and received her diploma in computer programming.

She hopes to set up a literacy program with the proceeds from “Billion Dollar Winner,” which she thinks will break through barriers and convince people that anything is possible if you have ambition and concentrate on self-improvement.

“I’ve received positive reviews, and what I’ve found is that young people who didn’t normally read have read this book, and now feel connected because it’s all about Chicago,” she said. “They recognize the story lines, and know that this could be their mother or their father or their uncle.

“I want to continue to write about areas of Chicago that don’t get written about too often, like the West Side. I want to help change the image and show that there are parts of the city that are as diverse a community as anywhere else.”

For a copy of the book, go to www.billiondollarwinner.blogspot.com

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