

For Immediate Release

Contact: Publicist Bridgette A. Lacy
Phone: 919-872-4234
Email: Bridgettelacy@att.net
Website: gumswamppublishing.com



Retired Banker Pens a Children's Book about the Power of Numbers

RALEIGH, NC – As a second grader, Leigh Ballance rode the school bus with older children who were often struggling to memorize multiplication tables. It scared him, but soon he began to dream of numbers. “They became my friends and have remained so all these years,” he says.

Ballance became a successful banker, real estate developer and general contractor. Those early days of tackling math problems inspired Ballance to write, *The Secret of Gum Swamp*. (Gum Swamp Publishing, \$12.50)

The read-aloud book designed for early readers tells the story of Henry and his friends, the Number People. They live in the magical, secret world of Gum Swamp. But the Number People and the animal friends are under attack by an evil menace named Hem. Using their skills to add, subtract and multiply, Henry outwits the power of Hem.

Each number, from zero to nine, is illustrated by Marion Clark Weathers, an award-winning artist based in Rocky Mount. The Number People come with human personalities, genders and smarts.

The Secret of Gum Swamp, a charming adventure story, is set in North Carolina's very own Gum Swamp, located in Hyde County, where Ballance grew up in the farming and fishing community.

The fictional Henry uses the power of math, leadership, bravery and teamwork to drive the evil force from Gum Swamp.

Ideal for reading aloud to children from five to nine years of age, “The Secret of Gum Swamp,” is not a math book, but shows children how numbers can be their friends, which may – as in the case of the real-life author – reduce anxiety about learning math. Its themes of companionship, partnership, cooperation, and respect for wildlife encourage adventure, good citizenship and creativity.

Published by Gum Swamp Publishing, LLC, *The Secret of Gum Swamp*, is available for purchase at <http://www.gumswamppublishing.com> and online retailers.

To arrange an interview or schedule a reading with Leigh Ballance, please contact Bridgette A. Lacy at (919) 872-4234, or by email at bridgettelacy@att.net

Leigh Ballance

LEIGH BALLANCE GREW UP IN A SMALL FARMING AND FISHING COMMUNITY in North Carolina's Hyde County. All the children, first graders through high school seniors, attended the same school, all housed in the same building. They also rode the same bus.

As a second grader, he watched the older students struggling to memorize multiplication tables while on the way to school. The idea of numbers seemed overwhelming, but soon he began to dream of numbers. "Instead of frightening me, they came to me in my dreams as friends and



we have remained friends all these years. As a child, having numbers as friends helped me approach learning math in a new way. When I looked at number problems, they were first my friends and using numbers became easy," he says.

Having numbers as his friends has always helped him with math and solving problems. It certainly helped him in his banking career. He began his professional career with Peoples Bank and Trust Company in Rocky Mount in 1972. Later, in 1989, he founded Unity Bank and Trust Company in Rocky Mount. In 1995, he merged Unity Bank with Triangle Bank based in Raleigh. A few years later, Ballance retired from banking and became a commercial real estate developer and general contractor under Prime 1 Builders, a commercial construction company.

His early struggle and fear of numbers inspired his debut children's book, *The Secret of Gum Swamp*, a read aloud adventure book for young readers. The book's main character, Henry, also dreams of the number characters. The book tells of Henry's discovery that his number characters are real and how his math skills and bravery help solve a mystery in Gum Swamp.

Ballance received a bachelor's degree in business administration from The Citadel in 1968. He served in the Army from 1968–1972 including a stint as a helicopter pilot in Vietnam.

While a banker in Rocky Mount, he met award-winning artist Marion Clark Weathers. Ballance shared his story of the number characters with Weathers. As he described each number and their personality to her, she created Zero through Nine, giving them human traits and unique characteristics including hairstyles, clothing and personalities.

The resulting sketches became the catalyst for *The Secret of Gum Swamp*, the first of a three-book series about the main character, Henry and the Number People. Other books in the pipeline include, *The Hay Bale Fort Battle* and *Lou and the Professor Scytodes* and two children's picture books, *Zero is Missing* and *A Tree Has Fallen*.

Marion Clark Weathers

AWARD-WINNING ILLUSTRATOR AND ARTIST, Marion Clark Weathers used her hands and imagination to create the number people, their animal friends and the mysterious Gum Swamp. A native of Orangeburg, SC, she grew up along the banks of the Edisto River near a swamp with alligators! Weathers graduated from the University of Georgia with a B.F.A. and has been a practicing artist ever since.

She is involved in many arts organizations, commercial art ventures, and shows her art in exhibits across North Carolina. She is currently doing post-graduate study in painting at Barton College.



A few years ago, Leigh Ballance sought out Marion, a longtime friend since his banking days in Rocky Mount, to bring his ideas about his number characters to life. As Ballance told her his childhood dreams about numbers, a response to his fears about learning math, Weathers began sketching each number from zero through nine. Based on his descriptions, she endowed each number with their own personality, gender and individual attire. Weathers' sketches soon led to the collaboration that created *The Secret of Gum Swamp*

and other stories based on the numbers. The pair created Gum Swamp Publishing in 2014, to publish children's books, games, and materials related to the series. Two more number people books are in the works.

Weathers has been included in juried exhibitions across North Carolina from New Bern to Boone, and has been an exhibiting artist at numerous Arts Councils. She served as President of NashArts Council in 2001 and American Advertising Federation, TEAM Chapter, in 1992. Weathers has received the National Award of Excellence three times from the American Chamber of Commerce, Best in Show from the American Library Association. She owned and operated ArtMasters Gallery in Rocky Mount for more than three years, and now happily paints in her own gallery, Goose Creek Studio, on Country Club Road beside Goose Creek Lake in Rocky Mount.

Throughout her career Weathers has won many awards, including The American Advertising Federation, IIA International, and The American Chamber of Commerce. Her work is displayed in private and corporate collections. Weathers is a Signature member of the Watercolor Society of North Carolina.

The Number People

