

STAR STUDENTS[★]

I got the call! No, not an offer from a publisher, but an invitation to present at the Young Author's Conference (YAC) at Bridgewater-Raritan High School on May 10, 2008. The YAC, sponsored by the Central New Jersey Reading Council, honors and celebrates student authors.

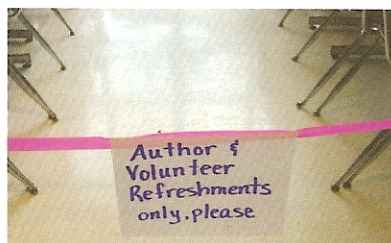
Why was this invitation such a thrill for me? Let me rewind to spring, 2004. In April of that year, my daughter, Sarah, participated in this inspiring event. With her bound story in hand, she had the opportunity to sit in on author and illustrator presentations, read her story, purchase autographed books, and enjoy refreshments with hundreds of kids who shared her passion for books.

Sarah listened intently as author and illustrator team Peter Maloney and Felicia Zekauskas spoke of perseverance and shared their disappointments and triumphs. She beamed when they told her they would "see her in print one day." Sarah left with a goal: to get a book published. She's been filling up journals ever since.

It's that kind of interaction with young writers that keeps Susan O'Keefe, author of *One Hungry Monster* and *Hungry Monster ABC* (Little, Brown, 1997 & 2007; illustrated by Lynn Munsinger) going back. "I go solely because it's for kid writers. We older writers have to encourage them because, with our miles of rejection slips, we know that few other people will, especially in the beginning. I've known of way too many wonderful writers, adults, who gave up too soon precisely of discouragement, with no one encouraging them at the same time. They equate a lousy piece with their being a lousy writer and just give up."

Co-chair of the event, Yvonne Tang says, "Being able to meet so many talented individuals gives kids a sense that they can *really* become an author and/or illustrator." Having been involved in the association for three years, this was the first year Tang attended the event. "I'd heard so many wonderful things about this conference from teachers, parents and students, I had to get involved! The next thing I knew, I'd become co-chair alongside Christine Teichmann."

Sarah wasn't the only one who left inspired and determined in 2004. As I listened to authors and illustrators discuss their paths to publication, their messages hit



Clockwise from top left: After seeing this roped-off area in 2004, I became determined to cross it. Four years later, I did!; NJ SCBWI Member, Natalie Zaman attended with her son, Vincent; Co-chairs Christine Teichmann (left) and Yvonne Tang (right).

home with me as well: never give up. I left vowing I'd return one day as a published author. Who knew that only a few years later, I'd be one of nineteen authors or illustrators offering my own words of encouragement to the budding authors? It truly was a thrill and honor to receive an invite!

I savored every moment as I sat in an overflowing room surrounded by young writers and illustrators. What they probably didn't know was that their enthusiasm, talent, and dedication at such a young age inspired me! Their conviction/determination convinces me that their books will line the store shelves one day. I wouldn't be surprised if Ms. Tang and Ms. Teichmann have already reserved chairs for them at the 2025 Young Author's Conference.

About Lisa Mullarkey:

Lisa Mullarkey is the author of *Splashing by the Shore* (Gibbs Smith, 2007.) Her chapter book series, *Katharine the Almost Great*, will be published by Magic Wagon in 2009. Visit her website at www.lisamullarkey.com.