

# Literacy Conversations: Teens and Authors

by CHRISTIE KAALAND

**IMAGINE AN EVENT** for 650 teenagers to get together with a dozen of their favorite authors. Imagine that this event allows for these students to hear original backstories, pose star-struck for photos, and be inspired by these authors. Imagine an event where students and authors can share ideas and find inspirations around the art of writing.

This is the literary event known as the Cavalcade of Authors. It began as a way to connect middle school and high school readers with current popular YA authors, and it takes place in southeastern Washington each March. School district librarians plan and host this exciting event, and it has become one of the regions' premier local affairs.

## HISTORY

Cavalcade began five years ago as the brainchild of Richland School District middle school librarian, Michelle Lane. As she explains it,

My mother was an elementary school librarian who taught me a love for reading and to treasure my extensive autographed book collection that she had built for me over my childhood years. I want to foster that same love in every student in my school. The only difference is our students get to actually MEET the authors and be mentored by them. I can't imagine the impact that would have had on me as a child (email message to author, March 14, 2012).

This event was established in the Southeast region of Washington known as the Tri-Cities. Although it is quite geographically isolated, this unique area has three large school districts within a ten-mile radius. The Tri-Cities region also has an overwhelming support for libraries, both public and school, and from community and school members alike. Cavalcade of Authors is one of the events that inspires this high level of support.

In 2007, Lane proposed inviting seven authors to her school for a writing workshop for interested readers and writers. She received small grants from the Richland Educa-

tion Foundation and Friends of the Mid-Columbia Libraries, but primarily made this event happen out of sheer will and the belief that it was an idea that could blossom once attendees and the school community witnessed results.

Originally, the event was held at Enterprise Middle School where Lane is the librarian. It has since grown tenfold, from 70 students in 2008 to 650 students in 2012. It has been moved to the local Columbia Basin College and has a more extensive agenda with ever-expanding roles for school librarians. New school superintendent, Dr. Jim Busey, learned of the event shortly after his move to Richland, and it gave him a greater appreciation of the importance of strong school librarians and school library programs—not only for student success in school, but also for personal enjoyment.

This year, four school districts participated in Cavalcade of Authors including one from northern Oregon: Richland, Kennewick, Umatilla (Oregon), and North Franklin School Districts.

## HOW CAVALCADE WORKS

In order to ensure the success of this event, an all-out effort is needed by participating districts' school librarians. Of those schools participating, each school librarian voluntarily accepts a role in organizing the event: organizing location, student transportation, equipment for authors, author accommodations, food, sponsorship, advertising, and promotion, among other tasks.

Because local media now report on and promote the event in both newspaper and local television news, sponsorship has exponentially increased. The sponsor page in the brochure for this year's event listed twenty-three sponsors of more than \$100 including a \$5,000 donation from local Mission Support Alliance. Goods and services from local donors include event space, social space (for the evening Author-Librarian Happy Hour event), a discount on hotel accommodations for authors, and other donations.

**"Today has been the best day for a young writer. I have learned a ton of cool information to make my writing a little better," concluded one Carmichael Middle School student.**

Authors and participating librarians are brought together the evening before the event at a local Italian restaurant for dining, wine, and socializing. It provides an opportunity for the twelve authors to visit with fellow writers as well as converse with librarians about young adults' reading habits and interests. This event has proven to be both rewarding and a prequel for the work to come.

check-in desk. As students check in, they are given a brochure of the day's events and an individual schedule of their assigned four author sessions (for which the students have previously signed up).

The brochures contain author room assignments, sponsors, author biographies, Writers' Workshops notes, and several blank pages for students to use for taking notes and getting autographs from their favorite authors. The brochure also has six pages of advertising from sponsors.

For the greater part of the morning, students attend a series of author sessions. The authors are given freedom to design their session according to their own strengths and priorities. Some authors deliver a polished, entertaining presentation, others less formally involve audience participation, and still others invite students to participate in Writers' Workshop activities. Some author sessions are held in a larger-audience, arena-style format accommodating over fifty students; other sessions are more intimate with only a dozen or so students seated informally in a circle with the author. Nearly all sessions, however, allow for individual student-charged question-and-answers at the end.

After four hours of author workshops, a closing ceremony and all-author panel brings all event attendees together, assembly-style. Students had earlier in the day submitted questions appropriate for all authors; these were reviewed and several questions selected to which authors responded.

The closing ceremony also includes announcements of the winners of a student writing contest, thank you acknowledgments (for authors, sponsors, and volunteers), and post-ceremony author signing.

The day's events end with authors generously signing brochures and T-shirts, as well as copies of their books that students had purchased during the day at the Cavalcade of Authors Bookstore (set up and sponsored by the local bookstore). Lines for the author signing are long, but students are unequivocally patient and still on their best behavior.

## STUDENT PARTICIPATION

Librarians in the participating schools, in their spring book orders, include multiple copies of the books by participating authors. So, from the beginning of the school year until the event, students can check out and read books by the twelve authors. In order to attend the event, Cavalcade students must read at least four books of their own choosing from each of four different authors. If they read eight authors, they earn a free T-shirt which most of them wear to the event adding hype. Michelle Lane emphasizes student engagement,

The cool thing is that we almost always get more out of our students than what is required. Once they get interested in a particular author or series, most students read far more than the four-book minimum. They want to read as many books as possible by these authors (email message to author, April 9, 2012).

One of the best things about this selection method is that no student is eliminated based on his or her academic standing. It is up to an individual student to decide his/her level of participation, but the minimum requirement is to read four books.

There are also students, in addition to attending, who choose to participate as volunteers. Typically these are high school seniors and they serve as hosts to the authors as well as guides for students, helping all find their way around campus. As a side bonus, attendance on campus provides a great opportunity for middle and high school students to spend time on a college campus.

## HOW THE DAY UNFOLDS

On the day of the event, students are bussed from various school districts on a staggered schedule and delivered to the

## THE AUTHORS

One of Cavalcade's delightful but cumbersome tasks is the selection of authors. Cavalcade founder and organizer, Michelle Lane, comments,

Selecting authors is one of the most rewarding and yet most important decision in the process. We want to meet the reading needs of all our students. We have to include authors at various reading levels. Also, reading selections for our beginning middle school readers as well as our YA readers, appeal to both boys and girls, provide both fiction and nonfiction, as well as have a mix of fiction genres to meet various interest levels and still stretch our kids to read outside of their comfort zone (email message to author, March 21, 2012).

Cavalcade of Authors, in 2012, is in its fourth year and

is well-established and broadly publicized enough to entice such renowned young adult authors as Ridley Pearson and Alexander Gordon Smith.

Local residents were particularly proud that author Royce Buckingham attended as a 2012 Cavalcade author. Royce is originally from Richland, one of the Tri-Cities, and in his presentation, he joked about having grown up downriver from the Hanford nuclear plant as an inspiration for his fantasy stories.

During the program, it was evident that each student had his or her own favorite inspiring author. Additionally, each author brought his or her own writing prowess as well as presentation strengths to the event.

Multi-genre author, Colleen Houck, bared her soul and shared poignant personal stories, and students were drawn to her struggle. As one student shared, "Colleen Houck tried to connect with us and told us her most embarrassing moments. She was rejected several times but she still kept doing multiple [submittals]."

Vivian Vande Velde turned her attention to the aspiring authors in the room. Showing students an imposing Victorian house on the screen, she prompted her audience members to draw on their own creative energies and script what might

be happening inside or what secrets the house may hold. She passed out dozens of old photographs and had students create a character from one that inspired them. As her hour-long session ended, students looked surprised at the speed with which the session drew to a close.

Ridley Pearson kept students laughing and literally on the edge of their seats as he told anecdotes of time spent with famous people, in exciting places (climbing 100 feet up a tree with Dave Barry as well as off-hours, behind-the-scenes at Disney-world researching his series). One student remarked, "My favorite quote was by Ridley Pearson, 'Shut up, shut up, I'm getting a call from outer space.'" The context for this story was when Pearson told of an astronaut who called him at dinner one night to say she had brought his books



Student, Emily, with author Alexander Gordon Smith

with her on her satellite expedition around the globe. She was, literally, calling him from the satellite!

Ridley Pearson and Vivian Vande Velde, independently, said that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is their most inspiring literary work.

## A THEME UNFOLDS

As a first-time attendee and volunteer, I spent the day observing, taking notes, photographing, interviewing students, and generally learning as much as I could about this amazing event. As I talked to students, an interesting theme evolved, one that more than half the students referred to in their reflections of the day: nearly every author had mentioned the difficulty they had experienced in first attempts to get published and yet each author in turn prompted students to keep trying and never give up. Over and over again, students referred to this theme.

## EXPANDING THE EVENT

Event founder and organizer, Michelle Lane, has approached the Washington Library Media Association (WLMA) about sponsoring the Cavalcade of Authors statewide as a three-day event. Lane suggests that in sharing authors, costs, and workload, authors can come to Washington and spend one day in a Seattle-Tacoma area Cavalcade, another day in Tri-Cities, and the third day in yet another densely populated locale, possibly the Bellingham, Spokane, or Yakima region. Making this a statewide event would certainly heighten exposure to Washington's school library programs and do much to connect authors, students, and librarians. ◀

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**"All the authors were inspirational and motivating. What Alexander Gordon Smith said about not giving up even if people say you can't do it was the most important thing I learned," remarked one student from Horse Heaven Hills Middle School.**