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# Niskayuna NEIGHBORS

AMY PATRICIA MEADE  
& DONALD KNAACK

Making a Positive Impact  
with Percussion, Puzzles & Passion

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Mary Flores Photography



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FAMILY FEATURE

# AMY PATRICIA MEADE & DONALD KNAACK





# Making a Positive Impact with Percussion, Puzzles & Passion

AMY PATRICIA MEADE and DONALD KNAACK are children of the arts. They both felt their calling from a very young age and have pursued their chosen professions ever since.

Amy is originally from Long Island. She grew up constantly reading and enjoyed arts & crafts, puzzles, and watching classic films with her grandfather. Writing was always a big part of her life. "As a child, I would borrow my grandfather's Polaroid Instamatic and take photos of everything I saw and then write stories about them. Storytelling was an important outlet for my imagination," she recalls.

She went on to receive her BA in English Literature and took jobs as a catalog copywriter for the Vermont Country Store and as a technical writer composing management coaching guides. But her heart wanted to be a mystery writer ever since her early days reading *Encyclopedia Brown* and Agatha Christie. Looking back, the chance to create order out of confusion was probably what most appealed to her about the mystery genre. "I think it was the puzzle elements of mysteries that appealed to me—that the clues you needed to solve the mystery were all there in front of you (if the author played fairly), and if you put them together, you'd find a solution. Life is chaotic and there's something satisfying about putting things back in order and restoring a semblance of balance."

In 2000, Amy made her mystery dreams a reality when she wrote her first book, *Million Dollar Baby*. After making the querying rounds, she found an agent that believed in the story, and they sold it to a publisher who contracted her for two other books as well. That first mystery series was set in 1935 Connecticut and written as an homage to the screwball comedies of that era. After that, her publisher wanted a more modern series, so Amy created the *Vermont Country Living Mysteries*.



Two books are currently released, and she's contracted for three more. She also has a standalone *Rosie the Riveter* mystery, *Don't Die Under the Apple Tree*, set in the NYC shipyards during WWII, and her most recent series, *The Tish Tarragon Culinary Mystery Series*, focusing on a crime-solving owner of a literary café and catering business. The latest book in this series, *Of Mushrooms and Matrimony*, released in the US and UK on January 3<sup>rd</sup> of this year, and Amy kicked off the release signing copies at an in-person event at Northshire Bookstore in Saratoga on February 9<sup>th</sup>.

Don grew up in Louisville, KY, loving anything music, customizing model cars, and playing baseball. Listening to the Dave Brubeck Quartet sparked his musical passion. "I became obsessed with their music and playing along with the recordings," he says. His elementary school music teacher wanted him to play flute since they needed another one in the band, but Don knew he just had to play percussion. "It was like a cosmic force that I had to play the drums. I believe she felt that cosmic force inside me."

Don received his BMED from the University of Louisville School of Music and his MM at Manhattan School of Music. He has performed as a percussionist with both the Louisville Orchestra and the Buffalo Philharmonic. His first concert, at only 18 years old, was in Louisville and featured Igor Stravinsky and Robert Kraft. Throughout the years, he has also played with the West Point Band, sat in as a session player in the Hollywood Studios, and toured worldwide.

—continued





## FAMILY FEATURE *continued*

◀◀ Two photos at left by Chelsea Nye



These days, Don is known as the Grammy-nominated “The JunkMan™,” teaching educational programs to kids that incorporate music, junk, and environmental lessons as well as inclusivity and acceptance. The idea came about from his early days watching his father. “My father was an automobile mechanic, and I grew up listening to the sounds of driveshafts, mufflers, metal fenders, and many other unique sound colors hitting or scraping the concrete floor. My composition teacher at Manhattan School of Music suggested I create a composition that included some non-traditional sounds. I immediately thought of the used auto parts. From that point, I began to collect and compose for those materials and gradually moved completely away from traditional percussion instruments into using reused materials exclusively. With traditional percussion instruments, there are approximately 300+ unique, individual timbres (sound colors), but with junk materials, there are thousands of unique, individual timbres. Therefore, these never-heard-before timbres gives my music its own, truly unique sound and style.”

JunkMusic™ has since been performed at all kinds of music venues, including with superstars like Eminem, Blink 182, and The Black Eyed Peas as well as on television

commercials, in commissions for national dance companies, at The Kennedy Center, and across mediums on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, CBS Sunday Morning, CBS News, National Public Radio, BBC, Associated Press, and *Billboard Magazine*.

Don has pledged an ongoing commitment to youth, their music, and environmental education throughout his career. He believes music can come from anywhere and can be accessed by any person. With this mindset, his work has resulted in the creation of the Help Our Planet (HOP) Environmental Education Initiative, which teaches music basics while learning music-making, the four environments we all share—soil, water, air, climate change—how we treat others and wish to be treated, our post-pandemic environment, and the role of culture in our lives. The program has won awards of excellence from the United Nations, the Federal Republic of Mexico, and the Governor of Vermont.

Along with many of the schools in the Capital District, Don has taught HOP throughout the US and Canada as well as in Mexico, most of the European countries, Dubai, and Korea. He’s also known to build Junk Music Playstations at various schools. They collect reused materials to build a sound sculpture on the playground

that the kids can jam on for years of music fun. He celebrates Earth Day every year with a Global Junkjam™ with students and musicians worldwide via Google Hangouts.

At one point, Don had a children’s television show called, *Junk Music with the Junkman*, on local TV. It took the first-place award in Children’s Programming from the Alliance for Community Media Northeast Video Festival. Amy was working at the TV station at the time, and the two have been together ever since.

Don and Amy decided they needed a change in scenery and applied for the Tier One Exceptional Talent Visa from the UK government. This visa enabled them both to live and work in the UK for five years. While there, Don performed at several festivals, schools, and special exhibitions at museums and galleries. He also designed and constructed a 16-voice polyphonic musical robot at the Bristol Robotics Laboratory. Amy continued working on her books, visiting schools, and stockpiling information for future stories. They made many special memories during their time there.

“London at Christmas time is exceptionally beautiful!” says Amy. “And that’s coming from someone who grew up outside of NYC and visited it often. Holidays in general were special there. The village in



which we lived held a celebration when they'd light up the shops. Also, we lived near Berry Head in Devon, which is possibly the most magical spot I've ever been. It's located on the English Channel, and you have an exceptional view of the water, cliffs, and rugged coastline."

Once their visa expired a year ago, they knew they would come back to the Northeast. They decided to live someplace less rural than where they'd been living in Vermont. They wanted something with more of an artistic and cultural life and decided that the Capital Region was an excellent location, close to both Albany as well as their family still in Vermont.



They have settled into their life here along with their two 18-year-old cats, Scout and Boo, and are loving being an integral part of the Capital Region community. When Russia invaded Ukraine last year, Amy wanted to do something to help. She created the Authors for Ukraine Auction—a concept that was intended as a small grass roots effort between Amy and a few other authors but grew to over

170 authors involved. They used an auction website as a platform for people to bid on signed and personalized books. "I posted the idea on Facebook, and it was initially met with crickets, but two days later, my phone started chiming and I was bombarded with authors wanting to get involved. In the end, the auction featured 35 *New York Times* bestselling authors and raised over \$20,000 for Ukraine refugee relief," says Amy. The money raised went to CARE's Ukraine Crisis Fund, which provides refugees with food, water, hygiene kits, psychosocial support, and cash assistance with a special focus on the needs of women and girls, families, and the elderly.

This year, Amy takes on her elected role of vice president of the local chapter of Sisters in Crime, a national organization that supports both published and aspiring crime writers. It is an honor she's looking forward to, but her proudest literary accomplishment so far was being invited to the Greenway Literary Festival in 2019. "The event takes place at Agatha Christie's holiday home, Greenway House, in Brixham, Devon,"

says Amy. "I did a Q&A session in a marquee beneath the magnolia tree Agatha's husband, Max, planted as a gift for her when they bought the house. It was positively surreal!"

When they're not entertaining us with their prospective arts, Amy and Don love to travel. In the Capital District, they enjoy going for drives, hiking by the old canal and historic lock at Vischer Ferry Preserve, and

taking in the views at Saratoga Battlefield. Don enjoys hitting the gym and karate, while Amy can be found reading or cooking. Many of her books feature recipes, so she's always looking to come up with new meals to try and testing out new recipes. She tends to gravitate towards comfort cooking and is fascinated with the complex spice combinations of Indian and Moroccan cooking. She doesn't have a signature dish per se, but she is always asked to make the Thanksgiving stuffing!

Amy also offers editing services for other authors, with a range of options including proofreading, copyediting, and line edits with a focus on works of fiction. In addition, she delivers storytelling classes for elementary schools. "My program tries to remove the intimidation factor of writing a story by using storyboarding as a preparatory technique," she explains. "True story—I was teaching my storyboarding classes the day before the UK lockdown was put into place. It was an odd experience as the teachers and children were thoroughly engaged, yet we all sensed that school closures were imminent. Shortly after I got back home, the Prime Minister made the announcement."

Amy and Don are looking forward to the year ahead with the hope that everyone stays healthy, and they can continue doing what they love, since it is truly a piece of themselves as well as a way of life. "Music is my addiction," says Don. "I love creating both an imaginary world in which readers can get lost as well as providing them with a puzzle to solve," says Amy. "I think people really need a positive distraction these days." 🐾

For more information about Amy's books and services and Don's music and appearances, visit [amypatriciameade.com](http://amypatriciameade.com) and [junkmusic.online](http://junkmusic.online).



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