



Japhet School Students Collaborate to Co-Write and Illustrate Original Book on the Challenge of a Distant Friendship

CLAWSON, Mich., June 15, 2020 - Students in preschool through eighth grade at Japhet School, an award-winning independent school, collaborated with one another to write an original book titled [Across the Distance](#) this spring via distance learning. With support from their teachers, each class from pre-k through eighth grade contributed character development ideas, adventures, and the underlying story line. After writing, they submitted hand-drawn illustrations telling the story in pictures.

Students showed wisdom while writing this story, weaving in the character traits they learn at Japhet School and realizing that being distant doesn't mean a friendship ends. "True friendships can never be broken, not with time or distance," said main character Marshall in his final letter to his friend Lucy.

The collaborative book filled the gap for one of the school's most cherished traditions that was canceled this year due to COVID-19. Japhet's annual spring musical, called Spring Sharing, is written from scratch every year to give each student a part that best fits them. The school's communications director Betsy Stecker, a professional editor, posed the idea of a collaborative book to faculty, who embraced the idea and immediately began engaging their students to write it.

The original storyline

A young boy and girl who are neighbors become best friends in Kindergarten and readers learn about their adventures. When they are 10, people across the world have to stay home so they cannot see one another. Not yet allowed to have cell phones, they create an ingenious system to stay in touch with one another. The storyline was inspired by the challenge of being apart, as most of the world is right now in the spring of 2020.

Students collaborate to write the story

Preschool developed the first main character, and Kindergarten developed the main character's family. First- and second-graders introduced two pets and wrote short stories featuring the pets. Third- and fourth-graders introduced the second main character and her family and wrote more short stories. Fifth- and sixth-graders developed the story's underlying narrative, and seventh- and eighth-grade students wrote the resolution to the story.

Teachers used the opportunity to teach character development and fictional writing. Some co-writing took place during Google Classroom Hangouts and some took place outside the e-classroom, when students worked in pairs or small groups (still via distance learning) with one another.

Most of the illustrations were created by the children, and the beautiful cover illustration and other watercolors were painted by professional artist and Japhet staff member Margie Brown. Photos of the children in the book were taken by Robin Pospisil, admissions director.

Once the writing and illustrations were complete, Stecker served as editor and brought it together in a [digital e-book](#), narrated it, and published it digitally with the whole school community via email and the school's social media channels. The book was also printed and offered for sale.

“We brought Spring Sharing to our community in the form of a heartwarming tale written and illustrated by our students,” said Kerri G. Vizena, Head of School. “The common thread between our stage productions and this book is that every student is represented and has a voice. This is an outstanding example of the desire to continue a tradition under difficult circumstances and finding a delightful manner in which to accomplish it. The result is a joyful journey in book form that brings happiness, a respect for friendship, and appreciation for the abilities of our students.”

About Japhet School:

Founded in 1973, Japhet School is an independent school, serving children in the metropolitan Detroit area in preschool through eighth grade. Its mission is to nurture and prepare each child for life by integrating character education with a strong academic program. The school provides small classes of fewer than 20 students in each, which enables teachers to challenge students with academic material that is appropriate for their intellectual readiness, regardless of age or grade. Integrated with strong academics is Japhet School's national award-winning character education curriculum, which builds a peaceful community within the school. The school's public speaking curriculum gives graduates confidence in leadership roles. Japhet is a National School of Character: it was the first school in Michigan -- and the first independent school in the country -- to receive this award. To learn more about Japhet, visit japhetschool.org.

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Photo captions (photos attached separately):

Cover: Royal Oak artist and Japhet School childcare assistant Margie Brown took students' details and created the cover for *Across the Distance*.

- (1) Preschool and Kindergarten students created main character Marshall and his family. They decided he would be a caucasian boy who knows a lot about dinosaurs and wears his hair “in a cool ponytail in the back.” Marshall and a younger brother are being raised by their single dad. They like to get ice cream together.
- (2) The third- and fourth-graders created the second character Lucy and her family. They imagined her as a black girl, whose parents are both STEM professionals: dad is an engineer, and mom is a wildlife biologist. Lucy knows a lot about science as a result.
- (3) First- and second-graders brainstormed Marshall's and Lucy's pets. These students study community workers every year, which includes the care of domesticated, farm, and wild animals. They embraced the opportunity to create a dog and cat with joy!

- (4) Fifth- and sixth-graders designed the primary storyline of Across the Distance. They introduced their friendship as kindergarteners, and, writing in pairs, they developed several small scenes that came together to build the whole plot line.
- (5) Seventh- and eighth-graders, the oldest students at Japhet School, collaborated as a whole class to write the final chapter. Their teacher led lessons in integrated fictional writing and resolution writing to give students tools to take on the challenge.

Six photos are included with this release. The cover:

