To show love amid COVID-19 fears, North Texas couple creates a bilingual book to help kids cope

'Behind My Mask' offers a message about navigating identity and emotions during the pandemic.



Dan Heiman and his wife, Martha Samaniego Calderón, self-published a book to help children — including their own kids, 7-year-old Natalia and 11-year-old Nicolás — cope with the fears of the COVID-19 pandemic.(Vernon Bryant / Staff Photographer)

By Helen Bond

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She's heard the reasons for wearing a mask and wants to do her part, but for 7-year-old Natalia Heiman Samaniego, wearing a face covering can be confusing and downright scary.

Martha Samaniego Calderón understands her daughter's apprehension far too well.

"English is not my first language, and I rely a lot on facial expressions," says Samaniego Calderón, who moved from Mexico to Texas in 2010 to raise her family with her husband, Dan Heiman.

"When I started to go to the grocery store with the mask, it was a vulnerable moment for me because I realized that I didn't know how to read other people's reactions. As an immigrant in this nation's social and political climate, you sometimes go into survival mode. It was difficult to process my emotions and to smile, and then people couldn't see my smile."

Every moment is a teaching moment for Samaniego Calderón, a graduate student at the University of North Texas College of Visual Arts and Design, and Heiman, assistant professor in UNT's College of Education.

As educators, and parents of Natalia and 11-year-old Nicolás, they didn't waste a second. It took just two weeks from start to self-published finish for the Denton couple to create *Behind My Mask (Detrás de mi Cubrebocas)*, a bilingual resource designed to help children work through their feelings and fears of COVID-19.

Samaniego Calderón hand-painted each page on canvas paper and collaborated with Heiman on the words, written in English and Spanish, before digitally converting the story into a softcover book.

"I couldn't stop for three days — I just felt a rush," says Samaniego Calderón,

a native of Xalapa, Veracruz.

“I felt like I can’t be the only person, regardless of race or anything else, feeling this way. It is a human thing we are experiencing. I wanted to do my part to help, and the best way I know how to do it is through art.”

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The artist wanted to show children the “you” behind every mask. Through the pages, a young, dark-haired girl with braids provides an avenue for kids to express joy and gratitude for their family, teachers and essential workers, and to acknowledge any feelings of sadness or anger seen or experienced because of the events of the world around them.

Behind My Mask offers a deeper message about navigating identity and emotions at a time when understanding one another has never been more critical.

Each mask featured in the book has a meaning, starting with the cover’s migrating monarch butterfly, symbolizing immigration.

“It’s up to the reader to create their own meaning as well,” Samaniego Calderón says.

Unfinished pages at the book’s end encourage children to explore their own identity and talk more about the masks we wear and those we hide behind emotionally.

Heiman, a professor of bilingual education, believes there needs to be a focus on “unpacking” the social and emotional well-being of both students and teachers, and for kids to see themselves in the books they read.

The unfinished section serves as an open space for dialogue across racial,

class and gender lines, says Heiman, who plans to use *Behind My Mask* on the university level to prepare his own students to go out in the field as bilingual teachers.

"The book was created before the protests started with the George Floyd killing. We find a lot of affinity with the project and the protests — there are a lot of courageous people, and for good reason," Heiman says.

"The unfinished nature of the book offers space for students to reflect around these unprecedented times and issues, because it is not easy. It is complex."

Samaniego Calderón hopes the book will lead to more doing.

"The intentional meaning behind it is to not just present the story, but give the reader the opportunity to tell their story, too, which is pretty unique," Samaniego Calderón says.

"Maybe you can start with conversation, and then you do something. You grab your markers, your crayons or whatever medium you want and keep creating. I think that is the purpose of the book: to inspire action."

Along with the book, available to purchase ($13) and view online in its entirety, the educators created a blog with free lessons and downloadable activities. The co-authors are hopeful that nonprofits and school districts with dual-language programs will buy and distribute *Behind My Mask* as a resource for local communities.

Ultimately, Samaniego Calderón says, *Behind My Mask* is a show of love for children everywhere.

"This is our way to say with words, 'We love them, we see them and hear them, and they are still themselves — even if they wear a mask,'" says

Samaniego Calderón.

"Visually, I hope it is like a hug to them and that my community can see themselves reflected in my visual work."

Details

To learn more about the book, visit behindmycubrebocas.blogspot.com. To purchase the book, visit tinyurl.com/y9l973ey.

CORRECTED at 10:30 a.m. July 2 *to give the full name of UNT's College of Visual Arts and Design.*

Connect with needs and opportunities from Get immediate access to organizations and people in the DFW area that need your help or can provide help during the Coronavirus crisis.