

Lunch with an Author – Irene Smalls

(Reprinted from Forum, Spring, 2007)

By Kathy Donovan, Reading Consultant, Turning Pages Kathy@authorassemblies.com

Linda Redding, Library Teacher, Silver Lake Regional High School lredding@slrsd.org

Irene Smalls was hard to catch up with for lunch. She was busy touring the country attending conferences on reading and children's literature. We finally caught up with her on a beautiful afternoon in Boston. She showed us around the city and took us to one of her favorite places—the Boston Public Library!

You have mentioned that kindergarten was an important experience in your life. How did your kindergarten experience lead you to be an author?

Kindergarten was truly a life affirming experience for me. I am a very active and physical person and rather than my teacher seeing me as being hyper or a behavior problem she saw me for what I was a kinesthetic learner. She geared her teaching to fit the various learners in her classroom. We danced books, played hand games to books, acted out books and made hats or costumes to go along with the stories. I had no idea she was teaching me to read. It was fun. So for me reading is strongly associated with fun. Also because there were no books in my house and no one read to me kindergarten was the kindling fire of my passion for books. There was this beautiful black woman who told me I was wonderful in her storytelling. The reading text was Fun with Dick and Jane. My kindergarten teacher, off curriculum read, Lil brown baby with the sparkling eyes. I was that lil brown baby.



One of our favorite stories is "Jonathan and His Mommy". How does your son feel about being the inspiration for one of your books?

You bring up a touchy subject. My children have discussed charging for the use of their stories. Kidding aside, it was important to me as a parent that I give my children the gift of their own little brown baby story. A book that spoke of them, to them and of their experience. Jonathan has always had Jonathan and His Mommy in his life. He takes it as part of his landscape. I am hard at work reimagining Jonathan and His Mommy turning it into an interactive play space installation for children.

With rising obesity rates it's important we activate the learning experience.

Many of your books are a great way to introduce children to history. We hear you spend a great deal of time at the Boston Public Library. Does the process of writing a historical picture book differ than writing a story like "I Can't Take a Bath"?

The process of writing a historical picture book

is very different from writing; an "I can't take a bath" book. First the research is extensive and I am always looking for aspects of history other people have not written about. Secondly, I am always looking for the fun aspect of the research to make it appealing to children. Finally, it has to be true I can be artistic with the truth but every book is based on real history. Being in the library doing research is so comfortable to me. It's like coming to my second home. It's rather funny. I go to the library to read books to do research and if I ask the librarians a question, they go on the Internet.

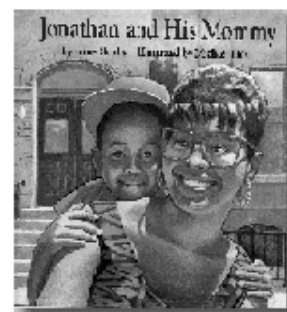
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For more information on Irene Smalls, please visit

<http://www.irenesmalls.com>

Books by Irene Smalls

Because You're Lucky
Don't Say Ain't
Ebony Sea
I Can't Take a Bath
Irene and the Big Fine Nickel
Irene Jennie & the Xmas
Jenny Reen & the Jack Muh Lantern
Jonathan and His Mommy
Kevin and His Dad
Masquerade
My Nana and Me
Pop Pop & Me & A Recipe
A Straebeatars's Thanksgiving



Lunch with an Author-Barbara Larmon Failing

(Reprinted from forum, Summer, 2007)

By Kathy Donovan, Reading Consultant, Turning Pages Kathy@authorassemblies.com
Linda Redding, Library Teacher, Silver Lake Regional High School lredding@slrsd.org

We found a great way to promote reading was to host a Ya-hoo-a-roo for Reading family author night featuring Barbara Larmon Failing. The evening included cowboy themed reading activities for children and a presentation for parents offering advice on raising readers. All participants were dressed in their finest western attire.

Barbara Larmon Failing spent over twenty years as a classroom teacher before becoming a successful children's author. Here is what she had to say about her career as an author.

Lasso Lou and Cowboy McCoy is a book that is so much fun to share with children. Lasso Lou and McCoy get a lot of giggles. What inspired you to write this story?

I decided to write a book featuring characters that children would really enjoy. Right away, I thought of cowboys. Then I thought of two silly cowboys. Next, the name Cowboy McCoy popped into my head. I had a little trouble with the second cowboy's name. I thought of Lasso Larry, then Lasso Luke. Finally, I decided on Lasso Lou. Interestingly, some people have told me that they thought Lasso Lou would be a girl. But I never pictured the character that way. He was always a boy!

Your presentation Raising Readers was very well received with parents and teachers. One veteran teacher felt it was the best parent presentation she ever attended. You were able to speak from the parent perspective, as well as from the perspective of a teacher. What is it that you hope to convey to parents in your Raising Readers presentation?

Raising Readers is about encouraging children to read and be readers. I am worried about the effect of television and electronics on children's lives. It's not that I'm against TV or computers, but I feel strongly that they need to be monitored, particularly with young children. This monitoring should begin at a young age. It's very easy to fall into the before breakfast, after school or Saturday morning cartoon trap. But if you're careful about turning on the television just for a show or two and not having it blaring all day long, I think it's a



Authorfest-Barbara Larmon Failing at Authorfest during the MSLA Conference in 2005.



Ya-Ho-A-Roo for Reading Barbara Failing (sitting on right) with the library teachers in the Silver Lake Regional School District during Family Author Night featuring a cowboy theme.

Back row: Deborah Dallaire, Denise Raynard, Vicki Wright

Front row: Linda Redding, Barbara Failing

much better environment for children. When television or electronics aren't an automatic option, children grow up finding other things to do. And one of the best things they can do is read - to you, with you or by themselves!

In addition to parent presentations and author presentations, you also have a program on writing. Tell us a little bit about that program and other programs you may offer.

Along with Raising Readers, I offer a school assembly called Ya-hoo-a-roo for Reading! It describes a writer's life and explains the publishing process using slides, props and audience participation.

My presentation for kindergarten through third grade is called Lasso Lou and Cowboy McCoy. It includes story time and a discussion of the publishing process using props and audience participation.

My presentation for third through sixth grade is called Ya-hoo-a-roo for Writing! It focuses on writing/editing and how a manuscript becomes a book using slides, props and audience participation.

Another program I offer is Story Time with Lasso Lou and Cowboy McCoy. Sometimes I pair this with Raising Readers. It includes story time with a cowboy craft and song. I love visiting schools and libraries and sharing my love of reading and writing.

You offer advice to writers on your website. Joining a writers' group is one of your tips. How important has it been for you to be part of a group?

I think joining a writers' group is one of the best things any writer can do. Writing is very solitary. When you have a supportive group you can turn to, it really makes all the difference. Other writers will notice details about your project that you may have overlooked completely. Plus, I enjoy getting together with other people who are striving for the same goals I'm working on.

Can you tell us about what you are up to now?

The exciting news is that I just got an agent. She is based in NYC and is fun to work with. Earlier this year, I finished a middle grade novel, which is almost ready to be submitted to editors. In May, I attended the New England SCBWI Conference where I was so inspired that I came home and wrote a new picture book. After about 50 edits, it was done! My present project is a middle grade super-hero novel. I've never written anything so fantastical before. I love working on it because I'm constantly inventing new powers for my main character. I hope to finish it this fall. Other than that, I'm enjoying summer on Cape Cod - going to the beach, riding bikes, and eating lobster! In August, I'll travel to Chautauqua, NY for our annual family vacation. This year I'll present Raising Readers twice at Chautauqua's School of Education.

For more information on Barbara Larmon Failing, please visit:

<http://www.barbaralarmonfailing.com/>

MSLA Forum

A REFLECTION ON THE MSLA PRESIDENCY CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

Fest, WaldenMedia previews, vendor sponsorships, high-caliber speakers, and cutting-edge presentations.

The most significant change that occurred during my tenure was the renaming and "rebranding" of our organization. With the name change came a new, more up-to-date look, with a new logo and website design to reflect our 21st century image. This change was invigorating and has pumped new life into our association.

Looking back over the past three years, I am proud and amazed at what has been accomplished. I look forward to my continued association with MSLA under the leadership of Sandy Kelly. Many thanks to all who have served on the Executive Board during this time and to the many MSLA members who have contributed the energy and ideas that makes this such a vital, professional, and forward-thinking organization.

LUNCH WITH AN AUTHOR – IRENE SMALLS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31

Students are so engaged in your presentations. From sharing your experience of growing up in Harlem to getting students involved in a Johnnankus celebration, you are a gifted storyteller. Tell us about your new interactive storytelling CDs.

The interactive storytelling CDs of which there are three are available on my web site:

Heart Hugs and Holidays - Includes 7 stories including the Black History stories

Heart Hugs 4 little 1's - This is my early childhood CD

And Black Histories This includes the 4 black history stories I have written thus far. My goal is to write 12 Black Histories, one for each month of the year.

The CDs were produced in response to the many requests I received for a CD. They have sound effects, original music and my telling the story behind the stories.

What resources do you offer on your website that will help teachers utilize your books in the classroom?

On my web site www.irenesmalls.com I have lesson plans for most of my books, Black History Fact sheets and background information about me personally and my books.

Do you have any new books in the works?

New books is my middle name. Writers are always creating new works. It is our reason for being. I am working on two more grandparent books. All my friends are grandparents. Then, I have some angst stories I have to revisit. After that it's up to the muses.

ADVENTURES IN MY SCHOOL LIBRARY CONTINUED FROM PAGE 29

If there's time I'd like to move my state and country books sets. If there's time I'd like to relocate the laptop cart and dedicated printer. If there's time I'd like to move a couple of free-standing cases and expand the series section. If there's time I'd like to see if my desk is made of wood or if my memory fails me, because it's been so long since my desk has been cleared off.

I love my job and I hope you love yours too. It keeps me working even when I'm not being paid, thinking about the library even when I'm not in the building. At the end of year four I can honestly say that I am right where I belong and considering that I am not a youngster, but a seasoned second career library teacher with a huge school loan (which will be paid 5 years after I retire as I said in a previous article), it's a relief that this is not just a job but more a labor of love.

Little Gem: You all know how stories can lead to interesting discussion. One story got my first graders talking about their parents' ancestry. One child said her mom was Haitian, another said her entire family was Italian. One little boy said his father was half and half...half Irish and half human.

Got a little gem to share? A comment? Email me at mdorsi@medford.k12.ma.us

See you next issue!

Annual Reports of the Executive Board - 2007

Legislative Committee

By Co-Chairs, Judi Paradis, Plympton Elementary, Waltham, and Bob Roth, English High School, Boston

The three goals for the Legislative Committee during the 2006-07 session were to:

- update and rewrite our legislation
- broaden our support for legal recognition of school library teachers and library programs
- hold a successful legislative day

Update and rewrite our legislation:

We have not been successful in passing legislation in the past year. We have re-filed our bill to amend Chapter 70 to include the word "Libraries." However, this amendment has not been voted in. Our lobbyist, Chris Gregory, is now working to line up senate support in the hope that the bill can be passed with Senate support. We also know that our bill is slated for debate on September 11, 2007.

While we continue to pursue this strategy, we have begun to look at other legislative approaches that might further our goals. We met in April to discuss possible options and are discussing:

doing a comprehensive search for existing legislation in Massachusetts that mentions school libraries and determining if this can be used on our behalf

working toward a survey of school library associations in other states to determine what legislation is in place in other states to support school library programs; and to see if we can adapt any legislation that exists in other states

talk to AASL about how we might proceed and what exists in other states

Broaden Support for Legal Recognition of School Library Teachers and Programs:

Primarily through the efforts of Kathy Lowe, we have made some good affiliations with the MLA Governance Board and believe this will be a useful group for furthering our legislative agenda. However, we have not made any strong forward motion with any other group. We would like to develop stronger ties with the teachers' unions in Massachusetts (MTA and AFT) and with parent groups.

We have heard that there may be a significant restructuring of the state Board of Education. We are poised to lobby this group as it is forming to ask for consideration of school library programs in education regulations developed for the state.

Annual Legislative Day:

Approximately 40 MSLA members and supporters attended our third annual Legislative Day on March 8th, as well as 12 of the 14 recipients of Book Mark Contest Awards. For the first time this year, some parents came to lobby on behalf of MSLA. In addition, 17 school library teachers sent exhibits for the day. Prior to the event, we sent all MSLA members postcards to send to their legislators and we asked members to send



emails also. Many legislators reported hearing about our event in advance.

MSLA members visited the offices of approximately 40 legislators, including every member of the Joint Committee on Education. All lobbying teams received lists of legislators to visit, and packets containing talking points and supporting documents. We specifically asked for support for H564. Particularly strong support came from Rep. Rice and Rep. Augustus on the Education Committee. We have also established good contacts in Rep. Haddad's office, Rep. Sandlin's office, and Rep. Rushing's office. Chris Gregory is continuing to look for opportunities to attach our bill to refinancing of the Chapter 70 law.

Our Bookmark Contest was well-received and we agreed that the event provided a good focus for the day, helped to bring in more legislators, and provided some very good PR for MSLA. We will do this again next year. Kathy Lowe served as MC for the event, with assistance from Rep. Frank Smizik and author/illustrator Mary DePalma, a judge for our bookmark contest.

Next Steps:

We are in the process of creating a survey that we can use to contact school library associations in other states and gather information about what is in existence in other states

We are going to continue to monitor the role our lobbyist is playing and see if we can strengthen or even change this relationship

We will continue to participate in the MLA Governance Board

We will develop a statement of support for legal recognition for school libraries and teachers and ask for endorsement from parent groups, unions, school committees, etc.

We are hoping to continue to make connections at the DOE and with a newly forming Education Department that is apparently going to replace the current Board of Education

We made some good contacts with specific legislators this year that may merit follow-up, including Rep. Travaglini, Rep. Marzilli, Sen. Finegold, Rep. Rice

Rep. Wolf urged us to continue to press the DOE to work with us until Ch. 70 is amended, and said we should continue to make contacts there as their support would be key in improving things legislatively

Annual Reports of the Executive Board - 2007

Public Relations/Advocacy

By Mary Kelleher, Prospect Hill Academy, Somerville, and
Kahla Jourdan, Sheehan Elementary, Westwood

Based on our action plan, activities toward our specific goals for the 2006-2007 year are as follows:

Objective 1: Develop documented guidelines for PR publications. During the course of the year, both co-chairs created and updated PR publications to support the many activities happening in MSLA and saved them in electronic formats.



PR co-chairs detailed the tasks they completed for the E-board roles/responsibilities document compiled by Sandy Kelly. This can be used as a reference for specific PR tasks that happen each year.

It is a future goal to create a CD/binder with PR materials so that any future co-chairs will no need to re-create the items.

Objective 2: Re-vamp April School Library month activity(ies). Worked in conjunction with the Bookmark Contest Committee.

It is a future goal that additional activities will be planned for School Library Month.

Objective 3: Help publicize the new logo and name change. Created content for new MSLA brochure.

Collaborated with graphic designer and MSLA president to approve design and layout of brochure.

Coordinated the printing of the new brochure with Roberts Printing.

Additional Activities and Information:

As was stated in last year's annual report, it is still our goal that sub-committees will be formed to specifically support Legislative Day activities, the annual Bookmark contest, and the annual conference (preferably a sub-committee of the conference planning committee). This year the co-chairs completed all of these tasks and they seek support from additional board or general members.



Legislative Day

Worked in conjunction with Legislative Committee leaders to establish PR needs.

Press release written and distributed to MTA Today, MFT, Boston Herald, the Metro and Boston Globe announcing the day's events.

Created promotional postcard for members to mail in and notify their representatives about Legislative Day.

Sent an email to membership detailing how to email their representatives, including a message they could use as a template.

Represented the organization with the MSLA booth and information folders for public officials.

Bookmark Contest

Wrote press releases announcing all winners for general release to Boston Globe, MBLC, MTA Today and MFT.

Wrote press release template for winners and the bookmark committee updated it with the winners' names and distributed to their local newspapers.

Contacted local papers of winners of each division.

Created press release template for honorable mention artists.

Exploratorium

Contacted members via email to encourage them to participate in the Exploratorium of best practices at the annual conference

Organized the set up and break down of the exhibits

Provided information for the conference binder regarding the exhibits

Represented the organization with the MSLA booth and information folders for public officials

Additional Activities

Created press release for Administrator Advocate award and Ellen Berne award winners.