

Children's author wows locals with his artwork

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Through his series of books and watercolor paintings, an award-winning children's author and illustrator took fourth and fifth graders on a journey through imagination, a general passion for reading and the arts, and the necessity to pursue their dreams.

On April 15, Chris Soentpiet walked the fourth and fifth graders of E.G. Hewitt School through his literary career, showing how he researches his books, photographs his models for his watercolor paintings, and develops his rough sketches and final watercolor artworks. During his presentation, Soentpiet said he credits many people for influencing him to aspire to be an illustrator as he was growing up.

"I would not be standing here today if it wasn't for the many people who have helped me become who I am, especially my mom," he told his young listeners. "You know what she said to me when I was your age? She said, 'Chris, follow your dreams and believe in yourself.' That's what I've done. That's why I'm standing here today."

Soentpiet visited the school as part of the annual Author Day, an event in schools nationwide that welcomes authors and illustrators to talk to kids about the creativity of books. Hewitt Media Specialist Mary Kirkegard contacted school librarians nationwide asking for feedback on Soentpiet and received positive responses.

Author Day is common among schools across the country, although not every school celebrates it, said Kirkegard, who coordinated the school's Author Day. The school's Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) and the Erskine Cooper Hewitt Organization (ECHO) sponsor Author Day through their cultural arts budget.

Kirkegard said that Soentpiet's books open history up to readers and welcome them into the stories, immersing them in the books' cultural and historical subjects.

"His books are very accessible in terms of life experiences such as adoption, and many of the books are historical in nature," she said. "They bring to life such times as the building of the Transcontinental Railroad, or the time of the Japanese internment camps. So in a gentle way, history is accessible to children."

Kirkegard first came across Soentpiet's name while researching children's book authors and illustrators to weigh options for Author Day appearances. She was immediately impressed by Soentpiet's number of awards and was pleased with his schedule availability and his locality. There months out of the year, Soentpiet travels across the country for speaking engagements and lives in Brooklyn, NY.

"We want someone who does quality work (to speak on Author Day)," she said.

The school spent six weeks gearing up for Soentpiet's visit through a variety of activities. The teachers acquainted the students with Soentpiet's works, and the students learned more about Soentpiet during library classes.

Order forms went home with students if they want to buy advanced copies of his books solely for a book signing. Soentpiet autographed those books at the end of the school day.

The school community raved about the author's visit, with students reveling in his illustrations and his work process.

"It's interesting how he tries to draw people," fourth grader Remi Presky said.

"It's amazing how you can experience art just by looking at it," said fifth grader Shawn Lavoie, who purchased copies of "Dear Santa, Please Come to the 19th Floor" and "The Last Dragon" for Soentpiet to sign.

But the raves didn't stop at his artworks. The school community also praised the message Soentpiet conveyed about the necessity to realize one's own ambitions.

"He sends a strong message to follow your dreams. That's a powerful message, that no dream is too small," said Pat Zartman, a parent volunteer who spent a good chunk of Author Day helping out at the school.

Soentpiet's works are rooted in history, people and world culture. He has won many awards, including the Jane Addams Book Award and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work.

Not only has Soentpiet written and illustrated children's books like "Around Town," he also has illustrated other authors' children books, which include those focusing on historical African-American groundbreakers like educator Booker T. Washington ("More Than Anything Else") and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. ("My Brother Martin").