

Saco teacher authors book about bullying

By Nate Jones
Staff Writer

John Goff said he always wanted to be a teacher, but "fell" into the director of community relations and personnel position with the Portland Pirates Hockey Club in 1995. A Dartmouth graduate with a degree in psychology and education, he said he was working on a graduate degree at Tufts University in Boston when a representative for the hockey team approached him.

"They had seen me coaching the [Tufts] football team," he said. "I hadn't ever even played hockey before, but it was a great experience."

Goff said his commitment to the Pirates brought him to Scarborough that same year but his desire to teach drew him to the C.K. Burns School in Saco in 1998, where he has spent the last 11 years teaching the third grade.

"My heart was always in teaching, always focused on the elementary grade levels," he said. "I had a passion working with young kids, figuring out how they learn and dealing with their parents."

As a teacher, Goff said it was important for him to become a role model for his students. In 1999, he helped direct the school's civil rights team, focusing specifically on eliminating bullying incidents by working on effective communication skills with students.

"Bullying starts with verbal abuse and then escalates from there," he said. "If you can teach students effective communication you're ahead of the curve."

Although Goff said writing was something that "didn't come natural" to him, it was one way he felt he could take a colleague's advice and "teach to make progress."

"Writing a book would give me a chance to reach beyond my classroom," he said. "The point of being a teacher is to make a difference in the lives of children, not just Saco children."

With his students help, Goff began writing "One Bad Thing," a title sparked by another teacher's experiences during a class field trip.

"She came back and said 'They didn't do one bad thing the whole time,' and I said 'That's it, there's the title,'" Goff said.

Goff said it took him one summer to write the book and nearly four years before finding Bryson Taylor Publishing - a company based in Saco - who agreed to print it.

"A former student heard the story and he knew somebody there," Goff said. "Getting published can be frustrating. Publishers won't take it unless you have an agent and agents won't take you on unless you're published."

Goff said he viewed the publishing process as a

learning experience.

"Kids like shortcuts, use cheats in video games," he said. "There's no cheat to this."

When it comes to writing, Goff said he found it helpful to "learn from the critics" rather than to ignore them.

"Don't take your manuscript to someone who you know is going to say 'Oh, that's a great story,'" he said. "Bring it to someone who can give you feedback you can use. You have to go a little outside of your comfort zone."

Often he said he shares his written work with his students just as they share theirs with him.

"Kids are great critics, they'll tell you exactly what they think," he said.

The book explores the issue of bullying by following three characters, each of whom Goff said "struggle to make the right choice," a decision that isn't always clear, he said.

"Sometimes good kids make bad choices," he said. "And if you make a bad choice and nobody thinks it's wrong, is it? The big thing is to trust your instincts. Kids know right from wrong."

A bully, by definition, is someone whose acts are targeted, repetitive and has power over others, Goff said.

"Maybe it's physical power, maybe they're older or more popular," he said. "There's a difference between bullying and a kid

just being mean."

Goff said he hopes "One Bad Thing" will be read by fifth and sixth graders - his target audience - as much as it is by parents and teachers. He said he originally envisioned the book as a helpful read along for adults trying to broach the topic of bullying with kids.

"I tried to write a book I would like to read aloud to my classroom," he said.

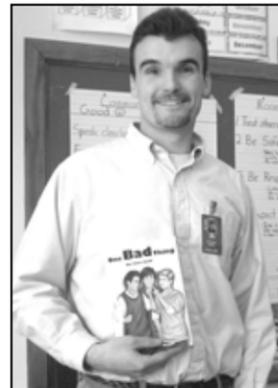
Goff said he's already near completion of his second book, another manuscript his students have helped him put together.

"What comes naturally

to me are the ideas," he said. "Being in education and running my writing by the kids really helps me. If you can get a fifth grader to want to read more, you're doing something right."

Although he enjoys teaching, Goff, 37, said he hopes to delve more into writing and possibly teach at the undergraduate level someday.

"I say that now, but at the end of the day, I'll always want to be called a teacher," he said.



JOHN GOFF

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