



## **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 Cathy "Cat" Lang, a professional educator who has been a long-time fan and advocate of The Life and Times of Lilly the Lash® in and out of the classroom. Throughout her teaching career, she has focused on instilling an enthusiasm for learning, primarily among underprivileged student populations.

Like a lot of college graduates, Ms. Lang had a degree in English and was left wondering, "What am I going to do with that?" Reflecting on what she enjoyed the most, literature and working with kids, she began teaching high school English at Cheyenne High School in Las Vegas, NV, where she taught 11th and 12th graders for eight years.

She later moved to the Southeast U.S. and pursued an opportunity with *YMCA Reads!* in Sarasota, FL. *YMCA Reads!* is dedicated to helping students reach grade level in reading and focuses on children who are in the greatest danger of not matriculating. The Florida program was touted as the best new statewide program by the YMCA. Most recently, Ms. Lang began the current school year at Latin College Prep as a 7th-grade teacher.

One of the key features of Ms. Lang's approach is a custom-tailored curriculum. Even though her class sizes may be large, she wants to ensure that the teaching style matches the way each student learns best. "I don't just jump in and do curriculum in the first few weeks of school," she says. "We do learning style surveys to determine, How do they learn best? That determines how I teach." This approach is both

functional and symbolic for the students, she says, because “it shows that I care about them as individuals, and as a group. It’s not my classroom, it’s ours.”

In her experience, every child can be encouraged to embrace learning. “I’m usually in inner-city schools, and the kids I work with typically need self-esteem more than anything,” Cat noted. “Whatever I can do, it’s all about self-esteem, and to know that they have an adult in their life that cares about them.”

While her curriculum may be substance and standards oriented, her overall mission is to help the students understand why they are going to school, which she finds is something that her students do not always grasp immediately. “The kids don’t value education for the sake of being educated,” she said. “They wonder, What do we have to do this for?” To help students answer that question, Ms. Lang believes that respect in the classroom is key.

With kids now, [teachers] don’t get respect automatically. You have to earn it. It’s a great challenge but also a great reward when you earn that.” The key for her to earn that respect is to be relatable and treat the students as other individuals on the same playing field. “I do a trust activity at the beginning of the year that has never failed me,” she explains, “I fall backward off a table, and let the kids catch me. I might be a teacher but that doesn’t mean I’m not human. It’s all about taking the time to be vulnerable with them. I don’t want them to respect me out of fear, but out of admiration.”

Once she has earned the respect of her students, Ms. Lang can help them see the bigger picture. “I help them pursue learning on their own by giving them assignments,” she notes. “For the high schoolers, it may be, Have you looked into colleges yet? Which ones do you like best? Do you know about the FAFSA form? I ask them to volunteer in programs like *YMCA Reads!*,” she explains. “As a teacher, you have to go above and beyond to get them to value themselves and value being educated and that there is life beyond school. I want them to understand, If I don’t have a plan, I’m going to fall through the cracks.”

With her focus on self-esteem and literacy, Ms. Lang was naturally drawn to the Lilly the Lash series of books in her work. “I met Julie [Woik] one evening and she introduced me to the Lilly books,” she recalls. “In fact, the first book [The Garden Gathering] is all about self-esteem. I just loved it. I loved it so much I became teary while talking to Julie about the book. Now years later, I always think of Lilly the Lash when I have to come up with a curriculum and something creative.”

As other educators I’ve worked with have found, the Lilly the Lash books provide a great way to share the benefits of reading, and the accompanying materials help with not only understanding but also behavior modification and control in the classroom. “I love the sunflower, because it shows how different she is, but that’s what makes her beautiful. And by coincidence, there was a sunflower garden at the school where I first ever used the book,” Ms. Lang says.

“I love the universal themes of the books,” she continues. “With any of the books, we talk about the characters, they choose their favorite characters, and explain which they like best, which ones they are most like. The kids love them and the parents love them, too,” she said. “These books get them to prepare for studying literature because they can understand the theme. The illustrations are really amazing and stand out. And the [Lilly’s Garden of Growth] board game is very effective to control behavior in the classroom — the reward system really works. It’s something that I’ve introduced to other teachers and they have used themselves. It worked out beautifully.”