

High-school manuscript turns pharmacist into novelist

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Author Vicki Allen finished her first novel 20 years after she started it.

Allen, 44, visited Destin last month to see her parents and hold a couple of book signings for her fourth novel, "Drink One To Me, Christian Bennett." She told The Log her first book, "For Molly," had been one of several manuscripts she had written in her teen years.

"Something prompted me to keep those particular pages," Allen said. "I found them in my closet when my parents retired 20 years later."

When her parents relocated from Louisiana to Destin, they asked Allen to clear out any personal stuff from the family home. "I found those pages, took them back to Oklahoma, liked the idea.

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You can order a copy at MagnoliaPublishing.com. Allen's own Web site is vickiallen.com.

I brushed them up, put an ending on it, and that's how it came about."

"For Molly," which Allen finished in 1997, opens with a young Southern woman, Ashley, relaxing on the beach in Destin, then rewinds to look at her heartbroken romantic history.

"I did the normal route at first, sent out queries to different agents, sent out different queries to publishers," Allen said. "After a stack of rejections, I had a group of friends that are very impatient people and said 'Enough of that!' We formed our own publisher and printed it in 1999."

Running her own company in

addition to her day job — Allen is a licensed pharmacist with her own drugstore — means more work than going through an established publisher, but Allen said she likes it.

"Once you've worked for yourself, working for someone else is not something you want to do. We've been so successful, I doubt I would even go another route. I'm used to having total artistic control."

The work includes 300 book signings and other events over the past nine years, Allen said, that with a solid fan base built up, she no longer has to promote the books quite as hard.

Allen said that while her first three books are sweet, romantic and family-oriented; "Christian Bennett," has a darker side, as the protagonist, Abigail, is kidnapped by a Mexican drug lord. What makes it really different from her earlier books, Allen said, is that

she wrote it in five months.

"I just got hit with the entire storyline, top to bottom," she said. "I barely ate, I barely slept, I typed and typed, 150 pages in two weeks — unbelievable!"

Allen said she needs very little sleep so she would start work at 8 or 9 p.m., after a day at the pharmacy, and keep going until 1 to 2 a.m.

"I love starting from scratch with a story idea and just letting it take control," Allen said. "I love to watch the way the story develops, the characters develop and take control ... it's fun to look back at a character and see where they came from."

Allen adds that while "Christian Bennett" is darker than her usual work, the ending is not: "I always have to have a happy ending. I have to come away from a book feeling good. You know it's going to end well, whether it ends the way you want to or not."