

ThisWeek COMMUNITY NEWS

Former student inspires teacher to pen novel

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Rockford "Rocky" Penn Jr., who was a student of Billingslea's in the seventh grade and again in the ninth grade, suggested he write a story about a character who "starts out weak, learns to use a sword and fights Cerberus."

Cerberus was the three-headed watchdog at the entrance to Hades, according to *Bullfinch's Mythology*.

That was all it took.

"I started writing the story," said Billingslea, 46, a resident of the Sharon Woods neighborhood in the Northland area. "Suddenly, before I realized it, I had 20 chapters. This was turning into a book."

That book is *Arkrames: The Orpheus Quest*, which published Dec. 8 by FriesenPress of Canada.

Billingslea said officials there contacted him after reading some of his short stories online. He pitched the idea for the teen novel to them, and spent much of last year polishing the work before submitting it to an editor.

Penn, now an illustrator and graphic designer, did the cover art for the book.

“It was always understood that the mysterious sword and shield mounted on the wall over the hearth was not to be touched,” according to the website for the novel. “But young Arkrames could not help but be drawn to the weapon which seemed to be perfect for him.”

His adoptive uncle wanted him to be a farmer, but “when the Fates deal a tragic blow to him and his loved ones, Arkrames takes the mysterious sword and finds that it gives him the power and the drive to question the motives of the gods themselves.”

Billingslea, who grew up in the Shepard neighborhood and attended Northland High School, said he wanted to be a scientist when he was young. After graduating, he joined the Air Force and became a clinical lab technician.

After his stint in the service, Billingslea decided to get a degree in education, first at Ohio State University and then at Otterbein College.

“All through high school, I was always tutoring somebody, helping somebody,” he said. “It was just a natural progression.”

Billingslea started his teaching career at the Wellington School, and has been with Columbus City Schools for the past eight years.

He said the book may be turned into a graphic novel in collaboration with Penn. And while it probably appeals mostly to boys, focusing as it does on a sword and learning to fight, the author said on the Facebook page he created for the novel that he wanted to include a little romance for the girls and some lessons for young people, as well.

“A lot of my students at school were really interested ... and now I’m starting to get the feedback: ‘Oh, when’s the next book coming out?’” Billingslea said. “It’s been a lot of positive feedback. I’ve had a lot of people come up to me and ask questions and ask for more.

“If I write another book, I’ll write another book, and if I don’t, I won’t.”

Billingslea said he created the Facebook page for *Arkrames: The Orpheus Quest* at the urging of his daughter.

“I’m getting friended by people, literally, in Europe,” he added.

Billingslea noted that the page is especially popular in England, possibly because the spelling of his last name is the British version of what in this country is more often Billingsley.