

How is it possible? This is my last month as the first National Ambassador for Young People's Literature - appointed by the Library of Congress and the Children's Book Council. But I've only been to about 33 states and 274 schools, libraries, bookstores, conferences, and festivals in the past two years. And now it's time to pick a new Ambassador? I still don't have my Ambassador Attack helicopter.

It has been an incredible run. One of my favorite moments took place in a California school shortly after I was appointed. The kindergarteners made me a beautiful red sash with blue tape letters that spelled A-M-B-A-S-S-A-D-O-R. And then, as I walked into the presentation hall, a group of 5th-graders played an original Ambassador Fanfare, which they had composed, on kettle drum, trumpet, trombone, and xylophone. I put the Fanfare on my iPhone and played it everywhere I went after that.

At an incredibly poor school in Arizona, I got to speak to a very intense group of 3rd-grade writers and illustrators who had never seen any kind of author . . . let alone an Ambassador author. I read some books, talked about the process of writing, explained my job as Ambassador, showed them my official medal, and asked if there were any questions. The first question, from a little girl, was: "Can I try on the medal?"

I loved it. She posed, and I took her picture as Ambassador. Then everyone decided they wanted to try on the medal and be Ambassador for a moment. It was incredibly heart-warming. And you never know what dreams were created that day.

It was great, because the teachers and kids instantly "got" the whole idea of the Ambassador. And they made it even better. I was the same author, but people listened with new interest.

I used my two-year term to work on reaching the reluctant reader: that's the kid who might be a reader, who could be one, but just isn't that interested in reading. The new Ambassador will have his or her own program, and ideas on connecting kids with reading. Here is the advice that I have been giving throughout my tenure:

- Let each child choose what she or he wants to read. I'll never forget my own son's reaction reading *Little House on the Prairie* (a favorite of many readers): "Are they really going to spend this whole chapter making a door?"
- Expand the definition of "reading" to include non-fiction, humor, graphic novels, magazines, action adventure, and, yes, even websites. It's the pleasure of reading that counts; the focus will naturally broaden. A boy won't read shark books forever.
- If a kid doesn't like one book, don't worry about finishing it. Start another. The key is helping children find what they like.
- Be a good reading role model. Show kids what you like to read, what you don't like to read, how you choose what you read. Let them see you reading.
- Avoid demonizing television, computer games, and new technologies. Electronic media may compete for kids' attention, but we're not going to get kids reading by badmouthing other entertainment. Admit that TV and games can do things books can't. Talk about how reading can make a world in ways that movies and games can't.

I am honored to have served as our great nation's first National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. I will continue to serve as Ambassador Emeritus. And I will make good on my Ambassadorial promise to my wife to stop playing the Fanfare every time I walk into or out of a room. Now, if someone could just get word to the New York City traffic department that I do have complete Diplomatic Immunity.