



# GOING *Beyond* THE BOOK

*Stephanie Hasty uses literature and life to teach students about acceptance.* BY TINA CASAGRAND

**STEPHANIE HASTY** was destined to teach. Growing up in Mansfield, she helped her two younger sisters get ready for school each morning and tutored their classmates in the afternoons. She read hundreds of books, skipping book series like Sweet Valley High for novels about teenage misfits. She learned to be confident and to be proud of where she came from and where she lives: the Ozarks. And her respect and acceptance for her English students at Lebanon High School pays off; they swarm her desk at every break, not only with homework questions, but also with personal problems and new ideas. And Stephanie listens. She gives them advice, serious or sassy, when appropriate.

The classroom reflects her wry personality. Posters declare, "Sacred cows make the tastiest burgers," and "I love my country, but I think we should start seeing other people." Postcards from all over the world splash color across the length of a wall. Action figures of Wonder Woman and Jane Austen stand beside Russian nesting dolls. Books as diverse as the

X-files series and *Little House on the Prairie* fill every gap on her shelves.

That classroom is where one student, Patrick Buckmaster, found a sanctuary. He loved celebrities, '90s pop music, and writing—interests that he says differed from most boys in the factory town. He says his classmates insulted him, taunted him, and threatened his life.

"When I see other people who are different, I gravitate toward them," says Patrick, now twenty-two.

Searching for support, he discovered Stephanie's classroom during his freshman year before he was Stephanie's student. This happens with a batch of kids nearly every class.

Matt Starnes, twenty-eight, also became friends with Stephanie during high school. He now teaches next door to her at LHS.

"That's a fine line to walk as a teacher, to balance being a teacher and a friend," he says. "She does a really great job of that, they feel a sense of commitment to the class."

The need to feel included was something Stephanie experienced during her childhood. After her parents divorced, she, her sisters, and her mother moved across the country from Connecticut to Mansfield. As the first black students to graduate from Mansfield High School, Stephanie says she and her sisters faced discrimination.

"The older kids, who only saw our skin color and didn't know us, called us names," she says. "Kids would play with or would tease me about my hair. Even in high school, I had a hard time getting a date for prom. The person I wanted to go with couldn't go with me, his best friend said his parents wouldn't let him."

Her mother, Patricia, used faith and encouragement to comfort her daughters.

"I told her that she was made the way God wanted her to be, that she was here for a reason, at the right time, and it wasn't happenstance," Patricia says, adding that overcoming negativity made Stephanie the strong woman she is today. "You know, you have to press on and stop thinking about the bigotry and the ignorance and start educating, subtly and from the inside out. You have to know who you are first, and then you can teach other people about your culture and your struggles."

Stephanie read books about black history to learn about her mixed heritage. And at school, teachers, friends, and writing helped her thrive. Her classmates crowned her prom queen. She edited the school newspaper. She worked at the Laura Ingalls Wilder Home and Museum and read books by Rose Wilder Lane, Laura's daughter. Rose wrote about thinly disguised scandals and restrictive social rules in Mansfield in her 1935 book *Old Home Town*. Stephanie writes on her blog *The Conscientious Reader* that she relates to the writer's relationship with the town because it resembles her own bittersweet love for Mansfield. Rose writes about the good and the bad.

After college at Southwest Missouri State University (now Missouri State University) and a semester abroad in London, Stephanie says she chose to teach in Lebanon because she thought she wouldn't get attached to it, she planned to work in London or Chicago after getting some experience. Within a few years, however, she began enjoying the challenge of teaching in a small town.

"There's something to be said about the kids of a small Ozark community," she says.

They love their families, they love their homes, and they seek out adventure. But sometimes, she adds, "They have a hard time understanding that they can have roots here and spread out to wherever they want."

She inserts that lesson into stories she teaches, such as Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, a play about appreciating each moment, even in unremarkable places. Although set in 1901, it still resonates with students.

In the century since then, or even fifteen years since Stephanie started teaching, one thing remains constant.

"The kids haven't changed," she says. "Their need to be listened to,



Stephanie Hasty teaches a unit about small towns and uses Rose Wilder Lane's *Old Home Town*, a book she discovered when she worked at the Laura Ingalls Wilder Home in Mansfield.

to be treated with respect has not changed."

Respect shines through not only in conversation, but in her extra work: outside class, Stephanie runs book clubs and teaches newspaper, takes students to journalism conferences, and invites speakers from the education field to train her fellow teachers. She plans lessons and grades papers in school on Sunday afternoons—the only time, it seems, students don't clamor for her attention.

Tamara Hicks, head of the LHS English department, admits she doesn't have the same personal connection with such a broad range of students.

"Stephanie has been an object of my ponderings for a long time," she says, shaking her head. "Every teacher wants to be her, and some think they are like her, but they're really not. She can do so much in one day. And the kids will do anything for her."

In her banter with teenagers, Stephanie models self-confidence and arms them with tales such as *Our Town*, so they can better understand their own story. Even if students don't stay in Lebanon, they take those lessons with them.

Two years ago, Patrick bought a one-way ticket to Portland, Oregon, where he now raps under the name Boy Funk. He's starting to appreciate his childhood and teachers like Stephanie.

"I do like Lebanon for what it's given me—great friendships, a backbone, the ability to be awesome anywhere," he says.

That's something Stephanie wants for all of her students.

"Because of the great teachers I had in my own small town, I was able to grow away from my roots, achieve my dreams, and come back home anytime I want," she says. "For the kids at Lebanon, I want to be one of those teachers. That's my motivation. That's why I stay."

*"The kids haven't changed," Stephanie says. "Their need to be listened to, to be treated with respect has not changed."*