Dedicated to Joe

Kids create heroic children’s book with ailing classmate in mind

By Jane Clifford
FAMILY EDITOR

Acting much like any other group of 10- and 11-year-olds, the seven children sitting around a table talk all at once, excited to share their story. They don’t interrupt each other, just sort of finish each other’s sentences. They ought to. Most have been together at Country Montessori School in Poway since kindergarten. A couple go back to preschool.

They’re more like a team than a class, a joyful group of kids who work together cohesively.

That’s probably why, when their director, Beth Flynn, asked them last fall if they wanted to create a book for the “Kids Are Authors” contest, they jumped at the chance. The annual competition is sponsored by Scholastic, the children’s publishing and education company. The goal is “to encourage students to use their reading, writing and artistic skills to

Joe Fitzgerald, 10, playing bocce in his Poway backyard. In May, he’ll receive a bone marrow transplant from sister Laura, 12 (at left). He’s also seen here with sister Grace, 7, and parents Angie and Pat.

SEE Book, E2
Team of eight for so long was now seven.

create their own books."

That was Flynn's goal, too, and the kids couldn't wait to get going.

But something was missing as they started work in December. This team just wasn't quite the same without Joe.

Joe Fitzgerald has been at the traditional Montessori school since preschool.

"I knew Brenna since I was 2 or 3," he recalls. The others — Danielle Bybee, Catherine Sisson, Serina Bhakta, Max Washam, Erik Schrunk and Kai Larson joined Joe and Brenna by kindergarten or first grade. It was 2004, when they were all in second grade, that Joe learned he had leukemia.

"It probably has the best prognosis of the leukemias," says his mother, Angie Fitzgerald.

Joe began a 2½-year-long treatment regimen, and his parents kept life as normal as possible for him.

"We had about 10 weeks left in the 2½ years," his mother remembers, "and he had a relapse."

The family knew that as they had the original diagnosis — with determination and optimism.

"But the relapse is a lot harder than the first time through." Angie says softly. Her husband, Pat, an ear, nose and throat specialist in Poway, cut back his medical practice to part time to be with his son.

"It's hard to be a doctor dad," Angie says. "You're used to being the one with the information and this is not your situation to control."

Joe started the school year, but by the time Beth Flynn suggested creating the book project, what had been a team of eight for so long was now seven.

"It's pretty sad," says Serina, 10, as all the others around the table nod.

"We all want to see him again," says Danielle, 11. "It kinda makes you feel lucky," says Brenna, 10.

Joe Fitzgerald, 10, at home in Poway, is getting ready for a bone-marrow transplant. Scott Leinonen / Union-Tribune

The cover of the kids' book, "Tom the Funny Bunny."...

"Yeah," adds Kai, 10, "you can be the richest man on Earth and not be healthy and that's pretty sad." Thoughts and feelings for their friend must have been rattling around in their subconscious as they started on the book in December.

"We split up into different groups," Serina recalls. "Mine was illustrator." She, Brenna, Max and Erik painted the watercolor illustrations while Catherine, Danielle and Kai functioned as editors.

"We decided where to put the words," explains Catherine, 10, flipping through the book to show where some pages have lots of words and smaller drawings and other pages are exactly the opposite.

Those words were a group effort.

"We threw out ideas" Danielle says, "and eventually we ended up with Tom the Funny Bunny, and we decided he would have big ears."

They all researched on the Internet to make sure no other book had that title or character, and then they set to work on the story.

"It's a bedtime story," Danielle says.

"There's a bunny with long ears who gets made fun of and he decides to prove himself," Erik, 11, begins.

Tom the Funny Bunny, sick of being teased, runs away. He ends up getting lost in the forest, explains Max, 11.

"It's a classic children's story," Brenna says. "In the beginning there's a problem, it gets scary in the middle, and there's a happy ending, with a moral."

All the kids are talking at once again.

"The story teaches you that it doesn't matter what you look like on the outside," Serina says.

"Right," says Max, "it matters what's on the inside."

They finished their book and were all ready to put it in the mall to meet the March 15 deadline. They went over the rules one more time with Flynn. That's when they all noticed the fine print. If the kids didn't win the contest..." "We couldn't produce our book!" says Catherine, disbelief still in her voice.

"We would lose our rights!" Max recalls with indignation.

At the Scholastic Web site, the contest rules state: "From the time of subscription, entries become the property of Scholastic Book Fairs."

Brenna says: "We would only get $5,000 in merchandise for the school from Scholastic and 100 copies of our book."

But they wanted more.

"Much more. It had occurred to them as their book came to life that Tom the Bunny's struggle was a lot like their friend Joe's."

"Tom shows a lot of bravery in the forest," Danielle says.

"Joe shows a lot of bravery, too."

They made a group decision.

"If we could publish it somewhere else," says Brenna, "we could get more money, and we want to donate it to the Leukemia Foundation."

So, they pulled out of the contest and are looking for... this book," says Danielle.

"Always be happy with who you are," says Kai.

"In the end, Tom overcomes his struggles," says Erik. "We hope Joe can do the same thing."

"Joe's never seen the book. But my class has told me about it. I think it's cool."

Especially the dedication: "To our classmate, Joe, who has shown such bravery and persistence in his long struggle with leukemia. With love from your friends."

"I'm not surprised," Joe's mom says. "They've always been taught they are part of something bigger."

They're focused on their friend now more than ever. Joe's in the final stages of preparing for a bone marrow transplant. Although his younger sister, Grace, was a match to donate her bone marrow, her older sister will get the honor.

Laura, 12, will have marrow removed from her hip, which will be transplanted into her brother. She will stay overnight at Children's. Joe will stay six to eight weeks. He'll have another six weeks or so in isolation at home, but his mother is hopeful that he'll be back in school come September.

So is Joe. As he moves on to middle school, he's contemplating his future. His classmates think it will be in medicine.

"He always puts Joe Fitzgerald, M.D. on his papers," says Kai. They all say they're sure he'll be a doctor.


It's another way he and his classmates illustrate the years of Maria Montessori's influence. She believed that children are natural learners with absorbent minds who, given the right environment, will excel academically and develop the creativity, self-control and work ethic that help them become independent and caring adults.

You can see it, all of it, in the faces of the seven youngsters around the table. You can hear it in the voice of Joe, talking from home.

"I feel very thankful that I have friends like them."