

By VALERIE HOFFMANN  
vhoffmann@ncnewsonline.com

Once upon a time in a school district not so very far away, a young girl proved to her classmates and teachers that if you believe in yourself, you can succeed.

Amid the laughter and chatter of children's voices, the girl stood holding gifts of a flower bouquet and stuffed rabbit. In the back of the classroom on a table was a cake decorated to look like a book. Another cake, already cut, was being distributed to hungry little tummies.

Propped up against a cardboard boxcar was a framed photo of smiling 9-year-old Stephanie Moore holding a copy of her newly published book.

Stephanie won last year's "Boxcar Children" fiction contest, sponsored by Scholastic Books.

And this party was for her.

Our story begins a year ago in the Neshannock Elementary School classroom of second-grade teacher Beth Bakuhn.

Beth discovered Scholastic Books was sponsoring a fiction writing contest opened to second- and third-graders across the United States. The students were to write a story based on the characters of the "Boxcar Children," authored by Gertrude Chandler Warner.

Beth's students had been reading the "Boxcar" books in class so she gave them the opportunity to enter the contest.

"I knew my kids could win," Beth said. "They are such great writers."

One of her students, Stephanie, went home and wrote a story called "One Scary Night" and had her father, Steve, mail it the next day.

"We didn't even know about the contest until Stephanie needed her story proofed and put into the computer," her mother, Sandy, said.

Time went by and one day Stephanie came into class and found a rose and the winning letter from Scholastic on her desk saying she was one of 10 children whose story would be published in a special edition of the "Boxcar Children" series.

"I was so excited," Stephanie said.

She was even more excited when she received 100 copies of her printed book this year.

"We were told she would have the book in a few months and it ended up taking a year," Sandy said.

Stephanie, who is now in third grade, said winning the contest has changed her career goals. The former teacher wannabe now has her sights set on fashion design.

"She's very creative," Sandy said. "She likes to dance, write and would like to illustrate, too. Winning this contest was a big feat for her because she was up against third graders when she entered."

Beth said Stephanie has been an inspiration to other children to write and enter contests. "She's proven to adults and children to believe in yourself. Don't think you can't win."

Sandy agreed saying Stephanie took the contest and ran with it with no intention of winning. She just liked the "Boxcar Children" series.

Debbie was happy to throw the party in her classroom seeing it as an opportunity to celebrate Stephanie's success. When the book is available through Scholastic Books, she plans to buy copies for her class so each student can have an autographed copy.

While Stephanie enjoys writing fiction stories, Steve credits his wife with introducing their three kids to reading thanks to the New Castle Public Library's summer reading program.

"I think it sends a clear message that if you read to your children they can succeed. Get them excited for reading," he said.

The end.