

Visiting psychologist brings ‘The Truth’ to Manasquan



Visiting author Barbara Holstein, Ed.D., signed a copy of her book “The Truth [I’m a girl, I’m smart and I know everything]” for sixth-grader Alanna Verdi, 11, when Mrs. Holstein visited Manasquan Elementary School last week.

Photo by JOSEPH DELCONZO, STAR NEWS GROUP

By *Kelly Rizzetta*

When April Ruggiero, a sixth-grader at Manasquan Elementary School, went shopping with her mom at BookTowne last year, she was delighted when her mother told her she could pick out a “fun” book to bring home and read in her spare time.

“I don’t know, I just picked it,” April said recently, recalling how she came by the unusual title, “The Truth [I’m a girl, I’m smart and I know everything].”

“I read it, and I really, really liked it, so I read it again,” she said.

Little did April know that her random selection would bring “The Truth” author, Barbara Holstein, Ed.D., a practicing psychologist, into the lives of many students in the Manasquan School District.

Mrs. Holstein is a licensed therapist who has been operating a private practice in Long Branch with her husband, Russell, for the past 25 years. She specializes in “positive psychology,” which she describes as “one of the newest branches in psychology” that emphasizes “recognizing what’s right rather than what’s wrong” and teaches people how to “stay optimistic and hopeful even if there are problems.”

Mrs. Holstein said she began studying positive psychology in earnest approximately 15 years ago, and about 11 years ago, she penned “The Enchanted Self,” the first book on positive psychology written specifically for women.

Although “The Enchanted Self” was well received, Mrs. Holstein noticed women who read her book were relating to the text in an unexpected way.

“The women [who read ‘The Enchanted Self’] were not as interested for themselves as I’d hoped, but for their children,” Mrs. Holstein explained.

As she witnessed mothers applying the text to their parenting skills, Mrs. Holstein eventually began exploring ways to adapt her message of positive psychology for young girls.

The result was “The Truth [I’m a girl, I’m smart and I know everything],” Mrs. Holstein’s fifth book and first fictional work, which was released last year.

After reading “The Truth” on her own, April proposed the book as the November title for the elementary school’s mother-daughter book club, and Mrs. Holstein was invited to sit in on the meeting and speak with the girls in the club.

The girls in the book club were instantly able to relate to the protagonist of “The Truth,” even though the feisty female author remains anonymous throughout the work. “The Truth” is composed in diary format, with regular entries documenting a year in the life of its 10-year-old narrator. Over the course of the book, the narrator touches on such subjects as having a crush, becoming comfortable with one’s developing body, and watching parents fight.

“I know the truth about looks: The most important thing is to feel pretty,” the narrator writes in one entry, dated Nov. 20. “If you feel pretty, then you look pretty.”

“[The book] is about blunt truths that kids know and parents forget ... We need to live by wise rules that make sense,” Mrs. Holstein said last week. “The goal is to empower our children.”

Ever since her visit to the book club, Mrs. Holstein has been spreading the message of “The Truth” in Manasquan.

Mrs. Holstein was invited to the elementary school to speak to the teachers in a professional development session on March 12. She gave a talk entitled, “The Seven Gateways to Happiness,” aimed at helping teachers develop self-esteem and self-worth in their students.

Then, Mrs. Holstein appeared at the elementary school for a book signing last Thursday. With the help of school counselor Nancy Sanders and parent Maribeth Pelly, Mrs. Holstein hosted a book signing in the school’s lobby at the end of the day, selling and autographing copies of “The Truth” as well as related paraphernalia.

Mrs. Holstein said many students who visited her table last week approached purely out of curiosity, but a good portion had read and were already fans of “The Truth.”

“What really has been my dream is to get into the schools and activate the students, the parents, the teachers,” Mrs. Holstein said of her experience in the district thus far.

“Manasquan is an ideal example of what I’m looking for,” she noted last week. “Manasquan is an example of how to utilize my expertise in a multi-faceted way.”

Next up, Mrs. Holstein will speak at the elementary school PTO meeting today, Thursday, March 26, at 7:30 p.m. in the elementary school cafeteria. She will also visit Ms. Sanders’ girls group and will wrap things up with a visit to the Manasquan Public Library on March 30, where she will give a lecture at 7 p.m. entitled, “Listening To Your Daughter.”

Ms. Sanders said last week she has been using “The Truth” in a pilot counseling group she has been testing with fifth- and sixth-grade girls this year, and she noted she was receiving “excellent” feedback from her students.

“It [‘The Truth’] is a great way to introduce self-esteem and positive body image issues, all of which are issues girls are faced with today,” Ms. Sanders explained, noting the book is a “nice spin” and offers girls “a different perspective” on these issues than they might otherwise receive through traditional instructional settings.

Ms. Sanders said “The Truth” was instrumental in getting the girls in her group to “open up a chain of communication,” which she said is vital for healthy development.

“The girls are very comfortable with it, they’re enjoying it,” Ms. Sanders said. “It opened up their dialogue on a different level.”

Ms. Pelly, a mother of three girls enrolled at the elementary school, also appreciated how Mrs. Holstein’s book has become a tool for communication with her children.

“From a mom’s perspective, it’s really important,” she said last week. “I’m always looking for another way to connect with my kids, whether it’s that I’m nervous talking about crushes or things like that.”

Ms. Pelly said all three of her daughters enjoyed reading “The Truth” — even her eight-year-old, who she noted was too young to experience some of the topics the book explores, but was still able to relate.

That, Mrs. Holstein said, was exactly the type of effect she was hoping “The Truth” would have, and she reiterated the importance of helping young people learn to express themselves and regard themselves in a positive way.

“It’s amazing what children can do,” Mrs. Holstein said. “They will show their parents the way a lot of the time.”