

'Forgotten Toboggan' brings traditional Christmas back for kids, parents

By Jessica Garcia
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Some local teachers are happy about one early Christmas gift this year: less screen time and more reading for their students.

Former educator Karen Votraw-Gysen of Gardnerville is pushing for quality family gathering this year among parents, children and educators as partners. She's using her new holiday book "Toby, the Almost Forgotten Toboggan" to inspire kids to remember what it's like to play in the snow and spend time with loved ones.

"Toby," published in July by AuthorHouse, is about incorporating the traditional values of Christmas into a modern family's routine to help kids appreciate what makes the holidays special. They also cast aside technology-oriented pastimes for more personal connections.

The children in the book, Jimmy and Julie, are named after Votraw-Gysen's own stepgrandchildren.

"About nine years ago, I ended up as a stepgrandma when my first husband's wife passed away and I became (their kids') granny, and they helped me fill in this book," she said of the start of the concept. "When I got involved with the children and seeing their preoccupation, being focused on iPads and TV and phones and DVDs at Christmases, they were more glued to that."

Votraw-Gysen has spent 40 years in education,



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First grade teacher Michele Cacioppo, principal Lisa Hutchison, first grade teacher Kelly Laaker, first grade teacher Dawn Hutson, author Karen Votraw-Gysen and first grade teacher Christy McComber pose with Votraw-Gysen's new book "Toby, the Almost Forgotten Toboggan" on Nov. 5 in Bordewich-Bray Elementary School in Carson City. Votraw-Gysen has distributed copies of her new book to teachers in Douglas County and Carson City school districts.

including teaching high school English and Spanish. She worked in upstate New York before coming to Nevada where she joined the Washoe County School District. She also has experience in counseling from the preschool to university levels, having assisted in play therapy and helped children who are severely emotionally disturbed. She has worked with children who have been molested and said she called Child Protective Services in some instances. Votraw-Gysen is a National Board Certified counselor and has volunteered in local fundraisers and children's programs.

Excited to be able to write the book but needing to bring it to life, she needed an illustrator to

visualize Toby the toboggan, Jimmy, Julie and Granny and Grandpa in the story. Votraw-Gysen recruited the help of Chris Bond Sullivan, another Carson Valley resident, through a friend of a friend. Sullivan attended college in California before transferring to art school in Pasadena in 1977 with the goal of becoming an illustrator and acquired the skills to do so. She married in 1980 and raised a family of five children. They are now fully grown, ranging from 23 to 39 years old, and this life experience has proven very helpful now, she says.

"I gained a lot of experience in real life and understanding in what makes kids tick," Sullivan said.

The entire writing and illustration process created

a positive professional experience between the two women who agree resulted in a fun, lively product that already has captured the attention of mothers and teachers. It also helped, Votraw-Gysen admits, to have had the help of Sullivan, a mother herself.

"My children are all raised on books, and I believe if you can read, you can learn anything," Sullivan said. "My kids use technology and they are researchers and have a love of good books. ... It's been a privilege to work with Karen."

Votraw-Gysen said molding the story into a picture chapter book might be the best fit to adapt it to an older age group, saying it's not meant for preschoolers and barely might be appropriate for first graders. However, she has had some teenagers who have responded well to it.

She integrated the limitations the children often experienced being confined to the indoors into "Toby," she said. She also sought to understand the attraction to their tech toys and relating to their more contemporary ideas to bring the book to life.

"I was used to more traditional Christmas activities more in terms of a contemporary theme and bringing the old and new together, with the kids being raised in a very technological world," Votraw-Gysen said.

She's helped create other professionals, including an anesthesiologist and barber,

FIND THE BOOK

Gardnerville: Circle S Western Market, East Fork Gallery, and Lone Tree Framing

Minden: Heartstrings, and Shelby's Books

Carson City: Purple Avocado and Children's Museum of Northern Nevada

Genoa: Dancing Deer

Virginia City: Virginia City Vault, Things-Things-Things, CC's Closet, Cobb Mansion, and "B" Street B & B

Reno: Barnes & Noble

Amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com

create their own publications oriented for youth. In summer 2019, when Votraw-Gysen asked her to assist and she explained the general concept, Sullivan was intrigued.

"My children are all raised on books, so I'm a believer that if you can read, you can learn anything," Sullivan said. "My kids use technology, they are researchers, they have a love of good books, and starting with picture books, it's a great tool for them."

Votraw-Gysen has spent time in recent weeks since the book has been published distributing copies to the local school districts, where teachers have been excited to get new materials to share with their younger students. She has spent time getting it out to Douglas County and Carson City School District teachers, many of whom are always looking to use and share new literature in their classrooms or assign at home.

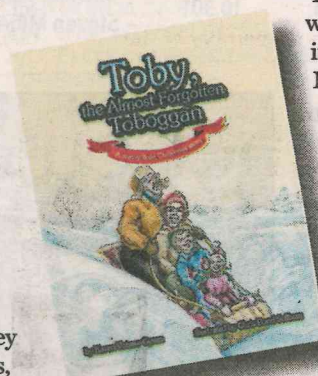
On Nov. 5, a few first-grade teachers at Carson City School District's Bordewich-Bray Elementary School were excited about the possibilities of using

"Toby" to help with their reading. Christy McComber shared she was excited to use it to introduce onomatopoeia and alliteration as her students learn how to write

paragraphs and read aloud in the classroom or to their family at home.

"Thank you for your generosity and for supporting the students during this difficult time," Dawn Hutson, another Bordewich-Bray teacher told Votraw-Gysen for her copy.

Copies of "Toby" also have been delivered to Storey County School District, and Votraw-Gysen said continues meeting with other local groups such as the Children's Museum of Northern Nevada to market her book.



There are plenty of things to

spread

this holiday season.

Don't let COVID-19 be one of them.

This holiday season, be kind, be merry, but most of all be safe.

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