

## **BOOKS TO GROW WITH NEWSLETTER FOR JANUARY 2005**

### **EDITOR'S NOTE**

Hello! To start off 2005, we interview Tony Petruzzi, Children's Librarian and Editor of the online resource "Helping Books Connection." The database is a great source for collection development and printable bibliographies on a wide range of topics, with more than 1000 titles, many of them contributed by librarians. (By the way, Tony welcomes reviews from *Books to Grow With* Newsletter subscribers!) The Helping Books Connection complements an Ohio program called "Helping Books Helping Families" that offers parents, children, and students a supportive environment promoting child development, literacy and access to community services. ([http://winslo.state.oh.us/services/LPD/tk\\_helpbks.html](http://winslo.state.oh.us/services/LPD/tk_helpbks.html))

Please note that I have just posted new book recommendations at the Lutra Press website! (<http://www.lutrapress.com/idea/>).

Finally, I'd like to invite your feedback. It was a pleasure to hear from some of you towards the end of the year and to hear how the Newsletter is helping you in your work. I look forward to connecting you with each other and sharing information about how we're working with books to help kids. You can always reach me at [cherylcoon@lutrapress.com](mailto:cherylcoon@lutrapress.com).

### **INTERVIEW WITH TONY PETRUZZI**

Cheryl: Hi Tony, and welcome to the *Books to Grow With* newsletter.

Tony: Hi Cheryl, thank you for asking me to participate in your newsletter. I always look forward to your articles.

Cheryl: What led to your interest in using books to help kids?

Tony: My own interest in using books to help kids came about in an "aha" moment. As you probably know, there are many self-help books out there for all kinds of self-help issues. Hazelton has published many self-help materials for adult children of alcoholics as well as for young children in alcoholic families. As an adult child myself I was very familiar with these materials before I became a children's librarian. Once I started reviewing and ordering children's books however, I would almost jump up and down when reviewing a trade book about, say, a polar bear, and discover in the text a coping skill I learned in my own recovery program as an adult. One of my favorite quotes about the wonder of story comes from Children' Author Madeleine L'Engle who said, "Facts simply told me what things were about. Story told me what things were."

Cheryl: How and when did you decide to set up the Helping Books system?

Tony: Once I had "discovered" the wisdom available in picture books, I had to find out more about this thing called bibliotherapy. Soon I had hooked up with a local mental health care agency that did programs for children coping with divorce, drug abuse and other problems. I did workshops along with the mental health staff for teachers willing to do these programs in the schools. I presented the idea of using picture books to introduce a topic such as anger management.

Before long I realized that a resource was needed to access quality children's books that addressed sensitive issues that mental health professionals, teachers, and parents could use. The web site was developed in part by the State Library of Ohio in collaboration with the Ohio Library Council's Children's Division. Several Children's Librarians formed a task force to develop this database. Many hours have been spent in trying to make the database user friendly and useful. It is still a work in progress.

Cheryl: Did you find that you had to persuade others of the need for Helping Books?

Tony: As literature specialists, most children's librarians know the value of books as tools to help parents with parenting issues and teaching issues. However, most people outside the helping professions do not want to get involved in mental health issues. And, for the most part, people not trained in working with mental health issues should not reach beyond their skills and knowledge. But Helping Books is based on using common sense knowledge to open discussion with readers or listeners about issues that can address everyday problems.

For example, I purchased a house from a young couple with a five-year-old child. I gave the family a copy of Frank Asch's book, *Goodbye House*. A year or two later I happened to run into the mother of the five-year-old and she thanked me for the book. She said that her child was having a difficult time understanding the moving process. The book gave her and her child some coping skills to make this family change easier.

Those aware of the Helping Books Connection web site have been enthusiastic about its usefulness. Due to its affiliation with and support from the Ohio Library Council, librarians have been our primary users to date. And they have been enthusiastic about its day-to-day usefulness! Many caregivers and school psychologists have found Helping Books an invaluable source to assist them in pinpointing titles they can use to assist children with issues like the one situation mentioned above.

Cheryl: Who do you see as your "customer" base?

Tony: Parents are at the top of the list of course, but the Literature Database is for anyone wishing to find helping books for young people. There are 10 to 12 librarians adding new titles quarterly. One of the goals of the database is to make selecting these kinds of titles easier for librarians and teachers.

Young people may also use the database to find books to help them cope. However, we would encourage anyone dealing with mental health issues to use these books as stepping stones for better communication and understanding with parents or helping professionals.

Cheryl: How have you publicized Helping Books?

Tony: Helping Books was also designed as a companion to a family book discussion program called "Families Talk". The two are interconnected and each reinforces the other. Each session of the "Families Talk" program focuses on a topic like "anger" or "honesty." Books are used to help families discuss each issue. The Helping Books Connection Literature Database provides a wealth of titles that can be used to support the sessions. This program is now available to anyone who wishes to download the manual. They have also served to promote each other. OLC has produced flyers and bookmarks about the Helping Books Connection and "Families Talk" that are passed out at library conferences. We have also approached school psychologists, teachers, and faculty who teach school psychology with information about our web site to increase awareness of this resource.

Cheryl: How are folks using the Helping Books?

Tony: We now have over 1050 titles in the database and the web reports tell us that people all around the world have used the database to search for a helping book. From the input we have received on an anecdotal basis we know that librarians are using the database in a reader's advisory capacity to help them find titles about issues that parents come in and request. Once instructed on the mechanics of the database parents and other interested users find it easy to navigate. We had one school psychologist come in a library who needed books on "bullying."

The librarian on duty was able to use the database to locate titles in her library system that would assist him. Teachers who do units of study on character education have used the database as well.

Cheryl: What challenges have you encountered in maintaining Helping Books?

Tony: There are two challenges that keep the task force on its toes. A small regional library consortium called NOLA has donated its server and tech director to maintain the database. Therefore we are limited to the searching capabilities we are able to use at this time. Keeping the database current has been a challenge. Until the State Library of Ohio offered help to market the database by approaching publishers to send new titles to the State Library to be distributed to librarians for review, we had few people willing or able to review books. Now we have at least 12 librarians putting in reviews on a regular basis. There is also a learning curve in writing reviews for the database. Although there is an extensive guide on the database on how to enter and write reviews, working knowledge of using helping books is helpful.

Cheryl: What are your future plans for Helping Books?

Tony: We hope to continue to upgrade the database with more efficient and effective search strategies. We continue to strive to make the reviews as useful as possible. We would like to have the ability to receive feedback from users of the database much like the reviewer's feedback on amazon.com, though, in this case related directly to the scope of the Helping Books concept.

Cheryl: Are you aware of any other similar efforts or databases?

Tony: Yes, we have listed the ones we know about on the resource page of the database. Any resource that supports the goals of the helping books connection is welcome to link to our database and we would be willing to link to that resource as well.

Cheryl: What topics do you think deserve a good children's book but you've been unable to find one on point?

Tony: Actually this is one of the future plans for the database, to review our topics and determine if there are enough titles to support keeping it in the database. We have three titles that deal with therapy, two titles that deal with gangs, and one that deal with psychologists. We may not need a subject on psychologists. We have been asked to put in a subject on pets. These are refinements that will gradually be made in the future.

Cheryl: Concluding thoughts?

Tony: Children are exposed to more stress these days due in part to the abundance of media coverage and media outlets. War, terrorism, abductions, and natural disasters, have become topics that surround families today. Families need all the positive support they can get. Learning how to deal with feelings and learning ways to communicate feelings and coping skills through literature is one way to help. Hopefully, literature specialists, writers and mental health professionals will continue to provide help using helping books.

If you have received this newsletter in error or do not wish to continue to receive it, please let me know at [cherylcoon@lutrapress.com](mailto:cherylcoon@lutrapress.com).