

# Melissa Finkelstein and Family:

## WRITING FOR A PURPOSE & GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

By Sandra Cosma

Children, like adults, can have strong emotions: excited about a dance recital, mad about not getting a new toy or nervous about the first day of school. It's normal and if you are a parent, you know that helping children cope with their feelings is part of the job. This is the idea behind Melissa Finkelstein's Big Feelings Friends children's book series, which now includes three books jam-packed with mindfulness lessons. Here, Melissa shares why she became a children's book author in addition to owning other businesses and gives us insight into her family life.

Melissa was born in Rhode Island and raised in South Florida. She went to the University of Maryland for undergraduate to study sociology. This is where she met Steve, who was born and raised in Long Island, during their freshman year. She then went to Fordham University School of Law and practiced commercial litigation in New York City. Melissa and Steve have now been together for 20 years.



Finkelstein Family Vacation  
in LBI - August 2023

They moved to Woodcliff Lake 7 years ago to be closer to Melissa's family, her sister and her family also live in Woodcliff Lake and her parents in nearby Park Ridge. The trees, "small-town vibes" and great local schools drew them in as well. They admired the beauty and community feel of the town and knew this was where they wanted to expand their family. They now have three children: Myles, 8 years old, and twins Kayla and Skylar, 5 years old. In recent years, even Melissa's brother, wife and kids have made the move to also be close by. "We feel so lucky to be living so close to one another," notes Melissa.

Creative writing has always been a passion for Melissa. She's loved writing poetry since she was younger, then enjoyed writing litigation briefs and has always kept a journal

close by. This passion drove her to launch Designer Rhymes, a custom poetry business where she offers personalized poems for milestone birthdays, weddings, corporate events and Bar and Bat Mitzvahs.



Melissa sharing her books at an  
author assembly at Dorchester  
Elementary in Fall 2022

"Once I had my three kids, each with their own strengths, challenges, and struggles, I really wanted to share their stories with other children in hopes that it would help validate their feelings and experiences," she explains. This is

how the Big Feelings Friends book series came about. Her first book *Picky the Panda and the Tickly Tail*, launched in 2022 and is inspired by her daughter Skylar. It's about a highly sensitive panda that learns to recognize her feelings and embrace sensory differences and reminds readers to take a step back when feeling overwhelmed. Earlier this year, Melissa released *Bobby the Snake and the Broken TV*, inspired by her son Myles. It encourages kids to step away from screens, embrace the outdoors and shows how a bad day can turn around. Her latest children's book just came out a few months ago: *Squeaky Kiki*, which is inspired by her daughter Kayla. It tells the story of a shy, polite bunny who likes to please others. It features several social-emotional lessons including standing up for yourself, using your voice, overcoming anxiety, and setting boundaries. "[I want] to remind children that we all feel big feelings, and how important it is to have the tools to recognize and process these big feelings as well as the importance of practicing kindness and empathy to others," says Melissa. She has been sharing her books at preschools and elementary schools throughout the tri-state area since they launched.

These days, the Finkelsteins are usually bouncing around to sports games, activities, and birthday parties with their children. Myles plays basketball, baseball, and soccer. He also loves chess, math and spending time in nature. Kayla and



*Melissa sharing her books at Westport, CT Fall Fest in 2022*



*Myles, Kayla and Skylar spending time with their goldendoodle Riley*

Skylar adore gymnastics, dance and art. They just started playing soccer like their big brother and can't wait to learn how to read so they can share mom's books with classmates.

The family also finds time to give back to the community. Aside from coaching Pre-K T-ball, leading a Bergen County Cycle for Survival Team to benefit Memorial Sloan Kettering, and volunteering at school functions, Melissa is the Hospitality co-chair of the Woodcliff Lake Parent Faculty Association (PFA). As the Hospitality co-chair, she helps plan events for the elementary and middle school staff members to show appreciation for everything they do. Steve coaches all the sports Myles plays and enjoys spending time with him on the fields. As if this doesn't keep them busy enough, they've recently opened a family business: Furry Land Rhode Island, a mobile pet grooming business in Rhode Island and Bristol County, Massachusetts. Being born in Rhode Island, Melissa still has family and friends there who they visit throughout the year. Steve runs Furry Land from NJ in addition to working in inventory management consulting.

When she finds free time, this busy mom reads thrillers and spends time with family, friends, and neighbors. Together, Melissa and Steve love live music, eating sushi, and playing tennis or working out together.

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Melissa Finkelstein photographed by Olivia Gonzales

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The Finkelsteins travel to Long Beach Island every August. "Several other local families go to the same spot, so we always have so much fun hanging out at the beach!" she mentions. They also make sure to get in some Florida sunshine often since her snowbird parents live there for part of the year.

With three kids, different personalities, and emotions, I'm sure there is constant inspiration for this budding children's author to keep writing for a purpose. Fans of the series are probably bursting with excitement to see what comes next, but they'll have to take a cue from lessons in Melissa's books- control your emotions and learn to be patient! I too look forward to the next addition to share with my kids. It was a pleasure to get to know the Finkelstein family and I'm sure I'll continue to see them around town.