



Herald-Tribune

Seidman: What the world Thneeds now



Carrie Seidman with Kindgartners at Alta Vista Elementary in 2016. STAFF PHOTO / DAN WAGNER

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Posted Mar 4, 2018 at 2:01 AM

I come from a family of voracious readers. In part that was because we grew up in the country, with limited television, a vast library and a mother who read to us every night until we were old enough to do it for ourselves. And in part it was because of books like those written by the man we all know as Dr. Seuss.

Theodor Seuss Geisel — Ted to his friends — combined irresistible rhymes, fanciful words, fantastical drawings and an often provocative underlying message to create some of the most enduring and beloved children’s books of all time. My siblings and I never grew tired of the devious Cat in the Hat, the ever-faithful Horton, patiently hatching his egg, or Sam-I-am, who not only convinced us to

try Green Eggs and Ham, but Brussels sprouts too. And, remarkably, my mother seemed never to grow tired of reading them to us.

So when I was first contacted three years ago to participate in the annual Embracing Dr. Seuss' Differences Day — where, in honor of Geisel's birth, residents volunteer to read his books in local classrooms — I was eager to sign on.

That first year I read “Hooper Humperdink — Not Him!” one of the doctor's lesser-known tomes, about an odd duck with an odd name who is the only kid not invited to a party, to Kaitlyn Lambert's Alta Vista Kindergarten class. We had such a good time talking about how it's important not to make anyone feel left out because they looked or acted or talked differently, I was invited to stay to color a picture of Humperdink and his dog.

Last year I went to Emma Booker Elementary, where I faced a combined class of about 40 children of mixed ages whom I suspected had just finished a meal of Frosted Flakes, doughnuts and Pop Rocks. They were — how shall I put this? — over-stimulated.

We made it through *The Cat in the Hat*, though I'm not sure anyone heard a word, and then I shared with them [a poem](#) I wrote several years back as a tribute to the doc. With the unedited honesty of the young, they told me quite frankly they preferred the book.

I was so looking forward to another Seussian adventure that I was crushed when I found an email in my box last week thanking volunteers for filling every slot available for this year's event. What?? I wailed in reply. But you never even asked me!

Clearly the Embracing Our Differences staff knows how to handle whiney children. Without delay they found me a spot in Ms. Strickland's third grade classroom at Wilkinson Elementary, where I would read “The Lorax,” Seuss's cautionary tale about how corporate greed can endanger our natural resources.

We sat on the floor in front of a projection screen where the 2012 film made from the book was queued up. I asked how many of the students already knew the story. Every hand shot up. So they'd read the book? Every hand went down. The English major in me sighed.

Now I consider myself a quite excellent read-aloud storyteller, but Seuss's material is not without challenge. I got through. "Grickle grass," "Lerkim" and "Whisper-ma-phone" — fairly easily. But when I hit "Miff-muffered moof," I made a muffstake. The children roared.

"You try it!" I challenged them. "Three times fast!"

Soon we were deep into hearing about how the Once-ler chopped down the brightly colored Truffula trees ("It's Truff-uh-la, not Truff-you-la!" they chanted) and drove out the Bar-ba-loots, Humming Fish and Swomee-Swans to keep "biggering" his pollution-belching factory that made the all-purpose garments known as Thneeds.

"You just spit!" cried Brian.

"I did thnot!" I replied defensively.

Eventually, the fidgets faded. By the time we got to the Once-ler's warning, delivered with the last existing Truffula seed — "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." — they were ready to take on pollution, littering, climate change and the corporate bad guys.

"So what do you think about the Once-ler wanting to biggerize everything?" I asked.

"Greedy," someone suggested. Everyone nodded.

I asked them to come up with ideas for what they could do to prevent pollution and preserve our air and water. Aurora thought everyone should be issued one of those claws that pick up trash issued to people doing community service. Avery suggested we all use bicycles and boats instead of cars and get energy from the pedaling and paddling. Brian suggested we have invigilators hide behind trees who would jump out and arrest anyone engaged in harmful pollution. ("Too creepy," Aurora said.)

The one thing everyone agreed on is that we could certainly stop making so many things that we don't really need, like Thneeds.

When we got done, we all gathered for two pictures — one, all smiles, prompted by “What do you think of Dr. Seuss?” The other — grumpy grimaces — prompted by our regard for the Once-ler.

On my way back to the office, I started thinking about my new friends, who saw very clearly that when someone is doing something that harms us, it’s up to us all to create something better. And that led me to think about the committed and courageous teens of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. My hopes of a better world are firmly pinned on these coming generations.

In fact, maybe instead of trying to convince the grown-ups in our community to work together, I ought to go back to working on that children’s book I put away so long ago. It’s what Dr. Seuss might have done.

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