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## Teacher presents a story better than fiction

Shawn Foucher | The Chronicle-Telegram

How could there be so many doubting Thomases when there wasn't even a single Thomas in the bunch?

Maybe that was the million-dollar question on the mind of Stacie Starr, a teacher at Northwood Junior High who, after a careful arranging of facts and human evidence, convinced nine of her skeptical seventh- and eighth-grade readers that the authors of a certain non-fiction book were real.

Earlier this year, Elyria Superintendent Paul Rigda made no secret of his desire to see his school district's academic rating jump from "continuous improvement" to "effective."

As it was, Rigda initiated a district-wide program encouraging teachers at every grade level to take a personal interest in every student, even the students who don't take an interest in school.

Franco Gallo, assistant principal at Northwood Junior High on Gulf Road, took the challenge head-on.

At the start of the school year, Gallo and his colleagues asked teachers who weren't hosting a morning homeroom to create 20-minute reading and discussion groups with students who had shown little interest in tackling those maddening monsters called "books."

Enter Stacie Starr, 29, a learning-intervention specialist at Northwood Junior High for the past five years, and a first-year assistant coach for the school's football team.

Starr recruited eight of her football players — coerced them, really — to create a morning discussion group on a book they would all take an interest in. A ninth boy recently joined the all-boys group.

The book of choice: "We Beat the Street," co-written by New Jersey natives Sampson Davis, George Jenkins and Rameck Hunt.



JASON MILLER/CHRONICLE

Northwood Junior High teacher Stacie Starr, center, and the students in her book club. In front (from left) are Marcus Shannon, Cecil Shelton and Joshua Meyer. Middle row: Derrick Mullins, Ricky Jones and Devin Johnson. Back row: Deanyon Groves, Darell Dozier and Jordan Stovall.

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Starr said the authors, who grew up on the mean streets of New Jersey were youngsters: They'd all go to college and become doctors.

Well, they did — two became medical doctors, one became a dentist and they wrote a book about their struggles and successes.

"They're 35 years old now, but they were faced with a lot of obstacles growing up — drugs, gangs, fathers not being involved," Starr said. "It talks about the kids being influenced by their peers ... and even goes into serious matters. One of (the author's) mothers was using drugs."

Starr's reading group loved the book, but there was a catch: Halfway through the material, most of the boys doubted that the authors were real people.

"I said, 'Let's see if we can get a hold of the authors,'" Starr said, hoping to convince the boys.

On Oct. 4, Starr e-mailed the authors and told them about her reading discussion group, how the boys are "truly special this year ... they have been journaling, discussing, and comparing their quest with those of yours in 'We Beat the Streets.'"

Within 24 hours, two of the three doctors replied by e-mail. Author Sampson Davis' reply the following day: "What's up fellas? Happy to hear you enjoyed 'We Beat the Street' ... Continue to excel academically and make sure to aim for all A's."

Starr thought she nailed it cold; there was no way the boys would doubt the authors were real after they saw the e-mails. She was wrong.

One of the boys — eighth-grader Derrick Mullins, 14 explained: "When I was in elementary school, the teachers would all have us write to Santa Claus, and then the teacher would write back and pretend like it was Santa Claus writing. I thought this was like that."

Starr's other boys said pretty much the same thing — it seemed a stretch that three hardscrabble boys in New Jersey could all become doctors, write a book about it, and then take the time to send e-mails to a group of students in Elyria.

"The kids thought I had written the e-mails myself," Starr said. "They were all like, 'Miss Starr, quit playing with us — you did that.' I told them, 'You guys, I don't have time to do that.'"

So Starr kicked her "convincing campaign" into overdrive.

A few weeks ago, the authors-turned-doctors had a book signing at Legacy Village in Lyndhurst. Starr found out about it at the last minute, and could only get two boys from her reading group to attend the book signing.

The two boys who met the authors were Ricky Jones, 14, and Marcus Shannon, 13, both eighth-graders.

"We went to the front of the line, and I said, 'Hi, I just wanted to introduce myself and two boys from my mentor-discussion group,'" Starr said. "(The author) said, 'Oh, yeah, I just e-mailed you guys last Friday.'"

Ricky and Marcus got their pictures taken with the authors, and Starr's discussion group at Northwood was officially convinced: The authors were real.

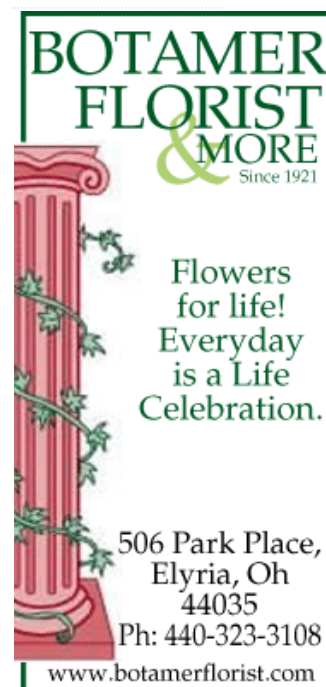


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Starr's boys gathered for a few minutes recently and discussed the expec mostly shy and quiet.

"It was pretty cool," Ricky said.

The other boys said Miss Starr and the authors have officially convinced them that books aren't as boring and pointless as they'd once thought.

"If I was in a regular homeroom, I'd just sit there and pretend like I was reading, but I wouldn't be reading," said Derrick, by far the most talkative of the group. "This group is actually kind of interesting."

The next book the boys will be reading is "Copper Son", a historic novel about the Africa-to-America slave trade, written by Sharon Draper.

Given the success of the last book, Starr may have set the boys' expectations a little too high.

On Thursday the boys asked: "Are we going to meet that author, too?"

Contact Shawn Foucher at 653-6255 or [sfoucher@chroniclet.com](mailto:sfoucher@chroniclet.com).

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One Response to "Teacher presents a story better than fiction"

1. *Della M. Liller, Carlisle Township Says:*  
October 29th, 2007 at 11:19 pm  
Wow - What a great story . . .  
There is so much bad that you hear between kids , teachers and even parents . . . It is so nice and so reassuring to hear a good, honest-to-goodness story . . . adults taking a personal interest in kids - for the sake of being a good mentor ! Good for Stacie Starr and Paul Rigda from Northwood Elementary School for an awesome challenge . . . As a parent of 4 children, I really appreciate hearing stories like these !!!

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