



Illustration by Coral Nault

By Michael Wales

Can a dragon named Iris and a boy named Fish play a part in educating young people about mental illness? Two Ottawa-area women certainly think so, and are hoping to find a publisher that thinks so too.

Author Gayle Grass, along with illustrator Coral Nault, have produced the manuscript for a children's book entitled *Catch a Falling Star — Tales from Iris the Dragon*, in hopes of explaining mental illness to young people and teaching the early warning signs that may prevent or lessen the severity of mental illness.

Grass, who has a son who suffers from mental illness, said the idea for the book began to form in her mind last year as she was taking art lessons from Nault, who also has a child who suffers from mental illness.

"We became very supportive of one another," Grass said.

"And both of us seemed to always be... looking for more answers and solutions."

Grass said one day, while she was working on a sculpture of a dragon, she laughingly told Nault that they should "write a book".

Last fall, Grass sat down and did just that, while Nault produced the beautiful, colourful illustrations.

The story is set in a real place, just out-

TELLING THE TALE

Author hopes children's book will help explain mental illness to young people

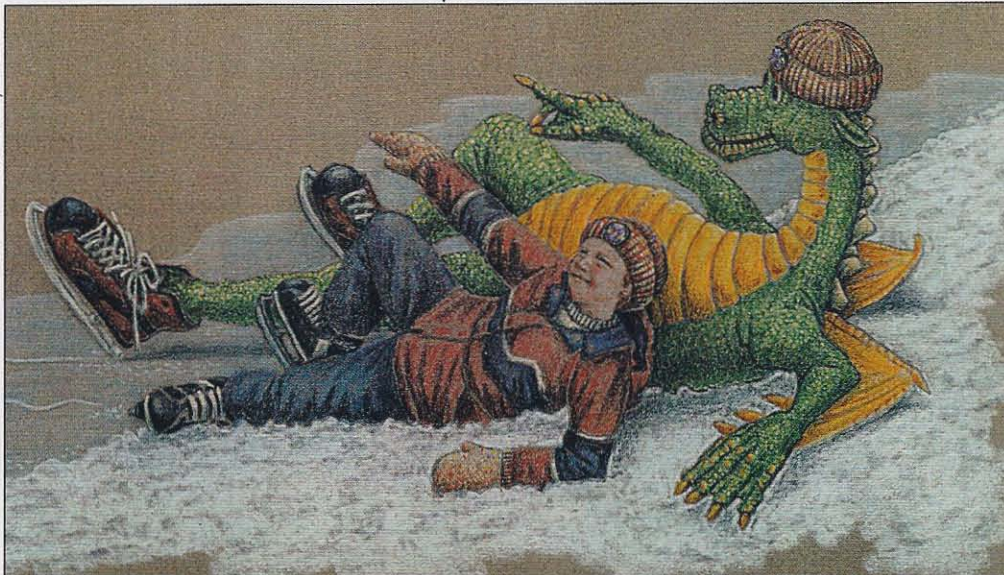
side Perth, Ontario, where Grass grew up, and includes the same bridge that she once fished off herself.

"It's a very special place for me, and Coral just lives around the corner from there," she explained.

The story revolves around a boy named Fish, and his imaginary friend, Iris the Dragon. The story follows the two over the course of one year, and is told through four chapters, named for the seasons.

Over the course of the special friendship, Fish, so named because of his favourite hobby, begins to display the early warning signs of a potential mental illness. Through their adventures, Fish's symptoms are explained, and Iris helps him to understand and cope with his difficulties. Fish

Illustration by Coral Nault



eventually travels with his parents to a clinic in "The City" to get the help he needs to become well.

Symbolism plays a big part in the story as well. In a synopsis that accompanies the manuscript, Grass explains that the different symbols are meant to promote the message of hope. The star, she explains, represents the dreams of a child, the Dragon which, according to Eastern cultures, has great powers and perceptions of understanding, is "magical and inspires the imagination." And the Iris is the flower that has been adopted by the Schizophrenia Society of Canada to symbolize faith, hope and courage.

Writing the book involved extensive research, explained Grass, who called upon numerous professionals to ensure the correct message is being sent.

"I wanted to make sure the book is as accurate as possible," she said.

"And I wanted to maintain the idea that the book encompasses all of children's mental illness, because there are early warning signs."

Grass admits that the early response from publishers hasn't been as optimistic as she and Nault may have expected. Meanwhile, however, in the true spirit of the book, she and Nault have decided to "put the cart before the horse" and start an educational campaign that uses Iris and Fish to spread the message. They also hope the campaign will help them to develop partnerships with people and organizations that realize the importance of the project. The book project is also part of an awareness campaign put forward by the Ottawa-Carleton chapter of the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario.

Once the book is published, Grass said, and expenses are covered, any proceeds will be given to charities that help children with mental illness. 