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Grafton librarian’s dachshund quartet inspires her new book for young readers

Children’s author and Grafton librarian Barbara Behm often tells colleagues about the antics of her four long-haired dachshunds — Longfellow, Rodney, Jack and Tommy.

“I joke around about the funny things the dogs do all the time,” Behm said. “I mentioned one time that we were watching the news. It was about the president’s cabinet, and I joked about them going to Washington to check out his cabinet.

“Someone said, ‘You should write a story about that.’”

Author Barbara Behm with her dachshunds (from left) Jack, Longfellow, Rodney (black and tan) and Tommy. Photo by Sam Arendt

She did. “Mr. Lincoln Goes to Washington,” a children’s picture book illustrated by Ellen Anderson of Milwaukee, was recently released.

Behm, who lives in Mequon with her four-legged friends, will sign copies of the book at the Grafton library on Saturday, Jan. 28.

Her real dogs won’t be with her, but she will have stuffed dachshunds.

Proceeds from books sold during the signing will go to the Grafton library.

In Behm’s book, four dachshunds, who bear a remarkable resemblance to her dogs, are watching TV and get excited when they hear that President Barack Obama is filling his cabinet.

Since their owner keeps dog biscuits in her cabinet, the news triggers their hunger. They race into the kitchen, climb atop each other to reach the cabinet but discover it is bare.

The dogs tumble down into a heap, then hatch a plan. The President must have tons of biscuits — “the entire nation’s supply” — so they decide to go to Washington, D.C.

The other three dogs decide to stay home, but Mr. Lincoln opts to go by himself because “I am so brave and strong that I was named after President Abraham Lincoln.”

The dog sneaks onto a train, where he sits with a group of retired Pullman porters who are on their way to the inauguration and tell fascinating stories.

Behm adds a historical note.

“In the olden days when people traveled mainly by train, many African-American men worked as porters on trains, putting in long hours for little pay. The first Pullman porters were former slaves, but they went on to form America’s first black labor union in 1925.”

Does Mr. Lincoln find dog biscuits in the president’s cabinet? What happens when he reaches the nation’s capitol?

The answers and the real purpose of the president’s cabinet can be found in Behm’s book, which received an honorable mention in the 2011 Writer’s Digest Awards program.

Behm published the book through Xlibris, using the knowledge she gained from working 16 years as a writer and editor for Raintree Publishing and Gareth Stevens Publishing in Milwaukee.

While at Gareth Stevens, Behm wrote educational books, including “The Story of Medicine;” “Lost Forever: Extinct Animals” and “In Peril: Endangered Animals,” both four-volume sets with

introductions by Jane Goodall; “Eco-Journey,” six volumes; and “The Science of Color” and “Animal Opposites, both four volumes.

She also wrote “Raintree Children’s Encyclopedia” and “Apple Patch: A Picnic Adventure” for Pinafore Pockets.

The book she is most proud of is “Tears of Joy,” also illustrated by Anderson and self-published.

The book tells the story of Carly, a little girl filled with joy who loves to sing and play with her stuffed animals until there is a change in her behavior.

“But one day, Carly suddenly was silent and sad. She did not want to play with her toys or read her books. She placed all her stuffed animals around the edges of her bed so they would protect her from all the world and keep all the world AWAY. “Carly cried and cried into the fur of all her animal friends — the only friends she thought she truly had. They were all very concerned.”

The girl refuses to tell anyone — not her mother, teacher or her best friend — why she is so sad until a school counselor, using her own large collection of stuffed animals, learns the secret.

“In my whole life, this is what I’m most proud of doing,” Behm said. “It’s not a sad story. It’s a happy story of how this young girl comes to terms with it and finally tells someone who can stop it.

“I’m hoping it changes the way our society responds. Sexual abuse of children is one of the last great taboos of our society, and it must stop. More of that goes on than we like to think about, unfortunately.”

Behm wrote the book after learning two of her friends, who she met as adults, had been sexually abused as children.

“We would get so far and all of a sudden they would close down,” Behm said. “That’s what was at the root of their depression. It’s time to empower the kids.”

Behm donates half the profits from the book to the education of children about childhood sexual abuse.

Childhelp, a national organization to prevent and treat child abuse, ordered hundreds of the book, and the book is in many school and public libraries.

The last three pages provide advice and facts to help adults recognize the signs of abuse, then intervene and empower children.

After writing “Tears of Joy,” Behm wanted to write a simple, fun story for children. Since her dogs make her laugh, she figured their antics and curiosity could do the same for children and adults with a little help from her imagination.

“I don’t know what goes on when I’m not home,” she said when asked if her dogs’ antics are similar to those in the book.

Behm got her first dachshund when she was 7.

“My whole world went from black-and-white to Technicolor. I was so happy to have a dog,” she said.

She’s had 13 dachshunds — smooth-haired ones at first, now shaggy, long-haired ones. About half have been rescue dogs and the others came from breeders.

Her dog Rodney, who was rescued, is the most like Mr. Lincoln, Behm said.

“Rodney is so grateful to have a good home. He does everything to please. I think he knows he got a second chance,” she said.

Her oldest dog, Longfellow, is a bit like Longfellow in the book. He is fairly calm, especially when compared to her two youngest ones, Tommy and Jack, another rescue dog.

“They’re filled with energy. They jump like they’ve swallowed Mexican jumping beans and everything is wiggling,” Behm said.

Her dogs provide enough inspiration that she is working on a sequel — “Mr. Lincoln Goes to Hollywood.”

“Penguins and wiener dogs were put on earth to make people laugh,” Behm said.

Behm will sign copies of “Mr. Lincoln Goes to Washington” from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 28, at the library, 1620 11th Ave.

The book is available at Next Chapter Bookshop in Mequon or online at www.mrlincolngoestowashington.com, www.amazon.com and www.barnesandnoble.com. It is also available through local libraries.