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## **WE ARE SPECIAL BEYOND OUR SPECIAL NEEDS: E\*LIT Project Entry Inspires Pride in Disabilities' Students**

*by MariRae Dopke-Wilson*

There's excitement in the voice of Frazer School Librarian Laurie LeFever as she recalls igniting the spark that fired her idea for a school literacy project for children with disabilities. The spin on Laurie's entry for Syracuse University's 2007 E\*LIT competition is what made her project really unique. Instead of working with students to create a project that would be targeted toward children with disabilities, she actually used



students with disabilities to create the project! The outcome was an inspiring and memorable experience for students of Frazer's 7th and 8th grade community based, special needs classroom known as Mrs. Sorrendino's Community. Their goals in school aren't necessarily to learn how to write a paragraph or pass a test. Instead, these special needs students are in class to learn basic life skills. While some are unable to write their names or speak in sentences, Laurie's project enabled all of them to become active participants authoring, illustrating, printing and publishing a book about their special talents. A book that now belongs to Award winning Children's Author Myron Uhlberg, as their gift to him

in return for inspiration. Throughout this article, you will see images from the book they created.

"We looked through the book "The Printer" by Myron Uhlberg and I thought this would be perfect for them to show their special needs and what they do beyond their special needs, because that's the history behind 'The Printer.' He was a deaf man who saved the whole printing factory by letting everyone know there was a fire. I thought my special needs students can all do things that have nothing to do with their disabilities and it would be great. So the inspiration came to me immediately." Undaunted by the multi-faceted project she was about to lead, Laurie began to put collaboration in motion connecting first with her school's art teacher, someone she had worked well with in the past.

She also relied on her Syracuse University graduate student Betsy Hartnett, now a Librarian at Syracuse's Huntington School, to work one-on-one with the students.

The students' first introduction to the project began with a special speaker who explained his disability. "We brought in Vlad who is



one of the members of our technology department. Vlad is blind, so he talked to the students about his blindness and about how he lives in the world beyond his blindness. They asked questions of him and he showed them Braille. He showed them how he tells time, and he showed them how he walked across the street. They saw another person with disabilities. Then we read the story 'The Printer' with them

and talked about how wonderful the character was that saved the whole factory of workers."

Next, with the background of 'The Printer' as a basis, the students in Mrs. Sorrendino's class made printer hats just as they saw in Uhlberg's story. They talked about being printers - a wonderful lead-in to how they would 'print' art for their very own book about themselves and their special talents. "The students created stamps. They used foam and they cut out pieces to make an actual stamp. They each did two and each stamp was a picture of something they do outside of school, outside of their disability."

Intern Betsy Hartnett worked closely with each student to help them to write sentences about their picture that would be printed using their handmade foam stamps. "The best part of the project was working with the students. The students showed unabated enthusiasm during the entire project. They were able to identify with the hearing impaired father in Myron Uhlberg's *The Printer*. The students took great pride in using a printing method to create illustrations and they worked very hard to write about their abilities."

KRISTY TUCKER



CHARLIE ROUSE



“Betsy was key. She went to the classroom, she sat with each student one at a time and helped them first create their sentence and type it out on the computer. And then they stamped right on those sheets where they had typed, so they became printers. They made their own book that was about their talents beyond their disabilities.”

Laurie remembers the students formulating their sentences about things they like to do and feel good about doing such as: “I can cook dinner – I can baby sit my little sister – I enjoy shooting baskets – I love to dance & sing songs.” Each student's picture was taken to be featured in the book preceding their talent and the artwork depicting it. Next, the art teacher bound the book using cardboard and contact paper to make a spine. Finally, the project jumped up a level of technology and was formatted as a PowerPoint presentation – this was an important part of the project requirement for electronic submission. LeFever remembers being impressed by a student's comment after viewing the presentation. “Mrs. LeFever, we should have spoken our words and put that in the PowerPoint so they could hear us talking. I thought he got it. He got the whole idea that we were making something by ourselves. And I said, you are absolutely right! We should have spoken the words. We ran out of time. And I had thought of it, but we had to get the entry in. But they understood what we were trying to do. We were trying to share them, each of them with Myron and show that they understood his books; that they were going beyond their disabilities to do special things. It was really cool.”

Frazer's entry was honored at the E\*LIT presentation, where author Myron Uhlberg spoke to contest participants and acknowledged the work of the students. "The actual best part was taking them to see the author. It was disbelief for them. They couldn't actually believe they were meeting an author. They really got it at that point. Before that it was just something we were doing. We went to SU, we went in this auditorium, it was beautiful and they felt special. They were introduced as a Frazer class and Myron talked directly, and my students raised their hands and asked questions and he answered them."

I LOVE TO DANCE AND  
SING TO SONGS.



### Motivating Factors

Drawing from the book of child shooting baskets with text reading Laurie says the special needs students were motivated watching her, their classroom and art teachers and Betsy all working together on the same project. "For them, I was, wow! When I go to the library I work on it, when I go to the art room I work on it, when I'm in class I work on it. So that was like the thread. To see the adults all working together on the same page is a motivator. Second, it was fun reading Myron's books and then we took out paper hats and they made them. It was absolutely just fun. When creating the actual stamps, our question was, what can you do? What do you like to do outside of school and beyond your disability? What are things you are good at? And kids love to share with other people what they are good at, and we didn't set limits on it. Knowing it would be completed in a book, it just motivated them straight through to keep going."

A former School of Information Studies graduate, Laurie feels involvement in The E\*LIT (Enriching Literacy through Information Technology) Project and other Syracuse University programs such as student internship, are enriching. She encourages other Library Media Specialists to get involved.

"I would say, if you can, do the project when you have an intern from SU so you have an extra pair of hands. You learn from each other, you learn from your intern, your intern learns from you. You can divide up the responsibility a little bit more. And the other thing I would say is find a teacher that you already work well with. I went to the art teacher first and said this is this project, Daniella, I think you could do something

phenomenal with this – think about it and get back to me. She did and I remember her saying, I’m thinking of using Lynn’s Sorrendino’s community based class, and that was exactly what I was thinking! There are certain people that you’re already on the same page with. And it doesn’t have to be overwhelming. We set up steps that were simple that each of us had a little role in and we could accomplish.”

Laurie LeFever says finding a teacher that you already work well with can

I ENJOY SHOOTING  
BASKETS.



lead to multiple collaborative projects, as in the case of Frazer’s innovative art teacher.

“She approached me already, what’s the project this year. How can we get involved! She enjoyed it so much. She was so excited to see her students do something that won them an award.”

In remembrance of “The Printer’ project and the special field trip to Syracuse University, Mrs. Sorrendino’s Community can enjoy browsing their special autographed copy of Myron Uhlberg Award winning book in Frazer’s Library whenever they like. Laurie LeFever and her fellow collaborators must get a little tingle of pride when they see it, too!

The School of Information Studies wishes to thank Laurie LeFever for her work with Syracuse University interns and the excellent lesson plans she has contributed to the SOS for Information Literacy database.

#### About the Author



MariRae Dopke-Wilson is a veteran media producer. She is the feature story writer for the Educators' Spotlight Digest and producer of many video clips for the S.O.S. for Information Literacy project. In the past several years, she has interviewed dozens of library media specialists and captured their stories in both print and video.