



Most parents experience some apprehension when sending their children off to school for the first time. As mom or dad cannot accompany their child to school each day, the story describes a surrogate parent in the guise of Yellow Bear, who attends the first day of kindergarten with Mika. The warm and friendly people Mika meets, along with the fun and happy experiences she encounters throughout the day reassure Yellow Bear that Catholic school is indeed a safe, happy and productive place for Mika to be every day.

The writing of the story began in earnest in the fall of 2006. Several drafts were presented to the Coalition during the following months. In the spring of 2007, the committee was faced with the decision of how the story should be published and how it should be illustrated. The first drafts of the story were presented to the committee in a PowerPoint presentation, illustrated with some posed photos of one of the author's grandchildren and pictures garnered from the internet. These gave the story some body and helped to describe the setting; however, the committee agreed that they lacked personality and failed to enhance the purpose of the story.

By **Carol Bryden**, Trustee, St. Clair CDSB

Like most of the smaller rural boards in Ontario, the St. Clair Catholic District School board began to experience declining enrolment in the late 1990s. The Catholic Coalition Committee of the board wanted to be sure that all eligible parents were aware of the distinct characteristics, which we believe make our schools an excellent choice for their children. We believe that parents enrolling children in kindergarten want strong schools that:

- are committed to academic excellence;
- provide a safe and nurturing environment for their children;
- provide meaningful faith experiences;
- frame student activities in Gospel values;
- reflect a strong commitment to family values; and
- teach students social responsibility.

To make parents aware of these qualities of Catholic schools, the committee prepared brochures, which were distributed through local real estate agents, the Welcome Wagon organization and the parishes. A *Welcome to School* kit was also developed, which is distributed to families at kindergarten registration. This canvas-bag kit contains general information for parents about the board and local school as well as some activity pages for their children. It also contains a storybook with a Christian message. In the past, the book *Does God Know How to Tie Shoes?* was included in the kit. Although it is an excellent book, which is based on the Psalms, it did not impart a uniquely Catholic message. Three years ago, the committee decided that we at St. Clair Catholic would try to write our own book, with a message that was more reflective of the environment within a Catholic school. Two members of the committee, Carol Bryden and Dianne Lloyd, accepted the challenge. Under the guidance of Todd Lozon, communications supervisor, the book became a children's story, highlighting the essence of life at a Catholic school.

The writers contacted Maracle Press to discuss publication. Maracle was a partner in the publication of the Catholic student planners used by the board and had published the book previously distributed at kindergarten registration. Through these discussions, it was decided to find an experienced illustrator for the story. Several artists were approached for samples of work. They were given a general overview of the purpose of the book and a portion of the text. Each submitted a sample illustration for consideration.

One of the artists who submitted a proposal was Jeremy Bruneel, a commercial artist and a graduate of one of the board's high schools, Ursuline College Chatham. Jeremy's work had been featured in a number of high profile publications including *Saturday Night*, *The National Post* and *The Globe and Mail*. His style was unique and engaging and the committee granted him the contract. Jeremy became a vital member of the team. A number of concept meetings were held to discuss the story and setting, and a final storyboard was produced. Jeremy spent many days visiting schools and classrooms to research the settings of the story. His illustrations brought the unique perspective of a Catholic school to life and gave both Mika and Yellow Bear their individuality and appealing personalities. Because of the detail integrated in each illustration, the authors were able to streamline the text, relying on Jeremy's designs to capture the nurturing atmosphere of life in a Catholic school.

After several meetings with Maracle Press, a sample copy was published in the spring of 2008. The authors and illustrator found the experience truly rewarding, reinforcing their commitment to Catholic education and reaffirming their beliefs that Catholic schools offer parents an academically challenging and caring environment for their children.

Carol Bryden is a former CPCO member. To order a copy of *Yellow Bear Goes to Catholic School*, contact Sherry Dodson at Maracle Press, 905-723-3438 Ext. 228.