

GIVING BACK

A dragon with a healthy connection to kids

The donor Gayle Grass

PAUL WALDIE
MAY 2, 2009

The Gift: Iris the Dragon

The Cause: Educating children about mental health

For a long time, Gayle Grass felt there was something missing from children's literature. While many children's books dealt with a number of social issues, few if any touched on mental health.

Ms. Grass has a son with mental health issues and she knew all about the stigma and misunderstanding surrounding the topic. She also has a master's degree in English and did her thesis on the "art of private book making."

Print Edition - Section Front



[Enlarge Image](#)



She decided to tackle the issue herself and came up with a green dragon called Iris who is 909 years old and lives in a cave near Perth, Ont., that is filled with books. "Children love dragons," Ms. Grass said from her home, also near Perth. "It just made it a really approachable medium."

She put together a book proposal, using Iris to convey a message that "there are children who have these illnesses and what they need is more understanding, compassion, acceptance and also hope."

She sent the idea to several publishers but none were interested. "They said, 'We don't think that would be anything we could sell.'"

So with the help of her husband, Michael, and encouragement from Senator Michael Kirby, who has worked on several mental health issues, Ms. Grass decided to publish the book herself. She also got input from experts at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario in Ottawa.

Her first book, *Catch a Falling Star*, came out in 2000. The book was distributed through several mental health agencies and demand was overwhelming. Ms. Grass has since published three more Iris books, the most recent called *I Can Fix It*, which deals with Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism. Each book contains an epilogue that was written by a physician who offers details about the illness.

More than 45,000 Iris books have been distributed across Canada, the United States, Japan, Australia and Greece. Ms. Grass has formed a non-profit organization and all the books are either donated or sold at cost. She is considering creating videos to go along with the books and has lined up an array of corporate sponsors including Royal Bank of Canada and Bank of Nova Scotia.

"We always try to show that so many things are possible by early identification and treating [mental illness] and not dismissing it, and not ignoring it," she said. "Iris's credo is: Do the right thing."

pwaldie@globeandmail.com