

Words take flight for Rachelle

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For many years, Rachelle McIntyre has dreamed of writing her own children's book — one in particular inspired by her young family's pet magpie.

Now, thanks to a network of "really lovely people" and a friend offering an extra pair of hands [literally], McIntyre's black and white protagonist has finally taken flight.

The Masterton local and former primary school teacher has released her first illustrated children's book, *Mrs M* — officially launched at an afternoon tea celebration at St James Union Church last weekend.

The independently-published story features McIntyre and

her now grown-up sons, Jake and Jesse, as leading characters. They form a friendship with Mrs M, an outgoing magpie who made regular visits to their Alfredton home when the boys were little.

"My youngest gave the magpie the name 'Mrs M'. Though we had no idea if it was a male or a female," McIntyre laughed.

While writing their own book is a long-held dream for many, McIntyre's journey has been more challenging than most.

She has been living with multiple sclerosis [MS] for the past two decades and has, over time, lost mobility in her limbs. She is now a tetraplegic, and uses a head and shoulder gesture-controlled wheelchair to manoeuvre around her home.

However, her dream of being a published author began to materialise last

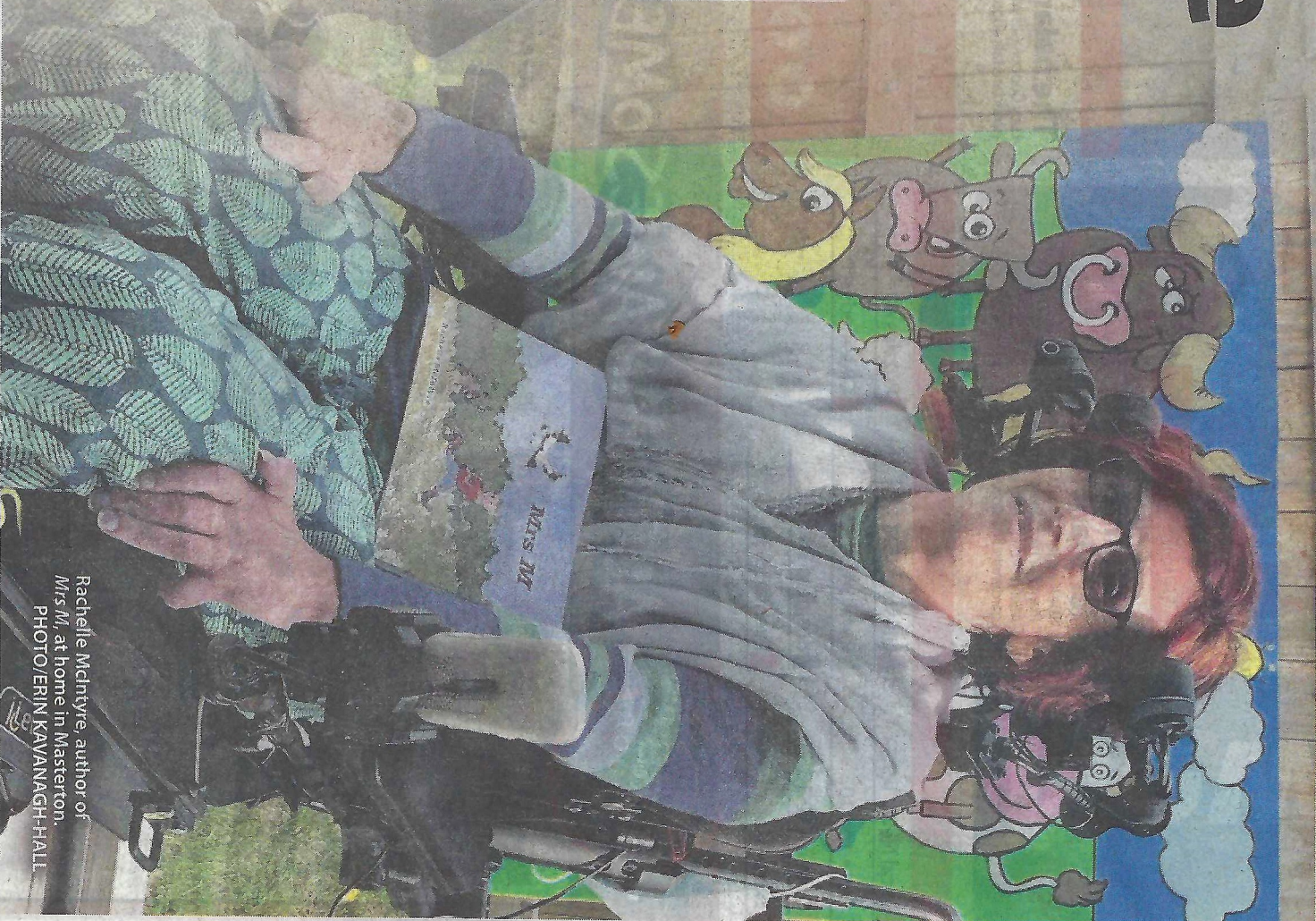
year, thanks to friend and fellow writer Shona Daubé.

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One of the illustrations by Janet Atkinson.

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Rachelle McIntyre, author of *Mrs M*, at home in Masterton.
PHOTO/ERIN KAVANAGH-HALL

Up and away for writer's dream

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Daubé, who has self-published five short books about her own journey with MS, wrote down all the words for *Mrs M* while McIntyre dictated what had "been in her head for a while". Daubé then published the book under own label, Pink Cottage Publishing.

When speaking to *Midweek*, McIntyre recalled the performance appraisals from her teaching career, where she was asked about her goals outside of work.

"My answer every year was the same – to write a children's book. But life got busy and I never got round to it. Until now," she said.

"To see *Mrs M* in print feels fantastic. Before the MS, I was always a very active, 'get up and at 'em' person. All the things I loved doing, I could see what I'd achieved in front of me – teaching children, working in the garden, cooking, fitness. You can see the visible results.

"After everything that's happened, I feel like the book is evidence of what



Rachelle McIntyre at the launch of *Mrs M* – with Cath Cameron (left), the guest speaker and a former teaching colleague, and her sons, Jesse and Jake.

I can achieve. And I'm really proud of that."

McIntyre first began experiencing reduced movement and coordination not long after son Jesse (now 20) was born, and was eventually diagnosed with secondary-progressive MS – for which no medications are available.

Her condition progressed rapidly, and her mobility deteriorated. She began using a crutch, then a walking frame, and had to rely on her parents to bring in her into Masterton from

Alfredton for errands. A real low point, she said, was having to give up driving.

"It got to the point where I couldn't lift my foot off the accelerator," McIntyre, who has used a wheelchair since 2013, said. "It was awful. I got home and cut up my driver's license."

In 2014, while being treated at Waitarapa Hospital, McIntyre's marriage ended, and she was transferred to the rest home unit at Glenwood Masonic Hospital. She remained there for close to four

years, while she waited for funding for in-home caregiving services.

She now lives in her own purpose-built, accessible home – which she has decorated with bright artworks, inspirational quotes, and photos of her boys. She will celebrate her sixth anniversary of independent living on

April 23. McIntyre met Daubé while she was working as a community advisor [CA] for MS Wellington – and was determined to help McIntyre get the ball rolling on her book.

"Rachelle had everything up there in her head already. I had the contacts – and the arms! I was like, 'well, we may as well get started.'"

The friends worked on *Mrs M* for most of the year, working through several drafts before they arrived at a final product. McIntyre was happy with. Daubé then connected McIntyre with Greytown-based artist Janet Atkinson – also a former CA with MS Wellington – who came on board as the

illustrator. MS Wellington agreed

to fund the first print run of *Mrs M*, which was printed at the Corrections Print Shop at Rimutaka Prison – which has printed several of Daubé's works.

"It's a wonderful thing they do up at their own printing press, and the guys can learn things like layout and graphic design, and get work experience," Daubé said.

"We sent the team a nice little video of Rachelle talking about her book, and the guys were right into it."

Now *Mrs M* has been launched, McIntyre has several more books in the planning – including one inspired by her childhood memories, and one starring her much-loved cat, Olson, another black and white protagonist.

"I'm so happy with *Mrs M* and what Shona and I were able to do together. It's something my boys can keep forever."

• *Copics of Mrs M* are available at Heart of Arts in Carterton.

