

Hudson Reporter - Profile in courage – canine style Vroom School students meet Hooper a Katrina survivor

By Al Sullivan *Reporter staff writer*

Courage, third grade students at Philip G .Vroom School learned, sometimes comes in strange packages.

On Feb. 10, courage walked through the door on four legs with a dog named Hooper, who survived Hurricane Katrina and recently became the inspiration for a book by Jane Paley, called “Hooper Finds a Family.”

Paley created a first person (canine) account of the harrowing experiences her dog must have gone through – first surviving the hurricane and then the lonely aftermath of traveling to a new home in the East and a new family.

The fictional account depicts the experiences of a 1-year-old yellow Labrador Retriever who, when



IT'S A DOG'S LIFE – Hooper was the real star of a recent visit by author Jane Paley, and every third grader in the Vroom School classroom had a hard time keeping their eyes off of him.

the family doesn't come home, nearly drowns, and as a result of the shock, loses his bark.

Eventually, he is taken to a shelter and then adopted by a family in New York, where he is renamed Hooper. The tale talks about the struggle, the characters he meets, and his eventual recovery.

Yet the story behind the story is as full of pathos as the book itself, about how when Paley's family lost their own yellow Lab, Hammer, to cancer, and their son – for whom the dog was more than a pet – pined away.

How does a family replace a treasured pet?

Paley talked about going online and searching for answers, and coming upon a group called Labs4rescue, which helped find Hooper for her, and the strange and dramatic nighttime meeting halfway between New Orleans and New York where they made the exchange.

Victim to victor

Paley and her husband, Larry Price, recalled bits of both tales as third grade students stared in wonder at Hooper, who routinely wrestled with his stuffed teddy bear at their feet, responding when they spoke to him, and barking his thanks for offered treats – proving that he had indeed recovered his voice.

“I can’t say definitively that Hooper’s survival mirrors any specific event in my life,” she said in reply to a question. “His story does, however, reflect my feelings about becoming an adult. We all have to come to terms with disappointments, failures, and renewed efforts to overcome adversity. It’s fair to say I embedded them in Hooper’s evolution from victim to victor.”

Paley, of course, had to convince her publisher about telling the story from the dog’s point of view, although she said she didn’t have trouble so much with writing the dog’s voice as with developing the plot.

“I’m not sure I was thinking like a dog as much as I was enabling Hooper to think like a child,” she said via e-mail. “I wanted young readers to identify with his fears, letdowns, and subsequent triumphs. Often, kids tell me that they understand what Hooper went through because they’ve had a traumatic life experience, too. From the start, I wanted kids to be empowered by his story, so Hooper’s voice is very much like theirs.”

Success with ‘Star Wars’

Paley, who worked as the director for community relations for ABC Television and received an Emmy and other awards for her ABC Notebook educational programs, previously authored books in the “Star Wars” series, and recently helped produce a documentary about George Lucas.

This prompted the question as to what common thread could be found in her dog tale

and the “Star Wars” fiction.

“What I’ve always loved about the ‘Star Wars’ saga is the struggle to break away from our parents and authority figures to become our independent, true selves,” she replied. “My husband and I produced a PBS documentary about George Lucas, so the ‘Star Wars’ mythology is close to my heart. He expressed the agonies of youth vividly in all his films.”

As a young girl, she said she avoided classic dog stories because they were too sad.

“When our son, Brian, was in second or third grade, I read ‘Old Yeller’ to him,” she said. “At the end I was crying so much I couldn’t get the words out. Brian took my hand and said, ‘Mommy, it’s okay. It’s only a story.’ One of the things I discussed with my editor at Harper-Collins was that Hooper had to have a happy ending.”

But third graders at Vroom School, when asked about the book, picked up on its central theme quickly, saying it was about courage, which Paley agreed was her intent.

This prompted the question, what does she mean by courage?

“For kids, I think being brave can be about raising a hand in class to ask a question,” she said, “or being able to recover from a rejection, or asking for help, trying out for a team, or admitting a mistake. It all comes down to having the guts to step outside the comfort zone and risk failure in order to become more mature and competent. Taking these risks seems to come more easily to kids who get respect early on from their families and teachers.”

She added, “At Vroom today, the teachers respected the kids’ curiosity; as a result, they were confident, comfortable, and articulate. I was really impressed by these third graders; they are my definition of brave.”