



What's the Good Word?

A series of occasional discussions with citizens of Lilly the Lash's universe

In this *What's the Good Word?* discussion, we talk with Principal Charles Renzelmann of Wilson Elementary School in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Author Julie Woik provided an Author Visit at the school, where *The Life and Times of Lilly the Lash*® children's book series and supporting learning materials are used for reading comprehension, fluency and values education. As fans of the Lilly the Lash books, the staff and students of Wilson Elementary welcomed Julie to their school and enjoyed learning more in person about the creative process behind the books.

As principal of Wilson Elementary, Charles Renzelmann has the responsibility of setting the overall mission and purpose of the education that the teachers carry out in their classrooms. For Charles, being an educator is a continuation of a family legacy. He started out as a teacher "because my father was a teacher for 38 years, and my older sister is a teacher. I originally played high school basketball, and the younger kids in the community admired the basketball players. When I saw the impact and influence I had over the kids, it pushed me to become an educator."

Charles misses being in the classroom to some extent, "because as a teacher you deal with all your kids and all your families directly. But as an administrator, now I deal with all the kids and all the families, and the staff as well. There's a real sense of having an impact on the community." Sheboygan is a place Principal Renzelmann knows very well; except for university and a period when he taught middle school in Illinois, he has been there much of his life and is now raising his family there as well.

In his view, one of the biggest challenges facing schools today "is the variance in students' ability levels. In a given second-grade classroom, you could have one student reading at a fourth-grade level, and others just learning to read. With 22 kids per class, it's hard to meet the needs of all the students." He continues, "It's definitely challenging when there's such a difference in what they know, and what they need to know."

For Wilson Elementary, going back to basics is one key to addressing this challenge. “We teach math, we teach reading and we also teach social skills,” Charles says. “We are teaching how to be good citizens in the broad sense.”

The lessons contained in the Lilly the Lash book series fit well with the Wilson Elementary approach to overall education. “One of my friends, who is a P.E. teacher, likes to say ‘You’re not fully educated until you’re physically educated,’ meaning education of the whole person,” he says. “We are teaching about how to be a good person more than we have in the past and the Lilly the Lash books help teach that because they include a lesson.

“Any good books can be used for fluency and reading comprehension. But once the students comprehend, we can use the Lilly the Lash books to learn about helping others. These books have an important social aspect that the kids can relate to, about being kind and giving back to others.”

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Giving back to others is an important part of the mission of Wilson Elementary, and the Lilly the Lash books support those values, too. A key motto at the school is “Four is GREATER than two,” which is a play on words that doing something “for” others is the most important thing. “We demonstrate that to the students in various ways,” Charles explains, “like when we acknowledged a local businessman who makes a huge contribution to the community. He provides an annual picnic and makes generous donations to the school and to the children’s hospital here. He’s a special friend of Wilson, and we engraved his name on a plaque as a reminder to everyone that you can make a difference.”



In addition to reinforcing the values of giving and sharing, teachers at Wilson Elementary use Lilly the Lash books to help modify student behavior. “Our overall goal is to get kids to grade level,” Charles says. “If they have bad behavior, we try to help them by explaining that their behavior is hindering their education, and we reteach. We use books like Lilly the Lash to reinforce the good behaviors that we expect in our school.”

The Author Visit by Julie Woik brings to life another aspect of overall education that is a priority for Principal Renzelmann and Wilson Elementary. Julie’s presentation explores different ways children can express their creativity – for example, by keeping a journal. “Julie’s presentation was awesome. She discusses how to write down your thoughts,” Charles comments. “When a child is exposed to the idea of writing a journal, we can relate that later to Julie’s books. Even if the students haven’t created a story, it helps them to understand the power of words. We talk about that with kids all the time – how words can be hurtful, but words can bring somebody up as well. These books give us a way of making that real and relatable for the students.”

Note: Secretary Jennifer Cardarelle thought it was noteworthy to convey that it was difficult to get a picture of Principal Renzelmann with even one of the Lilly the Lash books, as they’re always checked out of the library. Lanae Lallensack, the Library Media Center Educational Assistant, only allows one request for any of Lilly’s books at one time, “otherwise”, she explained, “I would have subsequent requests at all times!”