

November 6, 2007

Teacher turns lesson plan into publishing career

By Juliet Fletcher
Press of Atlantic City (New Jersey)
Copyright 2007 Press of Atlantic City

VINELAND - They didn't realize they were her first audience. But the cluster of Alloway Township, Salem County, kindergarteners who spent the fall of 1995 peering up at teacher Esther McQuaid were the first ones to hear the outpourings of a now-published children's poet.

For every lesson, says McQuaid, 62, she would search books for a poem to encapsulate a theme. From the creepy-crawlies of the animal kingdom to action verbs such as 'to love' and 'to travel,' she wanted poems that offered clear descriptions in a rhyming pattern.

How often she came up short, she can't remember. All she knows is that some time that school year, she realized that if no published poem served her purpose, she might have to use one of her own.

"It might take me a couple of days," she said, sitting in her Vineland home. "But I'd write something myself."

Last fall, McQuaid answered a competition held by educational publishers SRA/**McGraw**-Hill that called for poetry or short stories aimed at children from preschool through sixth grade. She submitted one titled "Ways to Travel" that she had written for her class.

From walking to a friend's house to flying to the moon, the verses explored different modes of transportation.

Last month, McQuaid heard that her poem had been selected and would become part of the published curriculum, "**Imagine it!**"

For her, the hardest part was imagining the news was true.

"Honestly, when I think about it, it's my life's dream," she said. "And I'll still be in classroom." Having retired in January after a fall in her classroom at Lafayette Pershing School in Carneys Point, Salem County, she had assumed she would bow out of the teaching world. "Now, to think that another teacher will be able to take my words and use them, to make them come to life for the children, that truly is an unexpected thing."

But McQuaid makes a point about her win: In her view, publishers could do this more often.

"I'm by no means the only one who likes a creative classroom," she said. Maybe few others write poetry, but McQuaid, who became a teacher in her 40s, knows from experience that other educators bring skills into their classrooms to augment lesson plans or simply to keep the children's attention.

Since she came to teaching in the mid-'90s, she says she has seen teaching methods broaden to include all elements - written and spoken; visual and hands-on.

In her time in the classroom, she says she saw standards adjust so that all children heading into kindergarten had to be ready to read.

Poetry, she found, was an easy tool for teaching reading and could be accompanied by illustrations. She found children eager to "hunt" for words in text and able to sound out words quickly when they appeared in rhyme.

"Honestly, seeing the leaflet about this competition was the first time I'd ever seen anyone asking us what we might like to see as part of a curriculum," she said.

The competition is unique, says Sue Andrews, **McGraw**-Hill's director of marketing for reading and language arts.

"They say everybody has at least one good book in them," Andrews said by phone from Columbus, Ohio. A curriculum is marketed differently in some states than in others. In certain states, such as Florida or Alabama, the state approves a curriculum after taking submissions from publishing companies.

In others, like New Jersey, the state gives benchmarks that must be met, and the kits themselves are marketed to school districts.

McQuaid's poem, which is currently being illustrated, will be published as part of a themed unit on transportation this April.

Andrews says the talk in the company has been about running another competition soon.

McQuaid says she intends to pursue writing for children, beginning with a very local source of inspiration: the Cedarbrook stream that runs along the bottom of her garden, and the creatures living in it.

Teeming with life, it's the perfect setting in which to set a tale of nature and conservation, she says. Clutching her binder full of finished verses and notes on more, she said, "I just want to stay in the classroom as long as I can."