

Girls Gobble Up Macaroni and Cheese!

written by Lisa Van Eysen



*‘Inspiring all girls to be Strong, Smart and Bold’
~ Girls, Inc., a national organization supporting
the education and empowerment of girls.*



STRONG STORY: Everyone races to form a circle, waiting patiently for the next moment. The story they are about to hear is the adventure of the Brothers Caterpillar entitled Grumpy, Grouchy and Grateful, part of a collection of inspirational stories and songs entitled *Macaroni and Cheese Anthology (Vol. 1)*, for children ages 4-9 years old. The author, Stacie Isabella Turk, is skillfully guiding an excited cluster of kindergarten girls into a discussion about gratitude, the kind of gratitude she describes as living deep in our hearts. When Turk asks them what they are thankful for, all the girls start to answer at once...“Christmas, Thanksgiving, food!” they yell out. Then one tiny girl, Daisy, softly mentions that she is grateful for her house because a neighbor on her street doesn’t have a house. Turk jumps on the opportunity to share her own feelings of gratitude for her home and her warm bed and then adds, “Do you think there are some people who don’t have a bed to sleep in?”



More girls offer their ideas, verbally tumbling over one another in an effort to be heard. Then... “Some Polish people don’t have a place to sleep,” blurts out Autumn. “But, but...” Hailey persistently adds, “But the 16th president, he did not have a very good comfortable bed.” Turk gently asks, “Is that true? What was the name of the 16th president?” “Ahhh ... I don’t know” Hailey replies, and laughter erupts through the room. It is this kind of spirited interactive learning that has fueled Turk’s passion to create an anthology of stories, songs and activities based on character building concepts as a literacy tool delivered via art and music under the comforting title of *Macaroni and Cheese Anthology*. In turn, it has spawned a partnership between its author and Girls Inc., a non-profit organization

founded to inspire all girls to “ be strong, smart and bold.” The match-up of a literacy program that fosters character development makes MACARONI AND CHEESE and Girls, Inc. a perfect combination.

Today, literacy levels in the US are at a virtual standstill. According to the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute of Literacy, there has been no marked improvement in the rates since early 2003. That means 32 million adults in the U.S. still can’t read (14% of the population). 21 percent of adults in the U.S. read below a 5th grade level, and 19 percent of high-school graduates can’t read. As noted by UNICEF, “Nearly a billion people will enter the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their names and two thirds of them are women.” Literacy partnerships are therefore a vital tool for educators to help the next generation of readers advance in education and beyond into the workforce. Girls Inc., in the first year of their literacy program has seen 85 percent of its participants increase in self-efficacy and motivation to read, translating into a 7 percent increase in assessment scores. When Turk approached Girls Inc. with the idea to partner on literacy workshops, her focus was to offer donation copies of the book/cd combo delivered with her MAC AND CHEESE workshops for Kinder to 4th graders based on her content. As a literacy volunteer for BookPals, she has learned first hand the value in storytelling to a group of children who might otherwise miss out on the chance to have stories read to them by someone who really cares. As Turk explains, “Literacy is a powerful and necessary tool with which to be armed, and when reading is shared with a grown-up who cares, it can be magic for a child. If the stories can awaken kids to character building concepts while they are practicing their reading skills, even better. Add music and activity into the mix and we have a total experience!” *Macaroni and Cheese Anthology*, includes an audio CD of original songs with bluesy rhythms and lyrics aimed at fostering each child’s creativity and unique view of the world. A Mom’s Choice Award winner, the book was also named Book of the Year (2013) by Creative Child Magazine (category: self-esteem).

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SMART READING: Today at the Girls Inc. Youth & Family Center (Costa Mesa chapter) the workshops are made up of three age groups: kindergartners, 1st–2nd graders, and 3rd–4th graders. These age groups represent a span of time that is critical in capturing a child’s interest in reading, which in turn boosts their academic skills and develops their powers of creativity. Turk starts out with the kindergartners, sitting on the floor with them, asking them how they’re feeling and guiding them to use as many descriptive words as they can come up with. All aspects of the book and presentation are an interactive experience, orchestrated to keep the children moving. They have a chance to ask about the author, define the words ‘author’ and ‘illustrator’ and to explore the creation of illustrations, including the colors, textures and style of illustrations that illuminate each aspect of the story. It’s not just about the story itself, it’s also about how the story came to be. Together they explore the back of the book, binding and the spine, asking what information might be housed there so they can navigate a library or bookstore independently. Discovering clues on the outside to what hides inside the book is just one example of how Turk excites them into looking closely at anything and everything.

“What do we call the writer of the book?” “Author!” They chime.

“What do we call the person who draws the images?” “Illustrations!” They squeal.

Hah! ... almost.

But Turk is gliding on, and before they know it, she has the girls deconstructing the book from the seed of an idea to a tangible thing that they can now hold in their hand, so that by the time the actual story is read, they are fully invested in the experience and maybe even imagining it as their own.

The workshops all follow a general form. The story and activity are combined to maximize the experience of each child. The kindergartners, 1st and 2nd graders will all have a live reading of Grumpy, Grouchy and Grateful, then have the opportunity to explore the concept of how to cultivate gratitude in their own lives, and sharing those ideas with each other. At age 4 and 5, Turk astutely understands that kids don’t sit still for long, and she jumps up to dance around the room with them as the Macaroni and Cheese Anthology CD blasts out “Attitude of Gratitude.” Circling the room, singing “attitude” while patting their hearts in “gratitude”, they are encouraged to listen to the words, creatively moving their bodies, while naming any instruments they might hear being played. When the 1st and 2nd graders come for their workshop, instead of dancing, they will be given the opportunity to craft their own gratitude journal inspired by the story they have just heard, using multi-colored markers and an abundance of stickers to begin practicing the act of gratitude in artistic form. The goal with this book series and workshop is to encourage each child to be active in their own life, not passive watchers, and to be keen observers, expressing their thoughts and feelings in their own individual way.



BOLD COLLABORATION: As a visual storyteller (Ribbonhead.com), Turk has a 20-year plus career of capturing the unfolding history of children and their families in photographs she shoots both privately and commercially. She is a filmmaker, having directed award-winning PSAs for non-profits organizations such as Cedars Sinai, United Way and The Brady Campaign Against Gun Violence. She is a rostered director with Hybrid in Venice, Ca., and hopes to be directing her first feature film soon, aptly titled, *Le Ragazze* which translates to “The Girls” in Italian. Connecting to Girls, Inc. on Ribbonhead’s first publishing project expands her reach to include an organization committed to the empowerment of young girls

with after school programs that help them develop important life skills, encounter new experiences, succeed academically and have FUN. Girls Inc. of Orange County was founded over 60 years ago with a mission to provide year-round holistic, compensatory, and intentional programming focusing on Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) for girls ages 4 ½ to 18. As affiliates of the national organization Girls Incorporated, the leading research and evaluation group on issues that pertain to girls and young women, Girls Inc. wants the community to understand that they don’t target at risk girls, they just target girls because they believe every girl can be at risk for something.

FUTURE LEADERS: The final workshop begins and the scope of ambition is fully realized in this last period. Ages 8--10 will have the opportunity to hear *Mediocrity*, the second story in the anthology, and to create their own book, working together as a team of writers and illustrators. This story juxtaposes our concept of participating in one’s own life from the mind-set of doing ‘just enough to get by’ to one that is about doing and being your best in each moment. Will we settle for mediocre or can we strive to do our very best no matter what. The story outlines 13 rules for identifying the aliens visiting us from the planet Adequate in the universe know as Mediocre. Turk has had her illustrators bring these concepts to life in pen and ink, with imagery that is vastly different from the caterpillar tale of intense watercolor. Instead, the white pages are filled with black and grey images, each calling us to an awakening, where we stop going through the motions and start asking the questions that truly connect us to the world and to each other.



Once the story has been read, she busts out the art supplies. Turk divides the kids into pods, and challenges each pod to write a chain link story based on the theme of mediocrity...then the clock starts ticking! The workshop is inspired by the Native American tradition of the talking stick, where the stick is passed around the group and only the person holding the stick is allowed to speak. While each girl waits her turn, she is encouraged to imagine a myriad of story elements that she might be able to plug into the story they are writing together. Each girl then draws on her own black drawing paper with the group's single white paint pen. In addition to creative writing, hand--writing, and thinking on your feet, the workshop is aimed at team building. They are practicing patience, learning how to listen to each person's contribution with non--judgment and to collaborate on a finished product based on work created independently This challenges the kids to use their brains in a different way, to imagine the next part of a story based on the creativity of the person who proceeds them, and to build their confidence in not only taking the story further, but also illustrating their own page of the story.

The timed session rapidly winds down, and each of the students quickly signs their own book page (as a piece of artwork) just in time to be called up as a group to read their collaborative book to the whole class. Reading aloud and addressing the group helps develop their speaking skills in front of others with confidence. Many are shy but all are giddy with excitement and giggles to share at the silliness created with this chain link story.

Before each workshop ends, Turk signs a book she is donating to the students. Thirty (30) in all will be given today, a reminder and precious touchstone to a day of discovering their power and ability in this distinctive and enriching program that has clearly activated them to live lives that are...

Strong
Smart

Bold...which is afterall, the Girls, Inc way!



DONATION OPPORTUNITY: As an individual or a corporation, you can sponsor workshops that include a copy of MAC AND CHEESE for each attendee at a school, library or hospital.

While Ribbonhead itself has committed to donating 200 copies to various organizations (previous recipients include Long Beach Children's Memorial Hospital, Create Now and Summit View West School,) YOU can participate by sponsoring a school, library or hospital with the MACARONI AND CHEESE program by designating your donation gift to KIDS NEED TO READ, the non-profit literacy partner for this project.

To learn more about sponsoring a MAC AND CHEESE workshop/book giveaway or to purchase the program for your community or school, contact: bigcheese@macaroniandcheeseanthology.com
Book/CD available for purchase at macaroniandcheeseanthology.com

Retail price: \$24.95

