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FEATURED

Students ‘Skype’ with author

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KEVIN FAMBROUGH | THE NEWS

“I Survived” series author Lauren Tarshis talks with Denham Springs Junior High seventh-graders via Skype. The students read her book “I Survived Hurricane Katrina” and wrote about the book, which led to the meeting.

Authors are names on books, but Denham Springs Junior High students got the chance to meet and talk to the author of a popular “disaster” series of books.

Lauren Tarshis, who writes the “I Survived” series—the adventures of junior high-age children taking part

in historical events—talked about her writing process and answered questions from 260 seventh-graders on Tuesday, Feb. 14.

“I was telling the kids when I was in elementary school or junior high, it would have been neat to have

a way to see or meet people hundreds or a thousand miles away," said Bryan Wax, principal at Denham Springs Junior High.

The school used a large projector screen and the Skype computer program, which allows real-time face-to-face communication, for the first-time event at the school.

"It's a cool thing to Skype someone in Connecticut," Wax told the students after they arrived in the cafeteria. "A lot of schools would love to be in our position to visit with an author."

The path that led to the meeting began with a book.

"When we came back after the flood, we had no copy machine, no textbooks," said Melissa Welsch, seventh-grade teacher. "We had nothing."

Welsch said money raised by a Gofundme account bought Tarshis' book "I Survived Hurricane Katrina."

"(The book) came in at a time when they could relate to it," Welsch said of the seventh-graders. "That got us through the first few weeks."

Every seventh-grader read it, she said, then they wrote responses to the book based on their own experiences during the Great Flood of 2016.

Welsch sent Tarshis some of the student responses and they began communicating, which led to the electronic visit.

After technology coordinator Jill McRight and Welsch made the Skype connection, Welsch turned her computer around so all the students could wave and say hello to the author.

"It's such a joy to connect with you," Tarshis said in greeting the students. "It makes me want to hear your stories."

"It's surprising how the series connects with children across the country," she said. "When we go through difficult times, if we can talk to people, even someone we don't know ... I know it helps me."

Tarshis said she once got a note from a child asking why she wrote about depressing things.

"I wrote him a lot of events are sad and intense. But I can become a better person. People go through experiences," that teach them to survive and learn the

skills that get them through their losses, she said.

"My goal was to write something to open your mind, for the reader to learn and understand better. You gain strength through your families, friends and friendships."

"I think they asked really good questions," Wax said after the 40-minute Skype conversation. "(Tarshis) was very open about her writing process and the struggles she has had."

And the principal says that can help his students.

"It's important for 11-, 12-, 13-year-olds to learn about her struggles with reading," he said, for them to see someone successful at writing who had to work hard to reach her goals.

"Kids sometimes try something and are not good at it and they say 'It's not for me,'" the principal said.

That's the challenge teachers have, to help students master any subject, he said.

"It speaks across the spectrum," of education, Wax said.

"I was the last person in the seventh grade that anyone expected to become an author," Tarshis told the students.

"I didn't read books until I was 14. I could read the words, but the problem was I didn't understand them," she said. "I couldn't keep track of information."

"I learned what I had to do to remember a book. I took tons of notes. I worked until I didn't think of it as a problem anymore," she said.

Tarshis said it took three years to write her first novel.

"I thought it was brilliant. I would be famous. It would be made into a movie," she said.

Then she read it again.

"It was horrible. I have no talent," she recalled saying to herself.

She put it away and became editorial director for language arts for Scholastic and editor of *Storyworks*, Scholastic's magazine for third- through fifth-graders.

She read children's books. She tried again.

"I was 40 when my first children's book was published. It took me 10 years to learn how to write a

book and I'm still learning," Tarshis said.

Her plan was to write a non-fiction book, but she found children didn't keep diaries, or wrote many letters.

"I couldn't find enough information from children from historical sources to fill a book," she said.

Writing a novel is "like doing two separate books," Tarshis said. "You do all the research of an event, then create an entire family and fit it together like a puzzle."

Her first chapters set up the plot, she said, then Tarshis has to introduce the event or disaster. What will happen? How will they get out?

Tarshis's first novel in 2010 was the 1912 sinking of the Titanic, followed that same year by the 1916 shark attacks of New Jersey.

The response surprised her, she said. Children wrote, asking for stories about events such as Pearl Harbor, the Holocaust and 9-11.

Children's letters and emails from New Orleans asked her to write a novel about Hurricane Katrina.

"How do I write about Katrina?" she asked. "It didn't seem right."

But Tarshis's third novel was "I Survived Hurricane Katrina," in 2011.

And the books continued: the volcano at Pompeii in 79 A.D., the Chicago fire of 1871, Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Japanese tsunami of 2011.

Her latest novel—due March 15—is about the American Revolution.

She held up a photo of a young boy to the computer.

"How do you come up with a plot from a picture?" she asked.

Tarshis also held up to the Skype camera a chart of her American Revolution novel, with a block for each chapter, what she wants to accomplish in that chapter and a synopsis of that chapter.

Her research included reading books on George Washington, Alexander Hamilton and the Battle of Brooklyn just to get a description of the time period. She held a cannonball to see what it weighed.

When Tarshis finishes her latest book, her next one will be about the Blizzard of 1888 in the Dakotas and

Nebraska.

Of all her historical novels, the closest one to touch her family was the Holocaust, Tarshis said.

Her husband's family lived in Germany before World War II, she said. Her husband's grandfather was put in a concentration camp, but his grandmother managed to get him out and they fled the country.

"All of us have history in our family," she said.

Asked by a seventh-grader why boys are the main characters, Tarshis held up a photo of her son, both as a curly-haired junior high student and as a young man today.

"Dillon was a good reader but he didn't like books," Tarshis said, but she wanted him to read. "He would not have read a book with a girl on the cover."

Teachers and librarians thanked her for books that boys would want to read, she said, but she is making up for it now.

"I Survived Mount St. Helens," No. 14 in her series published last year, is her first book with a girl as the main character.

Also asked for advice to a beginning writer, Tarshis said 16 years ago, she found a book on her office chair, "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone," the first book in the series.

Tarshis and other editors met author J.K. Rowling in New York City. Tarshis asked her if Harry Potter was her first book.

No, Rowling replied, her first two books were locked in a drawer. They have never been published and no one has read them.

Rowling told Tarshis, "Don't you think you have to write two bad books to write a good book?"

"So I went home and wrote a bad book," Tarshis said. "And another bad book.

"My advice: Start writing your bad book now."

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