

# Exit

by linda smolkin

## strategy

Edwin Fontáñez Left Puerto Rico in Search of  
New Color for His Palette

photography by visual cocktail

At Edwin Fontáñez's cozy townhouse and studio, a wonderful creature takes center stage. His name is Ricky, Fontáñez's plump and extremely sociable cat. Ricky jumped across the dining room table to settle into his owner's lap for a late morning nap.

"See, this is why I don't get as much done," said the artist and children's book author.

But Fontáñez seems to do plenty. Original artwork lines every wall, breathing the lush colors of a tropical island. A painting of Ricky shares space with one of Bolita, his other cat, "the introverted one." But the most compelling subjects found in his paintings are those of Fontáñez's family.

As a child, Fontáñez, who describes himself as being in his "fabulous fifties," was born in Bayamon, Puerto Rico, and spent many summer vacations visiting his grandmother in Corozal. When he was 9, his father moved the family of five to Corozal to be closer to her. Fontáñez fondly recalls memories of what he refers to as a "very modest upbringing."

"We were on the verge of poverty. I had to learn to appreciate my surroundings and come up with ways to entertain myself. I didn't have a chance for the TV to entertain me. We didn't even have one."

Although he loved Puerto Rico and didn't want to leave his family, Fontáñez's young heart and artistic mind ultimately tugged him away. His pursuit to see what the world could offer led him to New York at 23 years old. There, he found a home after being accepted to the prestigious Pratt Institute to study art. After a seven-year stint studying and working in Manhattan, Fontáñez set roots down in Arlington in 1986, where he was offered an art director's position.

Still, the job denied the place where Fontáñez's heart really lied: creating an artistic world meant for the minds of babes.

So while working at Hecht's in-house advertising department, he started his company, Exit Studio, and worked on educational projects on the side.

"It's funny. People ask me how I picked the name of my business. Part of the name, 'exit,' is taken from the word 'éxito.' In Spanish, éxito means success, so I thought it would make a good name. When I came to New York, I knew English pretty well, but was still

learning. I went to the movie theater and saw all these exit signs. I said to myself, 'Wow! This movie theater must be really successful because they have these exit signs everywhere'."

Fontáñez readily admits a learning curve when it came to his English, but says the most he has learned comes from children.

"Kids are the best and sharpest critics. They find details in everything and have a totally different way of looking at things. And, they're brutally honest."

His first projects under Exit Studio included creating a multicultural video and holding workshops at schools in the Washington, D.C. area.

"When I was doing a workshop, I remember asking the kids—who were 7 or 8 at the time—if they knew what Vejigante, a folklore character, was. Only one kid raised his hand. It was the only time I heard anything from him. He was so shy, but at the same time, so excited he knew what I was talking about, something that was part of his culture."

The experience led to other multicultural videos and workshops. Fontáñez created a video called "Taino" about the Taino tribe that inhabited Puerto Rico 500 years ago. By creating the video and offering workshops in elementary schools, he provided a great lesson to children about the Taino culture—the strength of community, respect for the environment and the value of family and friendships. After these special experiences, Fontáñez knew it was time to write a book that could represent the Latin American community and his own culture. This is how "On This Beautiful Island," published in November 2005, was born.

The story follows Guanin, a 10-year-old boy from the Taino tribe, and his pet parrot Tahite during a typical day on the island. With compelling illustrations, Fontáñez brings the entire island to life leaving nothing unturned, not even the tiniest frog or the stirring sounds from the treetops.

The heartwarming story was written for children 6 years and up, but even adults could learn a thing or two.

"As an artist, I want to take children and parents to a beautiful part of my history and give them a sense of imagination and curiosity." When asked if his grandmother told him stories like the one he wrote, he said, "I know I say I write for the kids, but sometimes I think that's a big fat lie. I write for myself. I'm telling the stories I wanted to hear as a child, but didn't."

## Edwin Fontáñez's Washington Chalk Festival

Saturday, Sept. 8, noon-6 p.m. Kennedy Center

Part of the Open House Arts Festival at the Kennedy Center since 1995, the Washington Chalk Festival has brought together artists of all ages to create and inspire. Children love this event, but it's for every age. It's not long before everyone—no matter what age—is creating his or her own masterpiece. At this free annual event, many different themes have taken center stage. In 1996 when the Kennedy Center celebrated its 25th birthday, the Chalk Festival put together quite an event. More than 20 artists created works on four-sided towers and on the sidewalk of the main plaza. In 1997, a Salute to the Circus showcased artists creating tigers, big top scenes and clowns while a real tightrope walker made an entrance. In 2000, a Celebration of Latin America brought artists and their vibrant colors with spectacular scenes. For more than 10 years, hundreds of artists and thousands of art enthusiasts have made this an incredible event and fueled the imagination of every visitor.

In addition to the videos, books, lesson plans and educational workshops, he has written original theme songs in Spanish and has created posters and activity books. And, for the past 10 years, he headed up the Washington Chalk Festival, which takes place at the Kennedy Center once a year. It's a festive event where Washington-area artists sketch colorful works of art while kids create their own masterpieces.

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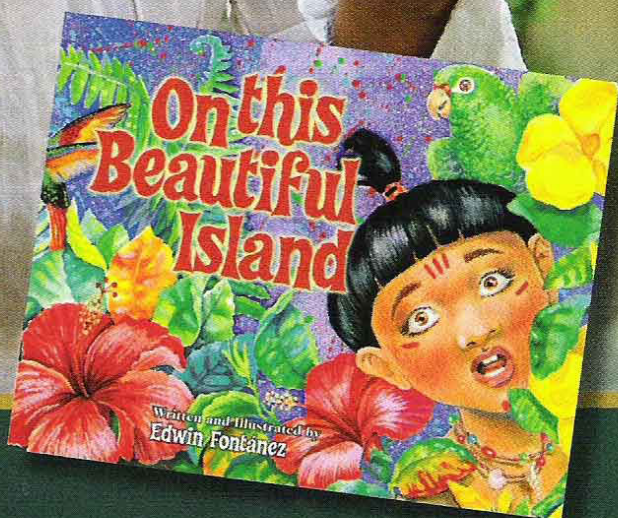
Once Ricky decided his nap is over, Fontáñez offered a tour of his studio. His vibrant, energetic personality calmed when he showed photos he uses for inspiration. They're of Puerto Rico: the river, the mountains, the Flamboyán tree with its blooming flowers as red as the spiciest of peppers.

He misses it but he's not going back any time soon and considers Arlington home. His current projects include writing a book of poetry and searching for a larger space for his studio. Whether it's a bond to his culture or just a natural ability to create, Fontáñez takes children to a special place in history through his incredible talent that's beyond imagination. It makes us wish that, perhaps one day, we could all live on a beautiful island.

"I see myself eventually going back. When I see the sky and color of the earth, there's a bond I can't break." 🐼

A photograph of Edwin Fontáñez, a man with a mustache, wearing a white button-down shirt. He is smiling broadly and gesturing with both hands held out, palms up. The background is a wooden fence with green foliage.

"I'm telling the stories I wanted to hear as a child, but didn't," Fontáñez said.



## Edwin Fontáñez, Award-nominated Author

Fontáñez's talent and hard work have not gone unnoticed. His book, "En Esta Hermosa Isla" (the Spanish version of "On This Beautiful Island") has been named 2006 Book of the Year Finalist by Foreword Magazine. As part of the Ninth Annual Book of the Year Awards, Fontáñez's creation is among nominations that represent some of the best work from today's independent press community. Foreword is the only review trade journal devoted exclusively to covering books from independent houses. Its award series was established to bring increased attention from libraries and booksellers to the literary achievements of independent publishers and their authors. Gold, silver and bronze winners and Editor's Choice prizes for fiction and nonfiction will be announced this year in New York City.