

Children's author is a hit at elementary school

By Erin Borla
Correspondent

The students at Sisters Elementary School (SES) were in for a special treat last Wednesday when Washington-based author Lois Brandt came to visit.

Brandt's book "Maddi's Fridge" is a story about friendship, compassion and empty refrigerators. Students listened intently as Brandt spoke for 35 minutes about her experiences growing up — struggling to learn to read.

"If you would have told me when I was in the third grade that I would grow up to be a writer I would have said 'bologna'," Brandt told the students. "Bologna. That was my word back then."

She talked about her friend Liz, who had an empty refrigerator at her house and how she took that experience and turned it into a story to shine the light on over 12.5 million kids in the United States that go home to empty refrigerators every day.

She discussed how she sent the story to 10 different publishers — every time rejected for publishing.

"After all those rejections, I quit. I put the story in a drawer and walked away for over a year," Brandt said. "One day I was at a workshop and the author who was supposed to read a picture book to the group didn't show. I read the draft of Maddi's Fridge and it was so well received that I

made up a new word: unquit. That's what I did. I unquit. I knew this was a story that had to be told."

Even after unquitting, Brandt's draft was rejected at least five more times. She kept at it and it finally hit bookstore shelves across the country in 2014 thanks to Flashlight Press.

"I had a story stuck in my head and I knew it needed to be told," she told students.

Most importantly, she told the students at SES to tell their own story. In fact, she made each of them promise her by holding up their right hand and repeating after her: "I promise to write the story that is sticking in my head because my story is important."

Paige Bentley-Flannery, the librarian at the Sisters branch of the Deschutes Public Library was able to attend the all-school assembly and stay for the first of the writing workshops.

"Author visits are incredible for the kids," Bentley-Flannery said. "It's like they get to meet a rockstar! We had three families in after school on Wednesday asking to check out Maddi's Fridge."

Brandt's visit, supported by The Roundhouse Foundation and FivePine Lodge & Conference Center, kicked off with an all-school assembly and was followed up by grade-level writing workshops. The author took time to privately sign over 50 copies of her book for teachers and families.

Within each of the workshops Brandt asked students to think about a story she shared about her cat, Simba, who was not always the nicest cat. One evening, Brandt woke to find Simba, who is not allowed in her bedroom, not only on her chest but laying with his paw in her mouth.

She discussed the difference between fiction and non-fiction and encouraged the kids to use their imaginations to determine how Simba got in her room.

"Maybe he was dreaming and you were dreaming and then he sleepwalked into your room," said one student. "Maybe he's a super-smart cat and he did a flying leap off your wall onto the door handle and opened your door," said another.

Then she asked the question "why" would he have put his paw in her mouth?

One of the favorite responses throughout each of the workshops was that he was

looking for food. Other students thought perhaps Brandt hid a cat toy in there.

After the brainstorming session students were asked to write quietly one of two options — either tell the story of an animal sneaking into a room or a story that the student had stuck in their head.

There were a few rules to the exercise. Students were to use this as their first draft and not worry about spelling, grammar, or punctuation — so they could really let their ideas flow. And, they were not allowed to write about video games and movies.

"Movies and video games have their own authors," she said. "People write those — this is time for you to write your own story. When you watch a movie someone else is having an adventure — there's a magic about books, they let you have the adventure."

Students took home a customized SES "Maddi's Fridge" bookmark and book



PHOTO BY ERIN BORLA

Lois Brandt interacts with student at book event.

list prepared by the Sisters Library of books similar to Brandt's.

"Piper loved today and won't stop talking about it (the author's visit)," said Jenny Cashwell, who has a kindergarten and a third-grader at Sisters Elementary.

During her time in Sisters, Brandt also did a school visit and series of writing workshops at Sisters Christian Academy. She was also able to tour the local food bank and spend time with the Sisters Kiwanis Club at their meeting on Thursday, March 10.

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