

THE TWO RIVER TIMES™

SCENE



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Abby Daly:

Bridging a Gap

Abby Daly knows the power of books.

Daly has been ensuring that thousands of New Jersey children get books of their very own through her Bridge of Books Foundation. She has seen during the past 11 years how the gift of a book is often met with joy and, sometimes, the unlocking of possibilities for a child who might otherwise not get the chance to own books.

"We want all children to have books to call their own," she said.

Books "are the cornerstone. They are absolutely the cornerstone to growth, to education, to life experiences. You have to have access to the written word in order to read. The more access you have, the better reader you will become ... Reading is critical to how we function."

Daly, the all-volunteer organization's executive director, said, "It still amazes me that there are still children in New Jersey who have fewer than 10 books in their homes."

It's a situation she is working to rectify.

"By the time school gets out, we will have donated 425,000 books" to underprivileged and at-risk children.

The organization has donated books to children from toddlers to high-schoolers across New Jersey. It has donated to child-care agencies and prisons, where visiting children can get comfort from getting a book or having their imprisoned parent read to them.

Bridge of Books Foundation recently committed to sending 3,500 books to Asbury Park schools to get the summer reading program under way and sent 2,200 books to the delight of students at James Monroe Elementary in Edison, a school that was destroyed by fire in March.

Daly has taken bags and bags of books to various community events in New Jersey's inner cities. She has watched as children circle the table. When she tells them the books are free and they can take as many as they want, "all it takes is one kid to start and literally, I have seen kids walk away with bags of books. People say kids don't want to read. It's not that they don't want to read ... they don't have access to books."

Daly says that, while much discussion takes place about testing and the need to improve students' literacy scores, "nobody ever talks about access to books as being part of the solution ... The research is abundant, kids who have access to books over the summer are so much less likely to lose academic gains than kids who don't ... It's beyond critical."

Daly, who is the mother of two, Ellen and Lang, laughs when she talks about her own childhood and reading. Initially, she was not a reader.

"I think my mother thought I was never going to read." Then, during the summer she was about 13, she got the reading bug. "I was in the old Fair Haven bookstore and they had a used book section and I discovered Mary Stewart gothic romances. I bought every one that I could. I remember riding my bike over there and my mother, I think she was mortified, ... but she really didn't care what I was reading, as long as I was reading."

Daly, a 45-year-old Locust resident, lives in the house, built in 1908, in which she grew up. "It's wonderful. There's such a sense of continuity. My daughter is now in the bedroom that I was in growing up ... It's neat to see them grow up where I grew up. We play hide-and-seek and I knew all the best places to hide; now they are learning those places," she said. "It's a nice feeling and sense of family and roots."

Daly, who attended Rumson Country Day School, then boarding school in Connecticut to take part in its equestrian program, went on to graduate from Smith College. "The experience of being in a women's college gives you a

sense of confidence and independence and to go after what you want," she said.

After college, with the urging and assistance of her mother, she got an internship with the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office. It was there that the idea of going to law school was firmly set in her mind. After a year as a paralegal, working in Newark, she went to Dickinson School of Law.

After law school, she clerked for a judge in Monmouth County and began sending out resumes and applications. One response came from a division of the state public defender's office that assists the mentally ill. Daly was hired by that office to represent children and adults who had been committed to psychiatric hospitals.

While it was a job that was wrenching "on some levels," Daly "really took to it." Initially, she found it difficult, particularly after working hard to get a client released from the hospital only to find them a short time later back in the same facility. "But, by being around them, getting to know what they were experiencing and seeing what they were experiencing, I sort of came to the philosophy that, if I could get someone into the community and they could enjoy themselves or live as part of the community for however long, that was a good thing. If they came back again, then maybe they needed to be there," she said.

She did find that working with children who were involuntarily committed to psychiatric facilities was "harder. I think there were a lot of issues with maybe a rush to involuntarily commit children because there wasn't necessarily a place for them to be, to misdiagnose them, to mislabel them, to not look for family resources. I spent a lot of time fighting on behalf of children," she said.

It was a post she "really loved it ... I just felt like I had this education and I was using it to impact people's lives.

"My role was not to decide what was best for them. My role was to advocate for them," she said. "I think it taught me a lot as a lawyer about advocating. Personally, I grew in terms of looking at situations and putting all the pieces together and deciding a course of action."

After five years representing people in psychiatric institutions, she went on to become a state deputy attorney general, representing the state Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS).

"It was a chance at broader experiences for me," Daly said. The job gave her more courtroom and trial experience. She handled abuse and neglect and termination of parental rights cases while working in Middletown, Edison, Ocean and Camden.

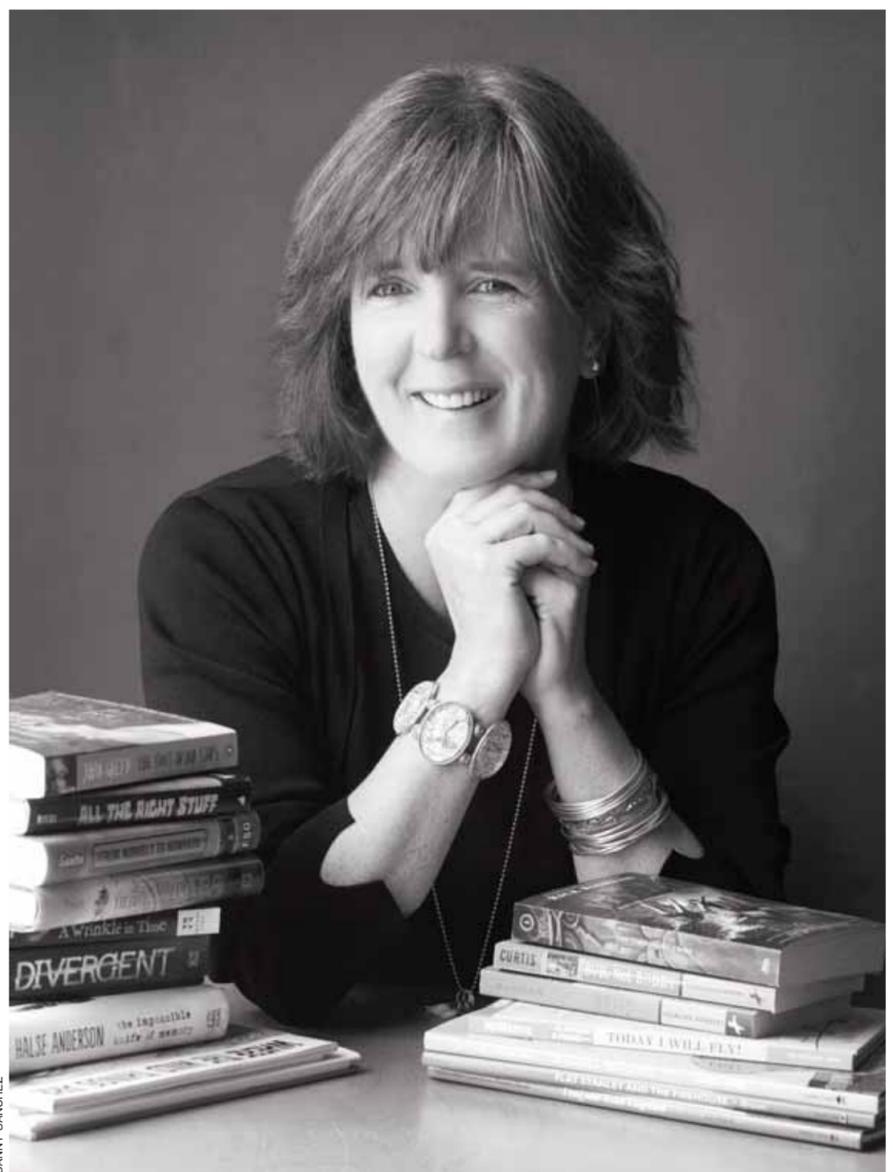
"It was very sad but ... people need to be there to make sure that children are protected, parents are protected and that the agency can try to do what it's there to do," she said.

Daly spent five years as a deputy attorney general during which time she married her husband Francis. Eventually she got pregnant with daughter, Ellen, and left her job in 2001.

"I was really, really lucky because I was in the position to be able to stay home with my daughter... but I wanted something to do that was flexible."

She found that "something" through a friend she had made while working in the public defender's office. The friend, Ellen McNamara, worked nearby in the state Office of Law Guardian. Daly and McNamara talked a lot about ideas to help the kids involved with DYFS. McNamara's niece, Tricia McCarthy, had started the Bridge of Books Foundation in California in 2000 and in 2002, she suggested Daly start a New Jersey chapter of the nonprofit.

The following year, the foundation made its first donation to the Red Bank DYFS office.



Bookcases, designed with a bridge motif, were given to the agency and filled with books. Bookcases and books were then donated to three other DYFS offices "and we were off and running," Daly said.

Red Bank Self Storage was an early contributor and still gives the organizations two large storage units. The effort has grown so much that Bridge of Books now rents two smaller units for overflow.

Daly clearly loves what she does and is proud to be able to get books into the hands of children who need them.

"It's amazing," she said. "It's so gratifying to get thank you letters from the agencies that receive the books that say how much they mean to the kids ... But, then I think of the reality of it. I sent 3,000 books to a teacher in Paterson. She had six schools with 500 kids each, that's only two books per kid...I think about the number of books out there that are waiting to come through us to go to kids who need them."

Daly sees the challenge to dispense even more books as part of the new direction the organization is taking.

"To get one book to one child is pretty straight forward. When you talk about getting 1,000 books to sixth-graders and 2,000 books to K-4 students, that's a lot more time intensive, labor intensive...and, even though we are all volunteers, it costs something."

Therefore, Bridge of Books Foundation is now at the point where it needs a permanent home and staff, not just storage units and volunteers. "As an organization, we have reached a point where we need to ... become something more. For all the need we have met,

there is still so much need out there," she said.

The organization has just gone through a strategic review "to envision taking Bridge of Books to the next level." It now has a critical need for funds to operate and office and warehouse space in the Red Bank area. She is also hoping to strengthen and add to its corporate sponsorships.

"We are looking to become something more than being run out of a home. If you look at what we've done as an all-volunteer organization ... we have a pretty darn amazing track record," she said. "Think of what we could do, if we had a real space, a real office..."

"Our success and the success that we've had so far is really a measure of the community support," she said.

"I'm pretty proud of what we've been able to leverage. People drive for hours to pick up books from us and bring us books... People believe in what we're doing and we want to get that story out there," she said.

"It's all about building bridges in the community."

Daly's aim is to have all children know the excitement of owning their first book - and then many more.

So far, she's at 425,000 books and counting.

For additional information about Bridge of Books or to make a donation, visit www.bridgeofbooksfoundation.org, email to info@bridgeofbooksfoundation.org or send checks to Bridge of Books, P.O. Box 39, Rumson, NJ 07760.

By Michele J. Kuhn