Shorewood teen helps children tell their unique stories

By Leon Cohen

In the age of smart phones, texting abbreviations, emoticons and 140-character tweets, does anybody, particularly any young people, want to do real writing anymore?

Shorewood teen Katie Eder does — and she has found it so much fun that she decided she wants to teach others.

Eder, 15, is the founder and executive director of Kids Tales, a non-profit organization that helps children not just write, but write about themselves and their own interests from their own hearts and minds.

Since beginning her efforts last summer, Kids Tales has taught approximately 120 children of ages 8-12. And these children live not only in the Milwaukee area, but also in Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Colombia in South America.

She taught her first two classes last summer at the COA Youth and Family Centers and the Highland Community School, both in Milwaukee. That inspired her to do more, and by this past January she incorporated Kids Tales with a logo that she designed herself. She has also created a written curriculum for her classes that she has used to teach other young teachers.

Each class, she said, comprises four or five daily sessions, each lasting two or three hours. The first involves brainstorming activities, in which the participants play with ideas and talk about characters.

Eder has devised worksheets on such topics as character development to give encouragement and direction, but “I don’t lecture,” she said. “It’s a summer program; it’s not school. The point is for kids to be able to create whatever they want and to come up with their own ideas.”

The middle sessions are devoted to writing. Eder and her other teachers walk among the kids and offer help with whatever each individual seems to need — formatting dialogue, structuring sentences, etc.

On the last day, participants edit and revise their own work and that of the others. Sharing, Eder said, is part of the process, including learning how to give and accept constructive criticism.

By the end, the participants all have a story. There are no requirements about length. Some write only one paragraph; one wrote eight pages, Eder said.

Then each participant has a photograph taken, writes a short “Meet the Authors” paragraph and draws a picture. Eder takes all of those plus the stories, and via an Amazon self-publishing service makes a small book, which is then sold through the Kids Tales website.

After all that is done, Eder said the classes have publishing parties, in which they can read their stories aloud, sign each other’s books and eat. The classes pick the titles of the books, which sometimes, Eder said, suggests ideas for the parties. The first COA class called its book “Tacos Will Always Make Things Better,” resulting in tacos being featured at the party.

This summer, Eder ran six Kids Tales workshops. Three of them were in Milwaukee; but others took place in Chicago and D.C.; and one took place in Villavicencio, Colombia.

That last one resulted from Eder’s submission to the American Field Service’s Project: Change. This national competition seeks ideas from eighth to 12th grade students for volunteer projects that could have meaningful effects in other countries. Winners receive a scholarship to spend two weeks abroad working on their project.

Eder received the AFS Vision in Action award, and so went to Villavicencio June 24–July 9. With her went 12 other teens, ages 15-18, from all over the U.S., half of whom could speak Spanish.

Together, they taught 21 Colombian kids, and “It still had the same impact on them as if we had been teaching in English,” Eder
succeeded. She added that the resulting stories will be published in English and Spanish.

The recent recognition did not stop there. The Milwaukee Business Journal announced in its July 10 issue that it gave Eder and Kids Tales one of its 2015 Eureka Awards, which recognize creativity and innovation.

And Eder will be listed as one of the International Literacy Association’s first list of “30 Under 30”—30 people under 30 years-old—who’s work helps promote literacy. She will thereby be featured in the ILA’s September/October issue of Reading Today.

Their own voices

“Writing is often pushed aside in schools” because of the emphasis on STEM — science, technology, engineering and mathematics, Eder explained in an interview on Aug. 5.

Not that Eder is opposed to STEM study — in fact, she said she wants to become an engineer, like her father Dan Eder. But she has discovered that writing is fun and that many children do not have the opportunity she had to write about themselves and what they care about.

“Every kid has a story to tell,” she said. “They have things that have happened to them, they’ve had experiences and they have ideas that make amazing stories.”

Indeed, doing so can be more than fun. Eder recalled one of her students last summer, “the shyest girl I ever met.” Her parents were divorced and she was moved “back and forth” between them.

During the class, this girl told Eder that no one had given her the chance to tell her own story before. Eder said, “Storytelling,” Eder continued, “gives kids the chance to have their own voice and tell their unique story their own way.”

Eder, who attended Milwaukee Jewish Day School through third grade, came to her own love of writing and desire to teach others literally by an accident. She used to skate and dance; but during a family skiing trip when she was in fifth grade, she broke her arm.

Her mother, Laura Peracchio Eder, is a professor of marketing at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She had served on a committee for Lake Bluff Elementary School with Priscilla Pardini, a freelance writer, editor and writing coach.

To give the incapacitated Katie something to do, her mother introduced her to Pardini and enrolled her in writing classes through the Shorewood Recreation Department.

“I realized I really liked writing,” Katie Eder said. “I ended up taking that path instead of continuing skating and dancing.”

Pardini told The Chronicle that Eder “loves creative writing. She wrote story after story [and] over time she got better and better.”

“One of her strengths is that she not only has great ideas, but she follows through, making them come to fruition,” Pardini added. “Her enthusiasm for writing is absolutely contagious and very inspiring.”

Eder attended three summers at the Interlochen Center for the Arts in Michigan, one for theater, which is another of her interests, and two for writing. She also attended a creative writing class in Oxford, Great Britain, taught by British Jewish novelist David Benedictus, whom Eder says is “a kid himself.”

“All of these combined gave me the idea to do Kids Tales,” Eder said. She also said she was inspired by one of her older sisters — she is the youngest of five, and has three sisters and one brother — who was a mathematics tutor.

She began looking for ways to teach, and decided she had to do it herself. “The original idea was just to go and teach a writing class,” she said. “I had no idea it was going to get this big.”

Laura Lysaght is special events and volunteer coordinator with the COA Youth and Family Centers, where Eder taught in the summers of 2014 and 2015 as a volunteer with COA’s youth development program.

“I quickly learned that she’s an extremely thoughtful, philanthropic and innovative young woman,” Lysaght told The Chronicle.

“I was impressed with how organized she was, and how she was always ready to take the initiative and see things through from beginning to end... Katie is definitely an emerging leader in our community.”

Eder said she is “hoping to expand more nationally.” She said that some of the teachers she trained for the Colombia effort want to bring the program to their home communities.

Meanwhile, she is a Shorewood High School sophomore who not only takes classes, but is involved in theater, writes for the school newspaper and participates in the model United Nations.

So far, Kids Tales has been primarily a summer project for her. But the planning makes it a “year-round enterprise,” and she has been asked to teach during the school year. “We’ll see how it goes,” she said. 

On the cover:

Katie Eder (right) works with a Kids Tales student at a COA Youth and Family Center in August. Photo by Lois Bielefeld.

Katie Eder (front row at left) with the Kids Tales co-teachers in Villavicencio, Colombia, on July 1. Photo by Hillary Weinberger.