

Walpole storyteller writes from the heart

Photos



Erin Prawoko

Walpole children's book author Nancy Tupper Ling has just published "My Sister, Alicia May," a story about a child with Down syndrome and her sister.

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By Keith Ferguson/Daily News staff
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WALPOLE — An author who claims to have given "blood, sweat and tears" to a project is speaking figuratively.

But when Walpole's Nancy Tupper Ling says it of her children's book "My Sister, Alicia May," she means it literally, except for the blood.

Illustrated by Shennen Bersani, the emotional story tells the tale of 6-year-old Alicia May, who has Down syndrome, as seen through the eyes of her 9-year-old sister, Rachel.

Ling based the story on her friend's children in Connecticut.

While visiting the family in July 2006, she talked about writing a story about Alicia May and Rachel while on a walk in the countryside.

"I always felt a closeness to (Alicia May) anyway," Ling said, explaining she had already written a poem entitled "Our Fragile Emissary" about her before deciding to do a whole book.

In November that year, she sent her manuscript to Jean Cochran, co-founder of Pleasant Street Press in Raynham.

Cochran liked the idea, but returned the copy to Ling for heavy editing. The Walpole writer sweated through three months of extensive cuts and rewrites until her draft was accepted.

From there, the journey took an ironic twist.

Cochran went in search of an illustrator and found Bersani on a British illustrators' Web site, but Cochran didn't think she'd be able to hire the veteran illustrator who has drawn for books that have sold well over a million copies combined.

What Cochran didn't know, however, was Bersani has a younger sister with Down syndrome and, by Bersani's own account, basically lived the life of Rachel.

"I got teary eyed," Bersani said about Cochran's pitch. "I just choked up."

Still, Bersani took some time to make a decision until her son convinced her on Mother's Day of last year saying, "You realize this story is about your life, Mom. You have to illustrate."

"It was serendipitous for sure," Cochran said.

Bersani became even more emotionally involved after meeting the real Rachel - a girl Bersani described as

"quiet and standoffish."

After six months of illustrating with an eye toward perfection, Bersani had made the story her own.

"I became the protagonist, Rachel," she said. "I'm seeing myself in this girl's face."

Bersani remembers turning in a tear-stained draft of the 20th page - a point where Rachel is trying to avoid Alicia May - because she could deeply relate to the feelings of frustration and responsibility Rachel felt while drawing her.

The book is meant to pull at the heartstrings by presenting both the blessings and hardships of having a sister with special needs, Ling said.

"I cry at the end of it and it's my own writing," she said, chuckling. "It's kind of pathetic."

Released on May 1, the book "fills a void in the market" of special needs literature, according to Cochran.

"(Ling) hit the nail on the head," she said.

However, Ling and Bersani are quick to point out the words "Down syndrome" never appear in the story and the book isn't just about a child with special needs.

"It's about two sisters, one of whom happens to have Down syndrome," Ling said, adding, after all, that Rachel is "special" too.

Ling lives on Forsythia Drive with her two daughters. She has previously published two books of poetry and is the 2005 winner of the Writer's Digest Grand Prize. She'll be visiting Boyden Elementary School on Friday.

Bersani is currently illustrating her 11th book. She lives in Brockton with her four kids.

Cochran is a Raynham resident with three children.

All three along with the real Alicia May and Rachel will be at the Barnes & Noble store on Rte. 1 in Walpole for a book signing on May 30 at 11 a.m.
