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Everyone has a story to tell

By ANNETTE MANWELL
Globe Staff Writer

IRONWOOD In one of the tales professional storyteller Jennifer Strauss told to Ironwood school children Tuesday, a goose said to a turtle “Turtle, you can not think and talk at the same time, unless you’re a mom,” and all the children laughed.

Strauss’ performance was presented by the Ironwood Carnegie Library as the kick off to their “Creating A Community That Reads” initiative, a service learning project for teenagers funded by a \$5,000 grant from State Farm Insurance. Luther L. Wright football players and cheerleaders joined Norrie and All Saints Catholic Academy students at the event. Each teen told the children they love to read and then joined them, on the gym floor, to listen to Strauss’ stories.

“This is the kick off to a wonderful grant program we are conducting and it’s pretty exciting for all of us” said assistant library director Lynn Wiercinski in a press release.

Strauss told the children that 16 years ago she taught sixth-grade. She quit her job after being inspired by her last class. Her story telling to that class was so well liked, Strauss realized she could inspire children everywhere to become storytellers. That sixth-grade learned that to tell a story, it had better be good, because if it was good, it would be heard and then you could tell it again and again. Strauss’ story telling slogan “let a story be told, let a story be heard, let a story be told again” got its beginning.

By the end of the school year that sixth-grade class realized they were storytellers too. Strauss said her students came to her proudly telling her that mom, dad and even the cat listened to their stories.

“Everything is a story,” Strauss said, saying that loosing a tooth, learning to ride a bike and getting or even loosing your first pet, is a story.

At the end of the school year, to make it special, Strauss turned her classroom into a stage, complete with a spotlight and microphone.

“I introduced each of my sixth-graders as if they someone incredibly famous, because they were,” she said. “Each story was better than the next.”

She never forgot that group of sixth-graders, she discovered her passion through them. That group of sixth-graders also went on to be storytellers, that year anyway, they went to six different schools and told their stories to other students.

Personalized stories

“What did people do before anyone could read,” Strauss asked her audience. “They told stories.” Strauss used her hands to show the children where she was from in the Lower Peninsula and how she had to drive north, over the Mackinaw Bridge and through the Upper Peninsula to get here.

She told them the story of how she found an old Finnish lufta, or lantern, in an antique shop. When she asked the owner the history of the lantern she was told that a Finnish family that moved to the U.P. would light the candle at the end of the day and tell stories around the lantern.

Strauss asked the man if she could buy it. He asked her what she wanted with a 100-year-old lamp.

“I told him I wanted to tell stories by it,” she said.

Strauss told a story about a U.P. turtle who wanted to fly south with his friends the Canadian geese. She told stories about the summer after her fourth grade in school.

Strauss had their attention, she used funny voices, she acted like a kid and she made them laugh.

Strauss has been touring the nation telling stories and doing writing workshops since she left classroom teaching behind. Her ultimate lesson – you can tell it, you can write it and telling and writing stories will lead to reading more stories.