



Mary Engelbreit®

MARY ENGELBREIT'S STORY
in her own words





My name is Mary Engelbreit—yes, I am a real person, not a corporate character like Betty Crocker! I was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri and started drawing when I learned to hold a crayon. By the time I was 11, I knew I wanted to be an artist for the rest of my life.



As a child, I loved to read, and would draw pictures to go with whatever book I was reading. It was another way for me to get even deeper into the story. That's

really why I started drawing. I was influenced by children's illustrators from the 1920s and 30s such as Jessie Wilcox Smith and Johnny Gruelle (the creator of Raggedy Ann and Andy).

When I was about ten, I discovered gift book illustrator, Joan Walsh Anglund. She drew simple drawings illustrating single sentences. She was a major inspiration to me.

During my Catholic high school days, a local shop sold my hand-drawn greeting cards and paid me a quarter for each one. They later raised it to fifty cents. Not a living wage, but OK for a high school kid. I ignored the nuns' advice to go to a Catholic University to become an English teacher. By the time I graduated high school, I was ready to start



my life as an artist. I worked at a local art supply store for almost two years where I met people who actually made a living as artists. It was a big wake-up—I realized I could live my dream.

Next I worked for a tiny ad agency where I designed things like shoe boxes and granola bar wrappers for about 18 months (when the owner moved out of town). At age 22 I was left to my own devices—on my own! Fortunately, I had contacts and could support myself as a free-lance illustrator. During that time, I also worked as a staff editorial artist for the St. Louis Post Dispatch! But I had a hard time taking orders from art directors who—I thought—liked to make changes just because they could. When I learned my male peers with the same experience were being paid more than me, I objected and was fired. Believe it or not, I was ecstatic—because losing my job meant I could sleep in—allowing me to work on my drawings late into the night!

I was much happier drawing what came from my own experiences and memories. I exhibited my work wherever I could and learned that people really liked it. I became moderately suc-





cessful and knew it was time to aim higher.

I married Phil Delano, a social worker, in 1977, and he (like my parents) was very supportive of my career choice. He

understood from the beginning that drawing was really the only thing I wanted to do. I can't emphasize how important all of this support was to me.

As long as I can remember, I've wanted to illustrate children's books. In fact, shortly after Phil and I were married, a friend of Phil's in the publishing business in New York scheduled appointments for me with several children's book publishers.

All of the publishers liked my work, but told me their companies had in-house artists and they rarely hired free-lance or out-of-town book illustrators who didn't have an established name. I don't really know what I was thinking; it's not as if I thought some big publishing house would say, "Oh yes, here, illustrate all our books—we thought you'd never ask." Fortunately, one art director suggested I try going into the greeting card business. But at the time, I was kind of crushed because I had my heart set on illustrating children's books.

I didn't know much about the greeting card business—I had never heard of a royalty! But as I really thought about it, I realized my little illustrations were perfect for greeting cards. That art director's comment stuck with me—and at the risk of sounding like a Pollyanna, I can hardly think of a disappointment that you can't turn into a good situation.

I returned to St. Louis with renewed optimism and began looking at the backs of cards for company names. I contacted a couple of card companies and sent my drawings to them. Both greeting card companies liked my drawings. I signed a short-term contract with one and sold 3 of my original drawings to the other. I was thrilled! You know, when one door closes, another one opens. I didn't get to illustrate children's books at that time, but as a result, a whole new opportunity opened up to me!

Time passed and my cards sold well. My enthusiasm for the greeting card business grew quickly. All along, I had been drawing fantasy art—clowns, dragons, unicorns, castles, etc. With the birth of my first son, Evan, in 1980, the content of my work underwent a pretty dramatic change.



Fantasy went out the window, and I began to illustrate reality—there was so much inspiration around me. After I became a mother, suddenly everyday life seemed more interesting to me. I figured that we probably lived the same

kind of life that everyone else seemed to be living, these things must be interesting to them too. It also sharpened my sense of nostalgia for my own childhood. To gain more control over the business end of things, we decided to start our own greeting card company! At the time, I was eight months pregnant with my second son. I believe proper timing is overrated. There are wonderful opportunities constantly sailing by and you have to be ready to grab them.

In the spring of 1983, we—The Mary Engelbreit Greeting Card Company—took our twelve little designs to New York to exhibit them at the National Stationery Show. That show was my true baptism into the greeting card business!

I remember how big the show was—I just couldn't get over it. I had no idea there were so many alternative card companies. And it was exciting because our twelve little cards were getting a lot of attention in that huge place!

On the back of each of the cards we printed a single sentence...“This illustration is by Mary Engelbreit, who thanks you from the bottom of her heart for buying this card.” Believe me—I meant (and mean)

every word of it. I really feel that way—I am so grateful to anyone for buying a card. I want people to know how much I appreciate their business.

I've been told one of the reasons we had so much success at that show is because my card style was different than anything else at the market. I typically draw intricate details and use deep colors and amusing or profound quotes.

At the show, we were approached by a publishing company to design a calendar so we made a deal with a licensing agent. Two years passed and our little company was producing nearly 100 hundred different designs selling one million cards per year!

A lot of people tell me because of my artwork—they feel like they know me. People have such a personal connection to the cards and they seem to buy our cards when they want to say something. That makes me feel great. I hesitate to explain to fans what I was thinking when I create particular images. I know what I was thinking, but when people buy the drawings, they may be thinking something totally different—something that is relevant to their own experiences.

By 1985, many greeting card publishers started noticing my art. Two of them approached me with licensing contracts. The timing couldn't have been better because as we grew, the distribution became a nightmare. I didn't want to spend my time manag-



ing inventory—I wanted to draw. That’s when we signed with Sunrise Greetings and gave them the license to publish and market my cards.



One of the important decisions we made early on was to retain the copyrights to each of my designs. This means I own all of my drawings and

can license a particularly popular design to several manufacturers across product categories.

In 1986, Phil and I expanded the licensing program to include calendars, mugs, address books, stickers, rubber stamps, figurines, gift books and hundreds of other products.

In 1993, at long last, I got the opportunity to illustrate my first children’s book, *The Snow Queen* by Hans Christian Andersen which quickly became a *Publisher’s Weekly Children’s* best-seller. I picked this story because it’s one of the only fairy tales where a little girl is the hero. Realizing my childhood dream was an eye-opener. *The Snow Queen* was difficult to draw because for 20 years, I had been drawing all different characters—never the same character in different poses. It’s really difficult. It was fun, but oddly enough, it turns out I like drawing cards best!

Anyway, as the licensing program expanded, we moved the business out of our tiny cottage office and bought a wonderful old converted firehouse in

Webster Groves, a suburb of St. Louis.

Since then we’ve been in 5 different studios, each one very different but all inspiring in their own way. The licensing business has changed a lot in the intervening years, but I’m still drawing almost every day.

I’ve often been asked how I actually create my illustrations, so let me explain. I complete each drawing on a single piece of paper, first in pencil, then in pen and ink. I then color in with marker and shade with colored pencil. Each drawing takes me about two to three days to complete, sometimes a little longer for calendar or book images.

It’s still fun and, frankly, I don’t know what I would do if I couldn’t draw! Remember, *To Imagine is Everything!*

