

Maria's voice booked for our town

immediately familiar to millions of current and former toddlers as Maria on *Sesame Street*.

"Many kids have told me, 'Seeing you on TV made me feel good about myself,'" Manzano said in a telephone interview from the Manhattan apartment she shares with her husband, Richard Reagan, who heads a wildlife foundation, and her daughter, Gabriela, 16.

"Maria — being part of the neighborhood, going to the movies, getting married, having a baby — that said to Latin kids, 'I'm a part of this society, too,'" Manzano said.

It may seem odd these days, when Dora the Explorer can effortlessly imprint the phrase "*¡Vámanos!*" on a nation of preschoolers, but Manzano broke new ground when she made her debut 32 years ago. She hadn't set out to pioneer anything. She was just trying to get out of the Bronx.

"Society was on my side to succeed," she recalls, beginning with the eighth-grade teacher who urged her to audition for the performing arts program to get her

involved in something before she was "pregnant or on drugs."

Manzano never set out to be a writer either, but she's now the proud author of *No Dogs Allowed!* (Atheneum, \$15.95, ages 3 to 8), a fond and funny picture book about the day trips her slightly wacky family would make to state parks. The book is beautifully illustrated by Jon J Muth.

School children in Miami-Dade and Broward counties will reap the benefits, since *No Dogs Allowed!* has been chosen as this year's selection of the One Picture Book, One Community literacy project. More than 3,300 copies of the book will be distributed to South Florida elementary schools this month, and Manzano will make several local appearances this fall.

"I had this story in the back of my mind for a long time," Manzano said. "Those excursions were always so irritating because 90 percent of the time, the car would break down or we'd hit traffic. It was such an ordeal."

Kvetching to a friend about those episodes made Manzano see the efforts of her parents, who moved from

Puerto Rico to New York in the 1940s, in a new light. The friend said, "Isn't that wonderful that they went to so much trouble?" And I realized, my parents could have said, 'Forget it.' But they always made the best of it because they wanted us to have that experience of taking a trip, going to the country."

Manzano credits her development as a writer to *Sesame Street*. It began when she would make suggestions to the writers, about her character and Hispanic culture.

"At first it was little things like, 'Why does it always have to be tacos or rice and beans?' and they would listen to me and they would change it."

Finally, the producer suggested Manzano try writing some of the scenes herself. She gave Manzano the show's "bible," a thick book that covers the *Sesame Street* mission and "curriculum" in meticulous detail.

"I was humbled. I finally understood what these people were up against and what they were trying to do," she said. Awestruck or not, she wrote three short pieces —

then waited until the last day of filming for the season to turn them in. "In case they were horrible. At least they wouldn't have to face me again for a while."

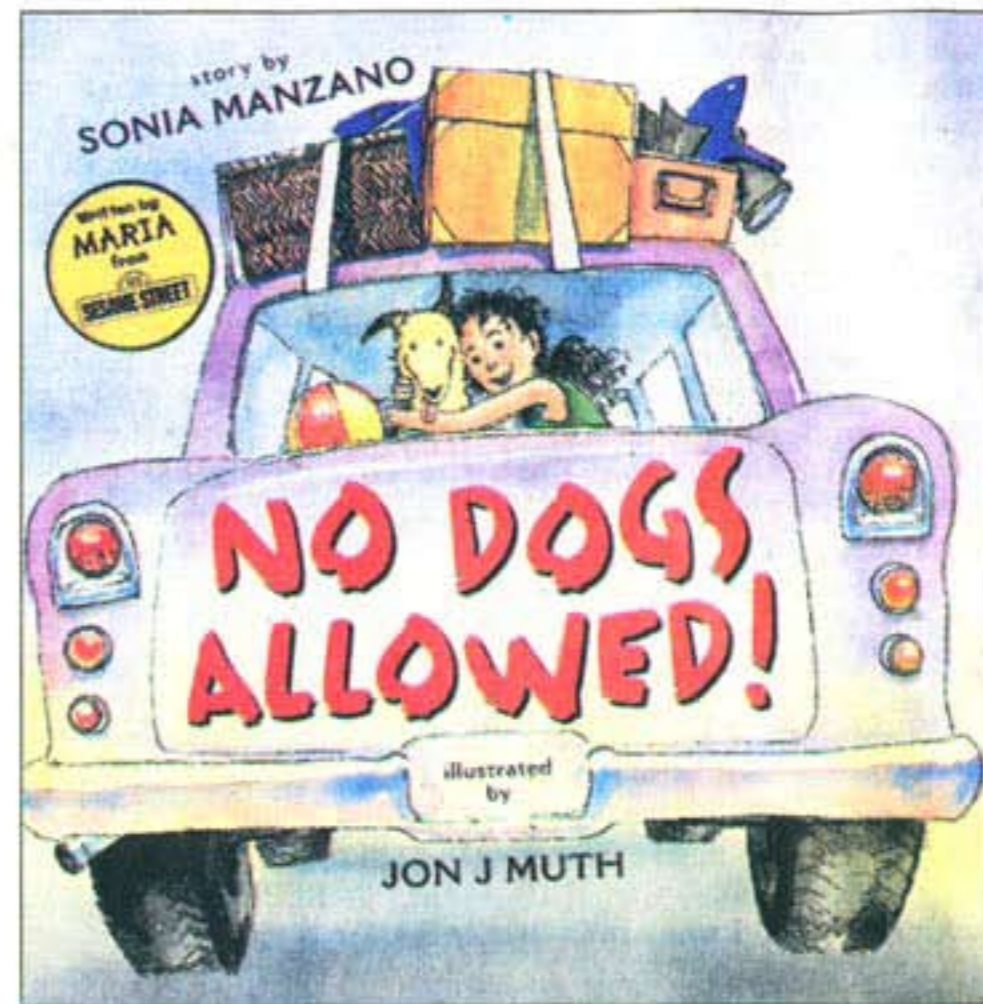
Fifteen television Emmys later — all for writing — Manzano has a lot more confidence. She's currently at work on a memoir.

Over the years, she has also stretched herself as an actress, appearing on Broadway recently in *The Vagina Monologues*. But she never felt a strong tug to leave *Sesame Street*.

"After a few years on the show, I did audition for other things, but it just made *Sesame Street* look better," she said. "They'd be like, 'Can you do it without the accent?' Or, 'Can you do it with an accent?' Or 'Can you play a maid?' I stuck with *Sesame Street* because they wanted me. They wanted *me* — who I am."

That pioneer stuff, Manzano notes, is just gravy.

"There's an advantage to not having any footsteps to follow in," she said. "You can make your own way."



READ THIS: Sonia Manzano's *No Dogs Allowed!* is the One Picture Book, One Community selection.