

Story Matters

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One day, Jose, age ten, shows me he carries around in his pocket a baseball card. It is inside a worn plastic sleeve. "My grandpa gave it to me," he said. "It's the only thing I have left from my family. Every night I put it on my table next to my bed, and every day I put it into the pocket of my jacket for the next day."

I am deeply moved by the extraordinary measures human beings will take to keep themselves a piece of home. And similarly, I am overcome by the beauty in these children, putting forth a piece of themselves to create home.

I am so grateful to receive this honor tonight, but it is really my privilege to spend time at The Children's Village, where the work is about creating a sense of home for all children.

My greatest privilege of all is to work alongside the boys themselves. They inspire me, with their courage and humor and their capacity for growth and their desire to learn and be part of the world.

Jeremy Kohomban said to me that if our work on behalf of Books for Boys could someday help these young men grow into fathers who would read to THEIR children, then these efforts would be a monumental success for that alone.

Do I believe that learning to read can save lives? Yes, yes, I do.

Everyone has the right, the human right to a childhood. Like food, drink, shelter and education, everyone has the right to a childhood. Childhood conveys its own kind of powers, bestows them upon the small child, who by laughing, by imagining, builds his own sense of his power and his place in the world. Children's Village is a sanctuary: where childhood is found again.

In much of great children's literature there are no mothers, and there are no fathers. Harry Potter, Narnia, James and the Giant Peach, The child must learn to face fears in a most resourceful way, the child must have courage. I realized in reading to and with the boys at the Village that there was tremendous resonance in these stories. Maybe we have never been to Narnia, or to Hogwarts, but we have all been lonely, and we have all had to find courage, and we can all find ourselves in these stories.

Literature gives us a huge sense of comfort and also a moral compass for how to be on those journeys. The greatest children's book writers knew that they were writing their way into understandings that all children seek: how to face one's

fears and still have courage. How to go to bed and not be afraid of the dark. How to go on a journey and play with the wild things as Max did in *Where the Wild Things Are*. For the kids at CV, like all of us in this room, to read these books and find themselves in there, and realize: I am not alone, because I too have experienced this sort of loneliness and have had to summon up these sorts of courage: for these children, for all of us, stories inside books are more than a gentle escape. They are a life raft.

From isolation to community, from devastation to transcendence:

Books create worlds. We can imagine the possibility of other worlds when we read. The boys, by reading, hear the potential for other worlds singing within them.

All my appreciation to the leadership of Children's Village, whose every action contributes to the creation of a life changing sanctuary for children who must never be forgotten. Erica Mason and Lori McFarlane lead Books for Boys on campus with dedication and joy and love for the kids, Many thanks to the staff of the school who face the real challenges every day and work hard to overcome them, to the extraordinary CV cottage staff who smile when we arrive with our boxes of books at all hours and who move heaven and earth to make Books for Boys a reality.

To Susan Meigs, Lauren Blum, Joanne Levine, Nancy Kliot, and Nicole Clark, the Books for Boys core: whose hearts are

so full and so generous. You take seeds of ideas and make them grow, and you love the children at the Village so genuinely. I treasure you for all of what you bring to every day of this work. To Elizabeth Fernandez, who brings the boys of The Brunswick School to CV to connect two worlds and through story, bring both worlds together, to Jeannie Blaustein and Peter Bokor without whose faith in the power of words and systemic change, there would be no Books for Boys, to the Hebrew Home and Joy Solomon for the connection there and especially Dan Reingold, a visionary leader who takes care of people at the other end of the life cycle. To Marva Allen, the innovative owner of the important Hue Man Bookstore in Harlem, who brings us authors and books and hope to the children at the Village.

My father brought me to CV for the first time when I was fifteen years old; the best gift he and my mother have given us has been the example they set by their commitment to public service and to hands on, real engagement with the world.

My deepest love and gratitude to my miraculous husband Jim and our beautiful daughters Katie and Charlotte who capture the blessedness and hope in absolutely every moment they spend at CV.

Can reading save lives? Can it bring a person back from the brink? Offer a life raft when the waters rush high? Provide

solace in the darkest times? Help someone find the words to restore their own stories. I say, yes. I say, yes.

Michael Bouchel, age 17, asked me the other day if he could create a program to read aloud to the younger kids on campus. I realized: this was exactly what Jeremy had said, and yet, I did not have to wait years before Michael became a father to see: Michael is already feeling the effects of being someone in the world who finds power and comfort in story. Now, he is the changemaker, now: he has power in the world, too.

A final prayer: let us together create the kind of world where childhood is found again, where for all of us isolation becomes community, where for the children who most need us, devastation becomes transcendence. Please, continue this work with me. Let us all, including and especially the precious boys for whom we are here this evening, be, as Ghandi said, the change we wish to see in the world. Thank you.