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Speaking out against bullying in UC

Author and her two dogs spread the word

by Gennarose Pope Oct 23, 2011 | 724 views | 0 | 5 | | |

Reporter Staff Writer



Some days it seems the only ones able to keep up with local author and activist Jane Lovascio on her extensive, increasingly nationwide anti-bully campaign are her two now-famous dogs: Casey, a Jack Russell Terrier, and Bella, a Teacup Yorkie. Fortunately for the students of Union City's Veterans' Memorial Elementary School, Lovascio will make an appearance on Tuesday, Oct. 25, which just happens to fall toward the end of National Bullying

[view slideshow \(2 images\)](#)
Prevention Month.

Lovascio, who lives in West New York, is best known for her “Casey and Bella” book series in which her dogs are characters in whimsical, child-friendly, and partially child-authored narratives. Each story has the same basic yet increasingly important moral: respect each other.

“One day I just woke up and thought, why don’t I bring my dogs to schools and meet school children?” –Jane Lovascio

Her books have led her to travel from school to school—sometimes three in one day, and up to 10 per week in the beginning—encouraging students to “take the Casey and Bella Pledge to stop bullying and be nice to one another.”

The response was so positive, she ended up creating Casey and Bella’s very own DVD, an entire (free) anti-bully curriculum for elementary schools, and free e-book versions of each of the six editions in her series; all of which were released this past Oct. 3 in celebration of the month.

The dog days of a new career

Lovascio’s was a real grass-roots initiative, and (most) joking aside, she truly did work like a dog to get the whole thing up and running.

After she graduated from Boston University and moved to Hoboken in search of a teaching career in 2001, she found the job market was “difficult,” to say the least. Unsure she would be able to pay the rent as a teacher, she took a sales job.

Soon enough, Lovascio found herself creatively unfulfilled and missing the daily interactions with children that she loved so much. The solution came to her as an overnight revelation.

“One day I just woke up and thought, why don’t I bring my dogs to schools and meet school children?” she said.

In response to the many raised eyebrows and accusations of temporary insanity inspired by her quest, she retorted that the worst case scenario would be that she’d find a small publisher, fail gracefully, and donate the books to her family and friends.

Speaking of donation, Lovascio has never charged a dime for her work, which has played no small role in her success. In 2006 she set up a booth at the New Jersey Teacher’s Association in Atlantic City and gave 50 copies of her first book, “Casey and Bella Go to New York City,” to teachers. She offered to visit the teachers’ schools for free to explain the stories as part of a campaign against bullying.

She booked 50 events as a result, and thus began Lovascio's odyssey.

Fortunately, her sales job allowed for her hectic touring schedule.

"I definitely overdid it for a while there," Lovascio admitted. "But it started to really explode then."

She focuses on bringing her message about bullying to the lower socioeconomic student demographic, and because she doesn't charge an honorarium, she is in high demand. While many have urged her to charge for her services, she still finds it difficult. Her explanation for this ties in with why she began the whole campaign to begin with.

"I was such an insecure child — I was bullied myself in elementary school," she said. "It has made me quite self-critical, and I feel like I can never do enough, much less charge for a service that is most needed in areas where it can least be afforded."

Promoting children as authors

Lovascio wrote her first book herself, but after she began touring schools and speaking with children, she came up with the idea to include them in the process as a way to further build their self esteem.

After listening to Casey and Bella's adventures, students always wanted to know where the dogs would go next. So Lovascio took the artwork from her illustrator, Aija Jasuna, and showed the art to her young audiences. They came up with plans for the dogs' future endeavors, which Lovascio then expanded and put into rhyme.

This inspired student writing contests. "If you make it all about the child, you build them up," she said.

Third through fifth graders submit their story ideas each year from Sept. 1 through April 15. The winner's story is published as the next Casey and Bella installment and the child author has his or her very own Barnes and Noble book-signing event for friends and family.

Both Lovascio and the participating student receive book royalties based on sales.

"You're an author too," Lovascio tells the winner, as well as any child who approaches her with a desire to write. "When I was younger I always thought authors were people with superhuman skills, and that I couldn't ever become one myself."

The Barnes and Noble events not only allow children to experience the thrill of published

authorship and a healthy boost of self confidence, but they receive an extra-special bonus on top of it: Lovascio brings Casey and Bella in the flesh to all of the bookstore events. She also takes the dogs with her to each of the top three winners' schools.

"It's all about building the kids' self-esteem," she said, "and the dogs make it real for them."

Lovascio plans to continue her tour indefinitely and reach as many children as possible. In addition to her strong anti-bully message, she also promotes three main ways to make dreams come true: "Believe in yourself, have a positive attitude, and stay in school."

She hopes one day to teach Casey and Bella's message full-time, but because she offers her services for free, it's simply not an option for the moment. Lovascio is able to find a lesson even in this.

"It's good for the kids to learn, too, that they can start from nothing and build their way up," she said, "if they believe in themselves."

For more information on Jane Lovascio and her work, visit her website at www.CaseyandBella.com.

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