

The Washington Post
Style

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THEATER REVIEW

An intense spiritual trip

Three actors and sophisticated video animate C.S. Lewis's Christian fantasy from the 1940s. **C3**

MUSIC REVIEW

From the past, but not a blast

Holiday music from a Maryland folk ensemble was wide-ranging and pleasant but lacked a spark. **C3**

KIDSPOST

A tiny talent

An 8-year-old from Winchester reached the final four of "MasterChef Junior," a cooking show for children. **C8**

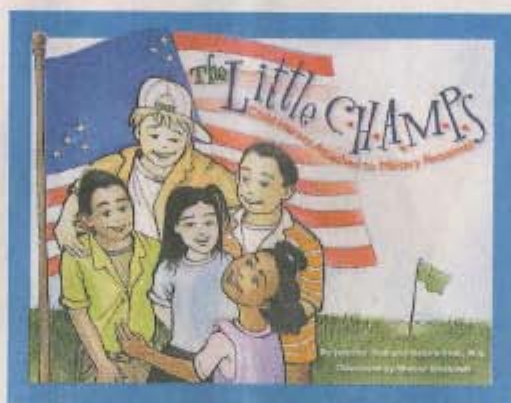
CAROLYN HAX

Feeling bottled up inside

A reader cites lasting damage from never being allowed to mourn a pet's death or be dissatisfied as a child. **C8**



LIVE TODAY @ live.washingtonpost.com Civilities chat: Columnist Steven Petrow answers your questions about tricky matters of gay and straight etiquette 1 p.m. •



FROM JENNIFER FINK

They're military-family kids. They're

B ★ R ★ A ★ T ★ S

Don't even think about changing the name.

BY JOHN KELLY

Would you rather be called a brat or a champ? The answer might seem obvious. Why choose to be an unruly, impudent child when you could be a vallant victor? That's what Debbie and Jennifer Fink thought, anyway.

The Bethesda, Md., mother and daughter are the authors of "The Little C.H.A.M.P.s," a 58-page self-published book aimed at the elementary-school-age sons and daughters of U.S. military personnel and their civilian schoolmates.

It tells the story of five military dependents, or "brats," as the offspring of service members are commonly known. They include Gonzo, an Army brat whose father is about to deploy for the third time; Lo, a Marine brat whose father has received a medical discharge; and Smiley, a Navy brat whose family has moved seven times in his life.

Except the book doesn't call these characters brats. "We are called the Little Champs, because CHAMP stands for Child Heroes Attached to Military Personnel," narrator Smiley explains. "We sure like the way that sounds."

Well, you're about the only one, Smiley. Around Thanksgiving, a clarion call went out across social media: Debbie and Jennifer Fink were trying to abolish the word "brats."

The brats mobilized for war.

Bob Holliker is an Air Force brat — or, as he likes to write it, "Brat," as if it were a nationality or religion. His father was a commissary officer, and Bob grew up on bases in Japan, Puerto Rico, France and Germany. Bob joined the Air Force and became a pilot, which means his two kids are brats, too.

In early November, Bob saw something on

Facebook about "The Little C.H.A.M.P.s" and about Operation C.H.A.M.P.s, a nonprofit group the Finks created to offer free babysitting to military parents in the Washington area. On one of the charity's Web pages was the exhortation "Brats are now champs."

"I looked at it and said, You've got to be kidding," said Bob, who retired outside Toledo. "My initial reaction was anger. Then I thought, if these people are successful, I will lose my heritage. I'm not trying to be a smart aleck here, but I can't tell you if they re-branded it 'champs' because of marketing

BRATS CONTINUED ON C3

The children's book "The Little C.H.A.M.P.s," by Jennifer and Debbie Fink, both civilians, attempts to re-brand a long-used appellation for military offspring.

She tried to rename 'brats.' She didn't foresee a battle.

BRATS FROM C1

considerations or because of social engineering, because the pretty people don't like the word 'brats.'"

Kay Kern, whose father served 28 years in the Army, was in Columbia, S.C., at a reunion of a group called Southern Brats when she learned of the Finks' book. "That was the big topic of conversation: Who are these people trying to infringe upon what we consider our heritage?"

Thousands of adult brats joined a Facebook group that Bob created called "BRATS: Stolen Valor — Stolen Identity," a name that references the fraudsters who claim military honors they didn't earn. Brats from across the country started chiming in, proclaiming their brat pride and wondering just who these Fink women thought they were.

An urge to help

Jennifer Fink is 23. When she was a student at Churchill High School, she started volunteering with the Red Cross at what was then Bethesda Naval Medical Center.

"I was a civilian living in Bethesda and for the first 17 years of my life I had no idea there was a military installation, let alone the president's hospital, in my home town," she said.

Jennifer increased her volunteer hours, eventually spending up to five hours a day working with wounded warriors and their families.

She decided there was "a definite need to celebrate and validate our military-connected children." She also thought it would be valuable to bridge the military/civilian divide.

In 2011, Jennifer approached her mom, Debbie, a self-described "edu-tainer" whose self-published kids' books include one on how to cope when a parent has cancer.

"I said, 'Whatever your next project is, put it on the back burner. Your next project has to be on military-connected families,'" Jennifer said.

The book they wrote together was originally titled "The Little Brats." They sent drafts to officers and enlisted personnel, to children, to nonprofits that work with military families. They wanted feedback, Jennifer said, but they also wanted to forge connections with groups that might get the book a wider audience.

The title received a bit of "pushback," Jennifer said.

"While we know brats is a name that's used with pride, there are a large number of military-connected children and their families and organizations who really do not like the term 'brats,'" she said.

One of those groups was the Military Child Education Coalition outside Austin.

"We just told them we don't use the term," said MCEC's president and chief executive, Mary Keller. "We train a tremendous amount of people who have no experience in the military. . . . It's kind of like you can refer to yourself one way or the family can refer to themselves one way, but you wouldn't want an outsider who didn't understand your experience to use that term."

Jennifer said she and her mom kicked around other names: military-connected children, military kids, little patriots. They ended up coining their own term: champs.

"Everyone loved it," Jennifer said of the book. "They absolutely loved it."

Well, not everyone.

What's in a name?

No one knows for sure how military kids got tagged with "brats." Some sources claim it comes from England and stands for British Regiment Attached Traveler, though that seems highly unlikely. Others like to say it means bold, resourceful, adaptable, tolerant. (Or brave, resilient, American, tenacious; opinions vary.)

The word has come to describe various "third-culture kids": children who grew up being dragged around the country or around the world because of a parent's job. There are State Department brats and IBM brats and Aramco brats, whose

parents helped drill for oil in Saudi Arabia.

"Certainly it has a negative connotation, so when we're growing up we don't call ourselves brats," said Morton Ender, a professor of sociology at West Point whose mother served in the Army. "When you get older, you learn the term is meant affectionately."

"Brat," he said, has "a sort of swagger." "Champ" doesn't swagger. To some, it reeks of everybody-gets-a-trophy political correctness.

But what's worse, Ender said, is that if you're raised in the military, "child heroes" comes across as "egotistical, celebratory, hyperbolic. That doesn't resonate with the military culture. Military people don't call themselves heroes. That's a term for someone else to use. Even real heroes don't like the term."

But what really seemed to irritate hard-core brats was the fact that neither of the Finks had been raised around the military. How could anyone but a brat hope to speak for the braterati?

(Full disclosure: I am a brat. Although it's been nearly 40 years since I lived on an Air Force base, I still miss the sound of sonic booms.)

Jennifer Fink of Bethesda wrote "The Little C.H.A.M.P.s" — Child Heroes Attached to Military Personnel — and started a nonprofit dedicated to helping military families. She says she and her sponsors drowned under what she felt was cyberbullying after the book's Amazon page was flooded with attacks.

On the plus side, a military upbringing exposes a person to many different cultures. On the minus side, it can leave you feeling as though you don't belong in any of them. The adults that filmmaker (and Army brat) Dorna Musil interviewed for her movie "Brats: Our Journey Home" talk about the difficulty in answering a simple question: Where are you from?

In the film's narration, Kris Kristofferson, son of an Air Force general, says: "It was a strange and interesting childhood: cruel, magical, privileged and painful, all at the same time."



MATT MCCLAIN/THE WASHINGTON POST

Germany, Italy, Japan and South Korea, where she visited Defense Department schools, read from "The Little C.H.A.M.P.s" and edu-tained children.

Brats scoured the Operation C.H.A.M.P.s Web pages and parsed statements from Jennifer and her mother looking for ammunition. There were dark mutterings that the whole thing was somehow a scam.

"People assume we're lining our pockets with profit," Jennifer said. "We're a 501(c)(3), 100 percent volunteer-run. Not one person has earned a penny."

She said proceeds from the sale of the book were what covered training, background checks and insurance for the babysitting program, called "Champsitting."

On Nov. 25, the Military Child Education Coalition posted an announcement on its Facebook page. "After careful consideration," it began, "we are withdrawing our support from The Little Champs program."

MCEC assured everyone that all of its copies of "The Little C.H.A.M.P.s" would be thrown out. The brat bombardment, MCEC's Keller said in an interview, "was distracting us from doing our work."

On Dec. 10, the Finks announced they were pulling the plug on Operation C.H.A.M.P.s.

"We have reached this decision reluctantly, following weeks of escalated divisive attacks from a group of adult children of military Servicemembers, which began as a difference of opinion regarding terminology," read a statement on its Web site.

Jennifer said they and their sponsors were drowning under what she feels was cyberbullying.

"It wasn't worth it," Jennifer said. "It was so not why we started this."

There was a backlash against the backlash. Jacey Eckhart, director of spouse and family programs at Military.com, wrote a column deploring the brouhaha. Its first sentence: "This is why we can't have nice things, people."

Eckhart, an Air Force brat married to a career Navy man, was surprised by the vitriol the Finks encountered. "I have been in this space since 1996 and I have not seen that kind of thing happen," she said in an interview.

Eckhart said it's doubtful that the Finks' little book — one of dozens of similar books that cross her desk every year — could have led to a wholesale change in nomenclature.

"Clearly here, the Finks have stepped into some kind of gap that really brought out a lot of emotion in people," she said.

And they did it at a unique point in time: While brats once graduated from their high schools in Heidelberg, Germany, or Okinawa, Japan, certain they'd never see their classmates again, now

they could find one another online — and use the Internet to pound the Finks into submission.

Taps for champs

Some brats see the victory as an opportunity for the brat community to show its strength, to get recognition for sacrifices made during childhood, to reach out to current brats.

"C.H.A.M.P.s is just a speed bump," Holliker said. "They're the catalyst. They're the blessing that got us looking at how remiss we've been in mentoring younger brats ourselves."

What has Jennifer learned? "That there's no room for civilians to play a role," she said. "They've made that very clear."

As for her immediate future, Jennifer said, she's focused on planning her wedding. She's engaged to a man who is serving in the U.S. military, although she said security concerns prevent her from saying which branch and where.

That means if her husband stays in the service, and if they have children, then those kids could be . . . well, what would you call them, Jennifer?

"I would use any and all the names that celebrate them: military-connected kid, military kid, brat, champ, fabulous child whose father is a hero and who served our country!"

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