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'Authors for Earth Day' Gears Up for 2013 Celebrations

By Sally Lodge | Apr 04, 2013



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April 22, 2013 marks the fourth annual Earth Day commemoration by Authors for Earth Day (A4ED), a grassroots organization devoted to promoting literacy, supporting conservation, and empowering kids to

become involved in both. Founded in 2010 by author Brooke Bessen, the initiative brings children's authors and illustrators into schools during the month of April to talk about the joy of reading and to discuss environmental issues. Each participating author donates a portion of one day's speaking fees to a nonprofit conservation organization selected by a student vote from a list of five nominees compiled by each author.

This year, 19 authors and illustrators – the largest tally since the program began in 2010 – will participate in A4ED events in 12 states, Canada, and Australia. Participants in this year's initiative include Bessen, Dan Gutman, April Pulley Sayre, Darcy Pattison, Roxie Munro, and Mike Graf. The first four A4ED events raised more than \$15,750 to benefit such organizations as the National Audubon Society, the Nature Conservancy, the National Park Foundation, the Australia Koala Foundation, the World Wildlife Fund, and the Ocean Conservancy.

A4ED spreads word of its initiative through its [Web site](#), which features a list of more than 75 available authors and illustrators for schools to consider booking for visits. In 2011, A4ED's community outreach expanded to include a blog posted on the site, where children's authors connect with eco-minded readers, librarians, and teachers.

Bessen, a naturalist, conservation researcher, and nature writer, was inspired to acknowledge Earth Day while shopping at her local Whole Foods in March 2008, when she spotted a sign that the store was no longer going to use plastic bags in honor of Earth Day. "I thought it was clever and meaningful of them to attach the plastic bag ban to Earth Day, and make that connection in people's minds," she says. "I had been looking for a meaningful way to observe Earth Day with students at the school I was scheduled to visit on April 22. I had planned to donate my speaking fee to a conservation organization, and I got to thinking, 'What if the students got involved, and voted to determine the donation recipient?' I was excited at the thought of empowering kids to use their voice to help care for our planet."

Teachers and students at Encanto Elementary School in Phoenix, Ariz., which she visited that Earth Day, embraced Bessen's plan, enthusiastically researching the five conservation organizations she had nominated and greeting the author with handmade posters on her arrival. "It was better than I could have anticipated," she says of the event. "The whole school became involved, and when I announced the result of the student vote over the school intercom – the winner was the Humane Society of the United States – I could hear cheering from all the classrooms. It was so touching, and drove home how amazing it is to donate to a conservation group through the voice of children."

On her way home that day, Bessen considered the possibility of expanding the concept to an annual multi-author initiative, which led to the conception of A4ED. Then she was faced with the task of getting other authors on board. At a 2009 SCBWI conference, she wore a badge that said, "Ask Me About A4ED," but attendees seemed to avert their eyes and no one asked – until she stepped into an elevator with Linda Sue Park. "Linda said, 'OK, tell me about A4ED,' and when I did, she wrote down author Dan Gutman's name on a piece of paper," Bessen recalls. "She told me I had to talk to him."



Librarian Doris Heise and author Dan Gutman celebrate reading at Jenkintown (Pa.) Elementary School last year on Earth Day.

An Idea Turns into Action

As it turns out, Park was a contributor to *Recycle This Book: 100 Top Children's Book Authors Tell You How to Go Green* (Random House/Yeareling, 2009), which Gutman edited. He put Bessen in touch with several other authors who contributed to the anthology, including Bruce Hale, Debbie Dadey, Suzy Kline, and Nancy Castaldo, and the initiative got underway.

"Brooke's idea of having a bunch of us do school visits around Earth Day and donating our fee to environmental organizations sounded like a terrific idea," Gutman says. "Over the years I had become increasingly concerned about climate change, and I wondered what could I possibly do – as a lowly children's book author – that would help along the process of switching from burning fossil fuels to alternative sources of energy. I'm afraid that my generation is pretty much useless when it comes to

doing something about climate change, so I'm hoping that the next generation is going to carry the ball. In 10 short years, the kids who read my books will be voting, starting their careers, and maybe even running for political office. My hope is that if we can get them thinking about this issue now, they will develop the political will to do the right thing when they are in control. It will be their planet, and it will be in their interest to keep it livable."

Gutman, who participated in A4ED in 2011 and 2012, will join in again on April 18, when he visits Haledon School in Haledon, N.J. Bessen, whose Earth Day agenda includes a visit to Dutch Creek Elementary School in Littleton, Colo., is thrilled about this year's 19-strong A4ED roster, which is almost double 2012's number. She attributes the growth to word-of-mouth, to the A4ED information table she set up at last summer's SCBWI conference, and to Gutman's tireless advocacy. "There have been so many serendipitous moments pulling this coalition together, but we owe so much to Dan Gutman," she says. "He has helped us make so many connections with authors. It's wonderful to see us grow as a community and get more authors, schools, and kids involved."

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Bessen underscores the importance of A4ED's involvement of children in the donation process. "This initiative enables authors to speak for literacy and for nature, and to give something back to their young readers with their generous donations, but A4ED takes it one step further, and lets children speak for themselves," she says. "Kids are not old enough to vote, and most have never had a voice in the world. This program empowers them to say what matters to them. They are very connected with nature and very engaged with the world around them. Who better to speak for the world around them than kids themselves?"

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