

TELLING THE TALE

Teacher-turned-writer Sara Hunter comes to the Carly School as part of its Visiting Author series



Caryl School third-grader John Pickering and author Sara Hoagland Hunter go over some of John's writing during Hunter's

By David Ortiz
TAB STAFF WRITER

When Sara Hoagland Hunter, a former English teacher at the Regional High School, returned to the classroom for two days last week to take part in the Dover Caryl School's Visiting Author series, she told the story about how she became a writer in a way any third grader could relate to.

"My first book was called 'Miss Piggy's

Night Out,'" she said. I wrote it for Jim Henson Productions four years ago. They invited me to New York to tell them my idea for a story, and I walked into this room with a long table surrounded by all of these business people and family members of Jim Henson, and they were all looking at me to see if I had a good idea for a children's book. Well, my throat got all dry and I thought 'oh no, what if I make a mistake, what if I'm no good?' And then I saw a big portrait of Kermit the Frog on

the wall ... and, you know, I've always thought Kermie has such kind eyes, and it felt like they were looking at me, and he was saying 'go ahead Sara — you're gonna do fine!' And I told them my idea for a story. And they liked it!"

The Caryl School's Visiting Authors and Illustrators Series has been inviting working writers and artists into the classroom since 1992, when school librarian Nancy Spence

TALE, page 24

TALE, from page 1

wrote the first grant for the program. The grant, which has been renewed every year by the Dover-Sherborn Education Fund, allows the school to bring in five authors and illustrators a year for school-wide lectures and classroom workshops such as the ones Hunter conducted last Thursday, Nov. 18, and Friday, Nov. 19.

Lois Libenson's class appeared to like Hunter as much as the bigwigs at Jim Henson Productions did. In her two mornings at Caryl School, Hunter showed why she's become an award-winning author of children's fiction since writing her first book four years ago — when it comes to kids, she's just got the touch.

"Years ago, she did a public speaking program at the school and she was just wonderful, so when we were looking for authors for the

third-graders this year, her name just popped into my head," said Libenson, who lined up Hunter for the program last spring. "I knew what a good job she'd do."

Hunter's roots are firmly planted in Dover. Though she's lived in Weston for 20 years, she was raised in Dover, and taught English, drama and public speaking at the Regional High School from 1983 until 1985, before getting a master's degree in education from Harvard University in 1986. Each of Hunter's three siblings live in Dover, and she has several nephews and nieces in Dover schools. In 1995, Hunter left teaching to start a company which would allow her to pursue her dream. Sara Hunter Productions Inc. creates children's books, videos and music.

"When I was in second grade," writes Hunter for her company's

"Writing children's books while looking out over Walden Pond seemed to me the most wonderful existence one could hope for."

Sara Hoagland Hunter

Web site, "my grandmother brought me to the home of Louisa May Alcott in Concord. She knew I loved reading and writing and thought it would be good for me to visit the home of a famous author. What I remember most, besides the fact that my grandmother made me feel so important, was seeing Louisa May

Alcott's writing desk in the window. Writing children's books while looking out over Walden Pond seemed to me the most wonderful existence one could hope for."

For her work in the third grade classes, Hunter used the book that put her on the map as a springboard for discussion. "The Unbreakable Code," published in 1996, is a historical novel that tells the true World War II story about a code created by the Navajos for the Marine Corps South Pacific campaign which the Japanese were unable to decipher. The book was listed by Smithsonian as a 1996 Notable Book for Children, then won the 1997 Western Writers of America Spur Award in the children's book category. In writing the story, Hunter traveled to New Mexico and Arizona and sought out some actual inventors of the code to

get their firsthand accounts and absorb their verbal imagery and rhythm of speech — a project that she explained to Mrs. Libenson's class as "kind of like a fun homework assignment." Her books are written for children, but Hunter is a serious writer.

If she owes her success as a writer to seriousness of purpose, Hunter's success at the Caryl school lay in her ability to meet the third-graders on their ground. After answering some questions for Mrs. Libenson's class about being a writer, Hunter asked students to talk about how they get ideas for writing.

"Usually when I get an idea, it just pops into my head — like when I'm playing Tetherball," said third-grader Allison McPartland.

Then Hunter shifted into a game of "break the code," teaching stu-

dents enough of the WWII Navajo code — based mostly on the names of animals found commonly on the tribe's land — to decipher messages such as "send help" and "fortifications on way."

"She was really good with kids," 8-year-old Philip Oasis said after the workshop. "She did a lot of games and she had a lot of excitement with her voice when she talked about her story."

"I liked how we got a chance to decode. The code was really neat," added Nicole Seidman.

Hunter said she enjoyed her two days at Caryl School partly because it gave her the chance to get back in touch with her target audience.

"Being in the classroom reminds you why you do what you do. I always realize, 'these are kids! These are the ones I'm writing for!' So it gets me pumped again."