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Bringing children's literature to life at the library

By AMY SIMPSON SWISS

A peek through the glass doors of the program room at the Mamaroneck Public Library provides a glimpse of the Picture Book Theater in action. One thing is immediately clear; this is not your average story time at the library. That's because Emma Caywood, the leader of the program, is not your average librarian.

Emma has an interesting background and it shows in everything she does. The children participating in the Picture Book Theater program were not just listening to a story; they were bringing it to life with Emma as their guide. Using creative drama techniques, she helped the children to use pantomime, creative movement, improvisation and self-expression to tell the story. The group marched, jumped, rolled, painted and laughed its way through the book of the day. They even created props for the story from provided art supplies.

Long before coming to the Mamaroneck Public Library, Caywood was on stage. She started acting when she was just 11 in a production of "Wiley and the Hairy Man" and her love of theater has stayed with her. She earned a theater degree at Northwestern University. That was where she learned the creative drama techniques she uses in her programs at the library.

After graduation, Caywood went on to work in both Los Angeles and Chicago in film preproduction, as well as an actor, drama educator and playwright.

Caywood didn't stop with a theater degree, though. She continued her education, receiving a masters in library and information science from Dominican University with an emphasis on youth services.

Above all else, she is a lover of books, particularly young adult and children's literature, and this is what ultimately led her to her job as a children's librarian at the Mamaroneck library.

For each session of the Picture Book Theater program, Emma selects a different book to bring to life. Recently, the book was "Willow" by Rosemarie Brennan and Denise Brennan-Nelson. It is a story about individuality and freedom of expression, a perfect match for the improve style of the creative drama technique in which every child is encouraged to use his or her ideas and imagination to contribute to the



Mamaroneck Children's Librarian Emma Caywood.

Photo courtesy Amy Simpson Swiss

story.

Parents are encouraged to drop their children off at the start of the program and spend some time in the library while their children are creating their masterpiece. This is a pleasure as the library, housed in a beautiful, recently-renovated building, is full of not just books, but interesting art as well. It's easy to pass the time for 45 minutes or so until the children are ready to perform for their parents and caregivers.

During the final performance, Caywood read the story again while the children used their props and acted the story out for the audience.

Caywood has managed to combine her enthusiasm for children's literature, her personality and her creative theater background into a program that inspires children to want to read, create and use their imaginations all at once. What could be better than that?

My own son—initially hesitant to join the class—was won over by Emma's engaging style and, by the end of the session, was marching, jumping and pantomiming with gusto.

The next Children's Picture Book Theater will be in January. It's easy to participate; there's no need to register, just show up and you'll be part of the program, for a guaranteed fun time. The program is open to all children in grades K through 5.

For more information on this, and the many other programs offered at the Mamaroneck library, visit their website: mamaronecklibrary.org/your_library.html.

Reach Amy Simpson

Swiss via her blog at HappyDayWestchester.com

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