Zach’s Story

BY DENISE RAMBACH

It is truly amazing what a little inspiration can do. Amid the success of the JustWrite program at our school (see story, left), I broadened my focus on student achievement to include reading. This idea was prompted, in part, by my school’s low reading comprehension scores on state assessments. Surely I could imagine something that would encourage students to “just read” as JustWrite had done for their writing. Out of this query came JustRead.

JustRead was funded by an enrichment grant. With the money, I bought multicultural books for my classroom. Now, on Fridays, students write in their journals and then select a book

See Zach’s Story, next page
Zach's Story
continued from previous page

JustRead through the Alliance for World Class Education, the organization that had funded my grant, and expressed interest in finding a JustRead student to represent reading throughout the county. As Citibank explained, they promoted ad campaigns focusing on education, and they were looking for a "real" story to enhance a countywide focus on reading. Specifically, they wanted to tell the story of a student who, although previously identified as a nonreader, had for some reason "turned on" to reading. As the corporation began its search for the right student, three Citibank representatives scheduled time to come to my classes and interview my students.

That particular day, the students were using a digital camera to make stationery on which they were intending to send notes to their reading buddies. Over the course of the day, I heard Zach grumble more than once that he didn't want or need "to talk to those ladies from Citibank." Amused by his protest, I took his picture and drew a devil caricature over it with the heading "the true Zach." Zach liked the picture. Laughing, he set the photo aside on my bookcase, intending to pick it up after school to show his mother.

Toward the end of the day, the Citibank representatives returned to my classroom. Disappointed, they told me their visit had not produced the type of representative for whom they'd been looking. As we talked, one of the representatives caught sight of Zach's "devilish" picture on my bookcase, and I told her what had transpired that morning.

"Can you get him?" all three representatives asked, almost at once, "We'd like to interview him."

The rest, as they say, is history. In Zach, the Citibank representatives found the student for whom they'd been looking. They selected him to represent their reading campaign: "Books Bring the Best Stories to Life." A photo shoot followed, and soon Zach's picture was splashed on billboards throughout Jacksonville and in event programs throughout the community.

From here, both JustRead and Zach prospered. JustRead has been featured on a local television station, Channel 4's Read for Life series, and was selected as second place winner in 1999 and first place winner in 2000 for the SUNSPRA Sunshine State School Public Relations Association awards in reading. Best of all, JustRead, like JustWrite, has encouraged many students, and both programs came to mean a lot to many people, including the students.

As for Zach, through all of it, he has maintained his modesty. He subsequently made the A-B honor roll and became one of the leaders of the JustRead mentor program through which student volunteers tutor elementary students in reading. In his senior year, he even began teaching beginning French to elementary students after school.

In May 2001, Zach graduated—on time. In my end-of-the-year letter to my seniors, I write a personal comment about each student, reminding each of something that was unique between us. About Zach I wrote, "He taught me so much and gave me hope for all students."

Although Zach may not realize it, he's the motivation for a lifelong lesson for this teacher— Just Inspire! Maybe he does know since he faxed me his final report card with a 2.87 average circled. He emailed me in July to say that he had been accepted to a local college to run track and play football. I'm still amazed that one student, given encouragement, could have such an impact on others, including his teacher.

USN Conference
continued from page 18

the role of students. The Poetry Café especially appealed to them as an activity they wanted their teachers to use. Though they knew they were there primarily to film, they could not resist becoming involved in sessions.

There were challenges in our documentation efforts. For example, the teachers at my site and I could have done a better job of preparing the student documenters. They needed both training and some practice with the interviewing techniques to be used. While they had experience with interviewing people on video, they had not been exposed to note-taking during face-to-face interviews.

Even with these challenges, the student documenters were successful. Their reflections are evidence that they benefited from this experience, although they did not so much hone their skills as documenters as expand their knowledge of NWP and USN issues and activities. They were able to discuss sessions in some detail and commented on how much both they and the participants learned. Their reflections made me remember that students benefit from participation in networks just as teachers do. I also note that the students are