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Newest school addition is 'The Reading Fairy'

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Since the beginning of the school year, a winged figure has been spotted flitting down school hallways in Long Valley waving her wand and spreading her magic.

The kids know who she is - she's "The Reading Fairy."

Several times a week, Margaret Harmon curls her hair, bathes herself in glitter, puts on a satin dress, attaches her wings and off she goes to read to the children.

"She's great," said Kate Twilly, a second grader at Old Farmers Road School. "We get to hold her wand and help her pick out her reading glasses. She teaches us new words, and we get to pick goodies from her "Magic Ending Bag.""

Inspiration for her new persona came two-fold. First, Harmon met with her son's second grade teacher in September and asked how she could help. The teacher suggested reading to the children. Then a scene from the film, "You've Got Mail," where Meg Ryan puts on a princess hat and reads to the kids stuck a chord with her.

"What 45-year-old woman doesn't want to reinvent herself and wear sparkles?" Harmon said. "People kid me that I never seem to do anything unless it's at 150 percent, even this."

Advance Research

Harmon said she does a lot of research online and in the bookstore to find themes and materials that relate to current issues or topics being explored at school. For example, February was dental health month and she read "Dog Breath! Horrible Trouble with Hally Tosis" by Dav Pilkey. The book was not only humorous, but introduced the children to new vocabulary words like halitosis.

"Not many people could pull it off," said Susan Ort, a first grade teacher at Old Farmer's Road School. "The kids get so excited when they know she's coming. She reads with so much enthusiasm and expression it spreads to the children. Of course, they also love that she has something to give them at the end that relates to the book. It really hooks them in."

Harmon now has five costumes she alternates for her reading sessions and lets each child select a trinket from her "Magic Ending Box." Each gift Harmon purchases with her own funds and relates to the story she is reading. Harmon said the gifts encourage reading by sparking conversation between children and parents and helping children's comprehension of the topic discussed.

In addition to her wacky outfits, Harmon arrives at school with a fabric-decorated carpetbag filled with goodies. In the "Spectacle Box" students choose from a selection of glasses for her to read with. Sometimes Harmon uses one of the fans to cool down and "to give my wings a little lift."

"It is important to give back to the community and keep in-touch with the schools," said Harmon. "My husband, Jim, and I both feel this way. He is also on the Board of Education."

Harmon is known for frequenting the grocery store in costume. So if you see an oddly cloaked woman fluttering about town, your eyes aren't playing tricks. You've just spotted the rare and wonderful new breed of The Reading Fairy.