

## Story Time Project



*Stories can serve as a platform for patients to discuss issues that affect them in a way they would otherwise be hesitant to reveal directly.*



■ Dana M. Kaplan (top photo) and Mariecel Pilapil

*This month's John E. Schowalter Resident Member Column comes to us from two medical students who have used their participation in the Klingenstein Third Generation Mentorship Program to start a reading program for psychiatrically hospitalized children. Dana Kaplan is a fourth year medical student who grew up in New City, NY. She attended Brandeis University as an undergraduate where she majored in Sociology and minored in Women's Studies and Spanish Language and Literature. She currently attends Mount Sinai School of Medicine. Mariecel Pilapil grew up in Jackson Heights, NY, and majored in Biology at Harvard. She is currently a third-year medical student at Mount Sinai School of Medicine.*

**Anne Frederickson, M.D.,** John Schowalter Resident Representative to AACAP Council

"The sun did not shine, it was too wet to play," were the first words I can remember reading as a child. Of course this was probably because my parents read *The Cat in the Hat* to me about a billion times and after a while those 11 words would stick in my head. They were the key that would unlock a period of excitement in my day. Each time that

story was read, the repetition brought about better understanding of what that crazy cat was doing. Over time I could tell parts of the story, I knew what was coming; I could fill in the sentences for my parents. Reading became story-telling, storytelling became a group sport. We laughed, as I would improvise endings that I presumed more suitable than Dr. Seuss' (Theodor Seuss Geisel).

Dr. Seuss' books are childhood memories and evoke certain feelings, like a song or a smell, because of the situations they bring to my mind. When Dr. Seuss died in September of 1991, I remember feeling as if I had lost someone close to me. My fifth grade class even had a remembrance party for him, complete with a green cake baked by my mother!

During my third year of medical school, I rotated onto the child psychiatry inpatient unit; a 15-bed unit that serves children aged 5 to 12 years old with a wide range of psychopathologies. I learned that these children are often shuttled between foster homes, with little of the consistency and nurturance that is imperative for the growth of healthy children. During this rotation, I developed a relationship with a 7-year-old girl, who was desperate for someone to spend time with her. One day I asked

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*Mentors and medical students that run the Story Time Project at Mount Sinai Medical School. From L to R: Dr. Alexander Kolevzon, Oliver Chow, Mariecel Pilapil, Lydia Miller, Jay Pendse, Scott Dale, Heather Feenstra, Dr. Andrew Pearson, Juila Fritz, Miri Rosen.*

her to read me something off a wall; she could only do so with great difficulty. So, I attempted to find a book to help her work on her reading. There was a paucity of reading material on the floors, but I finally found something. I could see her become frustrated and in the end she simply asked me if I could read to her.

I realized at that moment how rarely an adult read a story to children on this floor. I wanted to find a copy of *The Cat in the Hat* to read to her. But then I started thinking about *The Cat in the Hat*...do these kids get to stay home by themselves without any parents? The kids are just helpless observers of the cat taking over. Their lives are chaotic on that rainy day. I began to think about the chaotic lives of the children with whom I was working. Few had developed a sense of trust in the world or feelings of stability. Was there any way to help these children feel a small sense of security?

Story Time was a project created as a joint effort between medical students and residents in the combined program of general psychiatry, child and adolescent psychiatry, and pediatrics at Mount Sinai School of Medicine. It is an attempt to improve care for hospitalized children with limited family support.

Borrowing from the tenets of Reach-Out-and-Read, a national pediatrics initiative that attempts to bolster literacy and cultivate a love of books in kids, Story Time is a designated hour during evening visiting time on the child psychiatry inpatient unit, where child and adolescent psychiatry residents and medical students interested in working with children, read stories to a small group of patients who would not otherwise have visitors. Story Time occurs weekly during evening visiting hours, a stressful time of day when many patients become angry and sad because they do not receive visits from family members. Reading to children who are distressed is therapeutic and provides a soothing activity before bedtime. Furthermore, stories can serve as a platform for patients to discuss issues that affect them in a way they would otherwise be hesitant to reveal directly.

The Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Mount Sinai developed the Beatrix Hamburg Medical Student Training Fellowship sponsored by the Klingenstein Third Generation Foundation in 2005. This mentorship program has been extremely successful and Story Time seeks to build on that success with a program that also provides a therapeutic activity for the chil-

dren we serve. Ten residents and approximately ten medical students participate in Story Time, with two residents and one medical student at most leading the program during any given week. Story Time pairs medical students and junior psychiatry residents with more senior residents, allowing junior members to benefit from the senior's experience and fostering the senior's teaching and mentorship skills. Story Time is also an important opportunity for senior residents to assume a mentorship role that helps prepare them for the transition to faculty appointments in academic settings, where they can continue to attract medical students to the field.

Medical student volunteers participate in an introductory session, run by child and adolescent psychiatry faculty mentors, to orient them to the inpatient unit. Each Tuesday an announcement is made during the unit's morning report and community meeting that some doctors and medical students will be coming to the floor in the evening to read to kids who do not have visitors. In the evening when the children gather, everyone sits on the floor in a circle while two to three age-appropriate stories are read. The children are encouraged to participate and ask questions throughout. At the end of each story, questions are presented for the children to consider and discuss. At the end of each Story Time, the medical students have an opportunity to process the experience with the resident mentors. Monthly meetings with child and adolescent psychiatry faculty and residents enable the participants to discuss their experiences, suggest ways of improving the program, and share stories that lead to fruitful sessions.

At the end of *The Cat in the Hat*, the Cat redeems himself by restoring the children's home back to normal. The mother returns, the cat leaves, and all is remedied. Although Story Time will not restore order to the lives of these children, hopefully it will create a tiny sense of consistency and nurturance that will be paired with fond memories of reading. ■

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