



Sahar Simmons '95 (center) poses with girls at a book-reading event.

## ALUMNA LAUNCHES CHARACTER TO BOOST SELF-ESTEEM IN YOUNG GIRLS

You've heard of Barbie and Dora. And if Sahar Simmons '95 has her way, soon the name Briana will role just as easily off of your tongue.

Briana is a cute wide-grinned character with thick braided plaits. This 8-year-old African-American girl lives in Brooklyn, N.Y., with her mother and grandmother.

Simmons is the author of the *Briana's Neighborhood* children's book series, in which Briana deals with issues such as divorce, self-esteem and puberty.

Simmons said she created Briana because there are not enough books about African-American children. According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center, only five percent of the children's books published in the United States are by or about Africans or African Americans.

"There aren't enough images of little black girls living real life scenarios and coming out on top," said Simmons. "Briana lives in a household comprised of the wisdom of three generations, together with her mother and grandmother. In *Briana's Neighborhood* it is OK to ask questions, to dream and to be yourself."

Simmons admits that Briana is more than just a character she created.

"Briana is me. The reason it is easy to write this story is because her life mirrors my life."

There are two books in the series that are currently available, "All About Me" published in June 2007 and "Boys will be Boys," published in October 2007. The third book, "Down South," will hit bookstores this fall. The books are written from a child's perspective and characterize the experiences of children from inner city back-grounds.

Simmons has been receiving praises for creating a character that many young people can relate to and other young people can embrace as an experience that is different from their own.

"[The *Briana's Neighborhood* series] is an excellent idea to spark reading and inquiry about African-American culture at the youngest ages," said *New York Times* bestselling author Omar Trycee. "You go girl! Open up those young minds and teach them to explore while enjoying reading."

Simmons is active in the community; she introduces children to *Briana's Neighborhood* by hosting children's events,

and doing book readings in various schools to instill her positive message in children. The *Briana's Neighborhood* series will also be partnering with the WNBA team, the Atlanta Dream, for the team's literacy program and with Chick-fil-A and Planet Smoothie restaurant chains for promotional events, Simmons said.

"This is all about bringing excitement back to reading while building a brand," said Simmons, who is currently working on a *Briana's Neighborhood* cartoon.

Simmons always knew she wanted to write children's books. However she didn't put Briana on paper until two years ago when she moved to Atlanta from Hollywood. Simmons had a successful career in Los Angeles. She was an associate producer and worked on three major films. She also acted in "Roll Bounce" and "Be Cool."

"Briana was always in my heart," Simmons said. "I left California and came to Atlanta and put everything into building the Briana brand."

For more information about *Briana's Neighborhood* or to purchase the books, visit [www.brianasneighborhood.com](http://www.brianasneighborhood.com).

- Yuri Rodgers Milligan '97