

'Esteem Engine' moves full speed ahead

Ron Johnson of Maplewood has written more than a colorfully illustrated children's book. It is an inspirational piece of work that can enhance the hopes and dreams of youngsters of all ages while being an entertaining page turner. In the meantime, there is an important lesson to be taught and to be learned, within these pages. Simply, but emphatically.

The book is called "The Esteem Engine," and its subtitle is "I Can Be Who I Am." It has attractive illustrations by Kenny Velez of a variety of children and adults, with personal problems, but especially of a piece of junk train that is aided and assisted to become streamlined.

Johnson, who began writing the book back in 2005, while he was working full time in New York as a ratings analyst of bonds, said, during a recent visit, he was "inspired by my wife, Pat, and my daughter, Sage. The words, 'esteem' and 'engine,' popped into my mind, which made me think of a train and the people around me. The people in the book are all based on people I actually know. And they all have significant roles in this book. Actually," he added, "a children's book came to mind, and instead of me telling a story, the story was telling me."

Johnson first introduces his interesting characters, the train's conductor, Spanish Senor Rivera, who daydreams about the early days of the once rusty and forgotten train; the Jewish Mr. B, who helped create and turn it into a beautiful train, called "The Esteem Engine," and the four children, who originally mistreated the "creepy" train by slapping on cruel graffiti. The trouble-making children are "busybody" Enta2tah, "artistic eyed" Mood Ring, the "shy" Hoi Tsing,

On The Shelf

By Bea Smith



and the "musically rhythmic" Benny Bebop.

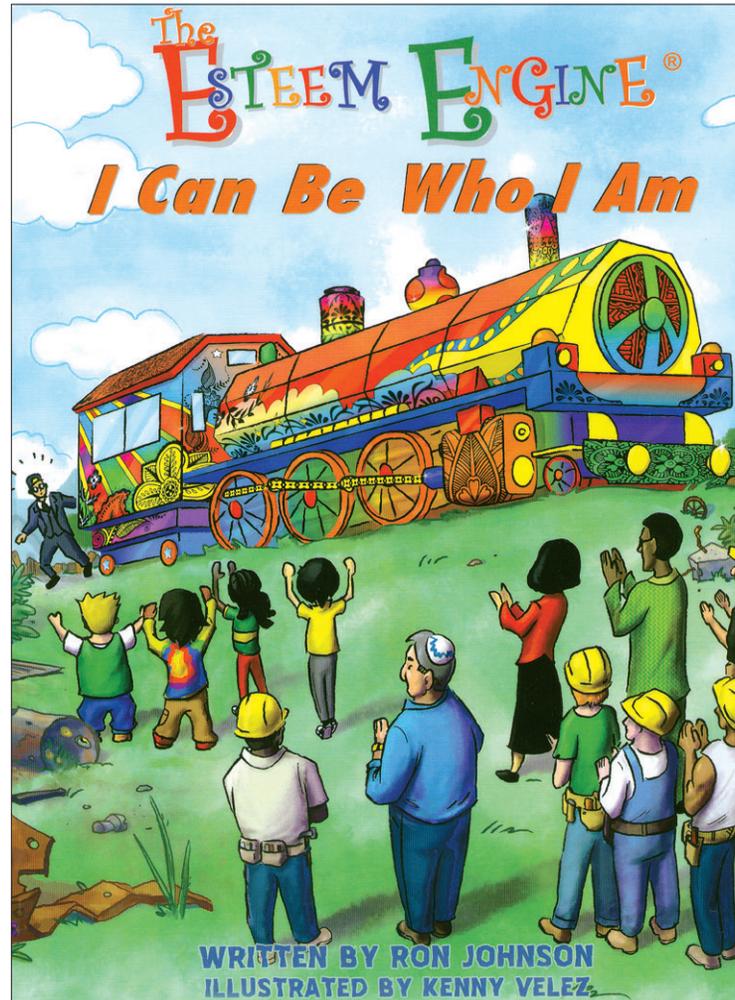
The other characters in the book, who are helpful in creating a smooth-running, computer train from a piece of iron junk, are friends of Senor Rivera, Dr. Okele and Ms. Connie, plus a computer scientist, Professor Etcetera.

Although only Senor Rivera can have a conversation with the Esteem Engine, in the long run, Professor Etcetera produces a brain helmet that can arrange for all the characters in the book to "talk" to the train.

Interestingly, all of the characters in the book learn to have self esteem and to live life on the right track.

Youngsters have much to learn about the importance of self esteem in Johnson's text throughout this splendid book while enjoying the drawings and the bright colorful illustrations, particularly of the attractive train.

As for the illustrations, Johnson explained that "I did an internet search for an illustrator, and I came across people who had graduated from the New York School of Visual Arts. That's the top school for illustrators and artists. I fell in love with Kenny Velez's work, and before long, we were working together. In fact, he illustrated four other books that I had written and that have the same characters as this book."



The new book from local author Ron Johnson

Johnson, who was born in Macon, Ga., has a degree in accounting and a master's degree in business administration from Morehouse College in Atlanta. He spent more than a year in the Peace Corps, serving in Paraguay before coming to New Jersey in 2003.

"I wanted to see the world," he recalled. "And I love the Spanish language. I worked in business development with farm cooperatives."

Right now, as proprietor of a business called The Right Track and author of "The Esteem Engine," Johnson mentioned that "I am in the process of developing a television series called 'Right Track Village.' It is similar to 'Sesame Street.' Passengers get on a train to tell stories on how they have overcome some tragedies in their lives through having a healthier self-esteem and the characteristic values and life skills to over-

come that adversity. It will be set in Newark, but the name of the city will be Right Track Village, actually shown on the cover of my book."

He said that this was so important to him that "I submitted a proposal to the New Jersey Motion Picture and Television Producing Commission to attract people to New Jersey to do the work of making a television series, films — Hollywood wants people there, well New Jersey wants people here."

Johnson beamed. "They loved the idea because of the purpose and the vision and the mission of my company, 'The Esteem Engine Inc.' The vision is to put an end to poor academic performance, poverty and crime. A child at a time. And we want to do that by nurturing children, their values, life skills, self-esteem in pre-school and elementary school-age children living in low income, urban communities. We want to generate a new generation of adults who are positive and productive. And it all comes to the children's books, the television series, entertaining games and other activities that children would enjoy. Actually," Johnson admitted, "it started with my young daughter, Sage, who had taken an interest in developing into a good human being, good self-esteem. And my company, Steam Engine Inc., which is a non-profit organization, is going to produce a show on parenting called 'Parent Avenue.'"

And as far as the handsome young author's recent book is concerned, "The Esteem Engine's" swiftly moving wheels can climb its way up this reviewer's bookcase for children and happily park itself on the shelf among the other illustrated volumes.