

Slippers a portal to appreciating others, self: www.heraldtimesonline.com

Local author's book, adult mentors help students gain new perspectives

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Emma Alexander's slippers look like fuzzy white bunnies, and they once belonged to her great-grandmother. They were then passed down to her grandmother, then her mother, then to Emma.

Emma's peers in Diane Siddons' fifth-grade class at Bloomington's St. Charles School might not have guessed that back story for the slippers, which looked virtually new, nor that their names have always been "Mopper" and "Fuzzy." And they didn't know the slippers belonged to Emma.

But they had fun guessing what characteristics the owner of those slippers, and the other pairs of slippers brought to class anonymously, might have.

It was all part of an initiative called "The World Needs Me/Walk a Mile in My Shoes." The program, in its fourth year, is designed to promote both self-awareness and appreciation of others, and to encourage individuals to share their unique gifts to aid the world around them.

This year's effort is a partnership involving the America Reads initiative of the Area 10 Agency on Aging's Retired and Senior Volunteer Program — which supplied adult mentors for the students in the classroom — along with funding from the city of Bloomington and the children's book "The World Needs Me," written and illustrated by local author Elisabeth Simeri.

But various slippers have played a part in the program every year.

"The notion about the slippers arose from a visit I made to the Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C.," recalled Michelle Martin Colman, the America Reads coordinator for Area 10.

"As you exit the museum, in the back, there is a huge bin full of shoes recovered from Auschwitz. You look at those shoes, and you know somebody wore them, somebody unique who had something to give to the world but didn't get a full chance to do so. And I wondered about who those people were, and how much you can guess about a person from their shoes. That's how the 'Walk a Mile in My Shoes,' program started, as a stereotype awareness exercise."

After the slippers are brought into a classroom anonymously, the children are given a few days to think about them. Then they make their guesses about the owners, who in turn then say which guesses are accurate, and what they actually feel to be true about themselves.

Emma's classmates guessed correctly that the owner of her slippers loved to care for animals, would be fun and would be artistic. Emma then added that she also liked music, ice skating and working on science projects.

Frannie Kincaid, after her multi-colored slippers were evaluated, said of her classmates' guesses, "Some of them were accurate, and some I kind of liked. When they guessed that I liked being with my family and that I like colorful things, those guesses were real accurate. But they also guessed I'm a good artist, which I'm not. They didn't guess that I love animals and that I live on a farm."

Frannie's great-aunt, Mary Katherine Ryan, was one of the 25 RSVP mentors from Area 10 on hand in the classroom to help the students document their classmates' guesses and their own self-evaluations.

"I think it's great for all concerned," said Ryan, a retired teacher. "It's stimulating and refreshing for the (Agency 10) people who come into the program. It helps keep them active in the community. And I think the kids get a different sort of instruction, a different learning experience."

"For me, it's great to be back in the classroom, and I like this exercise a lot. It emphasizes the diversity in the class, and expands the kids' thinking about themselves and others."

Marianne Aurich, who mentored fifth-graders Tanner Shapiro and Brynne Varvel, said, "It's about time we did this sort of thing in the schools. We should do more of it, and do it in all the schools. Elisabeth's book is so well-g geared for this and for the kids."

After Simeri read her book aloud in Siddons' class last week, the students publicly pledged to share gifts with the world such as "Violin," "Charisma," "Good conversation," "Loving animals" and "Politeness."

Simeri spoke to the class afterward. "Take a minute, look around you, look at all the amazing people here in this classroom. You guys are amazing resources. You've already packed a lot into 10 or 11 years, and you're just getting started."

Martin Colman said the program has funding to stage the exercise in 19 other classrooms, and those interested can contact her at mmartin@area10agency.org. "The city's Martin Luther King Day funding gave us enough money to buy 20 books," she said, "and this is intended to honor Martin Luther King's legacy teaching that 'Everyone can be great, because anyone can serve.'"

From left, St. Charles fifth-graders Matt Skirvin, Tanner Shapiro and Frannie Kincaid, students in Diane Siddons' class, take part in last week's slippers exercise.
Elisabeth Simeri | Courtesy photo



Emma Alexander, a fifth-grader at St. Charles School, wears her bunny slippers, which once belonged to her great-grandmother, and a placard listing guesses her classmates had made about what the slippers' owner might be like. Andy Graham | Herald-Times



St. Charles fifth-grader Sophia Velicer talks with mentor Jim Montgomery as she works on a list of characteristics for the slippers project. Andy Graham | Herald-Times



Frannie Kincaid shows her multicolored slippers and a placard listing the characteristics her classmates guessed the slippers' owner might have. Andy Graham | Herald-Times

