

# Walking for Brave New Minds

## Students raise awareness for mental health

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The colourful characters of the Riverbank may be imaginary, but their spirit of compassion and understanding for children with mental health issues will come alive on the streets of Perth next week.

The only thing missing will be the dragon.

On May 7, the first real-life

Brave New Minds walk will take place in Perth, but local author Gayle Grass envisioned the event long before she knew it would become a reality. The walk is the central event in her book, *I Can Fix It!*, the latest installment in her Iris the Dragon series. In the book, the mayor and adults organize a march through the town to show their solidarity with children facing mental health

issues.

On May 7, the children themselves will play a starring role in the walk.

"It's really important that the movement comes from the children," Grass said. "It's important that (the children) are able to do this for their friends."

The event will mark Children's Mental Health Week, which takes place from May 2 to 9. Sixty Grade 4 to 6 students

from Queen Elizabeth Public School, as well as a group from Perth and District Collegiate Institute, will gather at Queen Elizabeth at 9:30 in the morning. After a speech by Brent McLaren, the town crier, a group of drummers will lead the students to the gazebo at town hall, where the mayor, MP, MPP and other dignitaries will join the walk.

See Walking for Brave Pg. 3



## Walking for Brave New Minds

With a banner flying and colourful balloons dotting the crowd, mirroring the cover of Grass' book, the group will make its way through the heart of Perth en route to the Crystal Palace. There, three speakers will address the crowd: Ian Manion, the executive director of the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario's Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health; Nicki Collins, executive director of Open Doors, a child and youth mental health service organization in Lanark County; and Perth Mayor John Fenik.

In the book, the mayor gathers the townspeople for a public meeting to get to the bottom of mysterious "Iris cards" people have been receiving, thanking them for being kind to a child who has a mental health challenge.

"That starts this whole ripple effect," Grass said. Those same cards have been printed, and children will hand them out to people along the route.

The event is the first of its kind to be modeled on Grass's book, but she said the Canadian Mental Health

Association has hopes to use the Perth walk – and the book – as a model for similar events across the country next year.

Grass began writing the books in 2000 with the help of Merrickville illustrator Graham Ross, with the goal of raising awareness about mental health and wellness for children. Since the series began, Iris the dragon, the central character, has addressed ADHD, anxiety disorder, and (in *I Can Fix It!*), Asperger's Syndrome. The disorder and the child's experience with the disorder are told through the picture book characters who find an understanding friend in the dragon and a host of other creatures in a fairytale locale called the Riverbank.

"We were told that we were probably the first to address mental health from a children's point of view," Grass said.

Focusing on children at a young age serves two purposes, she said. First, awareness could lead to early identification of mental health concerns, which could lead to earlier treatment and could prevent the issue from escalating, Grass said,

noting that 75 per cent of all mental health issues are identified in childhood.

Second, Grass hopes seeing the acceptance with which characters in her book approach each other will influence children to practice that same acceptance with their peers.

Increasing acceptance of people struggling with mental health concerns was the focus of the latest book. Grass conducts extensive research before embarking on each book, and she said studies painted a clear direction for the newest book.

"If you look at the figures, there is a major problem with stigma. How do we address that?" she said. "The bottom line is it has to start with the community becoming more knowledgeable."

There are many walks, runs and bike rides for other diseases, and a similar event for children's mental health will "give the same attention" to the cause, Grass said. She said one in five children is diagnosed with a mental health issue, and only one in six will seek treatment. Grass noted that Michael Kirby, chair of the national mental health commission, has said that if those were the same statistics for the treatment of cancer, the public would not stand for it.

Grass and Collins from Open Doors will be visiting the students participating in the walk before the day of the event to read the book and tell them more about mental health. Each child and youth will receive a bag with the book, a green mental health bracelet, and materials about mental health and the services offered by Open Doors.

Collins initially approached Grass about planning the event, and the agency's advocacy committee, particularly Katie Hoffman, has been busy ironing out the details. While Perth is the only place a walk is taking place this year, *I Can Fix It!* will have an impact across the province, because it is being distributed through 82 mental health agencies in Ontario.

For information about Open Doors, visit [www.opendoors.on.ca](http://www.opendoors.on.ca). To find out more about the Iris the Dragon charity and book series, visit [www.iris-the-dragon.com](http://www.iris-the-dragon.com).



Local author Gayle Grass' children's book, *I Can Fix It!*, will be the inspiration for a march to the Crystal Palace on May 7 to raise awareness about children's mental health issues.

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