

First graders become published authors at Ruch Community School

BY CURTIS MEKEMSON

I was recently asked to write an article for the *Applegater* about the first graders who are self-publishing their books in Kim Neiswanger's class at Ruch Community School. Being a self-published author myself, I jumped at the opportunity. After all, it's important to check out the local competition, right?

As part of my assignment, I drove to the school to watch the young authors at work. I had no idea what to expect. When I arrived, Kim greeted me enthusiastically and said she was going to bring the children in from recess. "What would you like the children to call you?" she asked. "Mr. Curtis will be fine," I said. The first graders arrived in two neat rows. I expected them to make a beeline for their desks, but they made a beeline for me instead.

Each child walked up to me with his or her hand stretched out, waiting to shake mine. The kids looked me in the eye, gave a warm smile, and said, "Welcome to our class, Mr. Curtis," or "We are glad you are here." I melted. What did it matter what the children had written; they had won me over. I may have met the most polite first graders in the world.

But the truth is, the children have a great project going. As they settled in to write or draw illustrations for

their books, I walked around and talked to them while Kim worked with individual students. The children were eager to share their tales and show me their illustrations. I learned about dragons, and tigers, and dinosaurs, and princesses, and kitties, and even robots. Apparently, Robocop was having a crisis because his batteries were low. At least that's what I thought I was told. There may have been an interpretation problem between the student's young voice and my old ears.

The class was in the second phase of its project. The students had started by brainstorming what they wanted to write about and picked up skills for idea generation that I wouldn't learn until I was 30. Now they were finishing up their first drafts. The third stage of the process will involve peer review. "I see you have drawn a big elephant but there is no elephant in your story." Whoops. Next up they will do one or two rewrites. The finished product will be shipped off to a publisher in the Midwest.

Each child's work will come back as a beautifully bound and illustrated book. I looked through a selection from last year. Every one had a cover, a title page, a copyright page, a dedication, the story, and an author's page. Imagine

the thrill the children will have when they see the finished book and hold it in their hands. I suspect it won't be much different than the thrill I felt when I held my first published book.

Afterwards, I stayed and chatted with Kim while the children went off to PE. As a teacher, she is brimming over with enthusiasm. "I love to write," she told me. "It is my hope that the children will develop the same enthusiasm I have." I would bet they do.

The first-grade book-publishing project, now in its fourth year, is a collaboration between Ruch Community School and the Oregon Writing Project at Southern Oregon University. Funds for publishing the books have been generously donated by members of the community at the Ruch School's annual PTO fundraiser. My wife

Peggy and I plan to attend this year's event to be held on August 21 from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. at Red Lily Vineyards to provide continuing support for the writing project and many other valuable programs at the school. We've been twice before. It is a fun event with good food and a great cause. It is worthy of your support.

An authors' reception is being held on Thursday, June 4, at the Ruch Branch Library adjacent to the school. The children will read their books to parents, school board members, and people from the community. Everyone is invited. In addition to the author's reception, the whole school will be engaged in a Celebration of Writing on that Thursday, with local authors sharing their stories and expertise with the students.

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Ruch Community School first graders work on their books with teacher Kim Neiswanger (in top photo).