

The Stamford Times
Oct. 12, 2003

Sparky's Journey Leads to "Walk"

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Sparky, the canine heroine in Stamford resident Rick Arruzza's first children's book, overcame big odds to win the heart of Arruzza's family. Now Arruzza has to overcome the Material Girl on his way to writing success.

"It's hard to get my book in the store window with Madonna's children's book there," laughs Arruzza, who recently published Sparky's Walk, a tribute to Sparky, a pointer pit-bull mix and Adopt-a-Dog, the group that saved her.

Despite the competition from a pop icon, Arruzza believes the book is already a success.

"I don't know if I'll ever make a profit, but the book has raised more than \$400 so far for Adopt-a-Dog, and I've always wanted to thank them for saving Sparky's life."

That modest but accelerating success comes despite the fact that shortly after writing the book, Arruzza discovered that Sparky's Walk follows a formula that isn't recommended.

"After I'd written and published the book, I saw some website that said, 'The worst thing you can do is write a children's book ... about a dog ... in rhyme,' " recalls Arruzza. "Well, it's too late now. This is what I wanted to do."

Sparky came to the Arruzza family four years ago from Greenwich-based Adopt-a-Dog, a private, not-for-profit organization that saves dogs and cats from being euthanized. The Arruzzas loved Sparky from the moment she came barreling into the room at Norwalk's Best Friends Pet Resort, which sponsored an adoption open house.

"She just bowled over my son David with licks, and that was it," Arruzza said.

Sparky, a gentle and friendly force of nature, soon made friends all over the block.

"Everyone knows Sparky," Arruzza said. "She got into so many situations when I'd take her out for a walk that the book just wrote itself."

Sparky's Walk takes young children along on Sparky's adventures as she makes her nighttime promenade through the Glenbrook neighborhood, and the book ends with her going to bed.

Written for children ages four to eight, the verse is fast-paced, much like a walk with the real-life Sparky herself, with a rhyming cadence that sounds “almost like Sparky’s rap song,” as one reader put it.

There’s a map at the back where kids can follow Sparky’s path through her neighborhood. “It’s a perfect bedtime story; an adventure story with lots of surprises, and then Sparky goes to sleep,” Arruzza said. “You say goodnight to Sparky, and then it’s time for you to go to bed.”

Sparky’s story really began five years ago when she arrived as a puppy at a large New York City pound, where dogs are typically put down two days after their arrival. That would have been Sparky’s fate, but a kennel worker took a special liking to Sparky and kept altering her “arrival date” so she would not be put down. He hoped to buy her time until someone adopted her or an agency came along to save her.

One did. Adopt-A-Dog was piling 15 dogs into their van several weeks later when he spotted them.

“We were just about to pull out when a young kennel worker ran up to the van,” recalls Marsha Beggar, Adopt-A-Dog’s adoptions manager. “He begged us to take a six- or eight-month-old speckled pit-bull-pointer mix that he’d been hiding for weeks. When you hear a story like that, how can you not?”

They had no more room in the van, so they sat Sparky between them in the front seat. “She rewarded us by licking us all the way to the agency,” Beggar remembers.

“When I think how close she was to not being here, I get very choked up,” says Arruzza. “It was always in the back of my mind to pay back Adopt-A-Dog.”

He just didn’t realize that payback would come in the form of a children’s book.

Arruzza, an editor of research reports for a Greenwich financial firm, had always wanted to get back to his writing career. But he was raising a family and was very busy after work with things like helping his kids with their homework – and walking Sparky every day.

“It was always in my head that it’d be a good story, and I finally just got the story down. I didn’t tell anyone at first. Then one day I walked into a close friend’s office at work and said, ‘I have a secret. I’m writing a children’s book.’ Well, there was no turning back after that.”

Arruzza’s original idea was to sell the book at Adopt-A-Dog’s “Puttin’ on the Dog” festival in Greenwich this past September, with all proceeds going to the agency. By the end of the day, he had raised more than \$300 for Adopt-A-Dog.

“I was rewarded in so many ways. First, by helping Adopt-A-Dog. I also received so much encouragement that day. Two parents bought the book for their little girl, and she sat right down in the dirt and read the book right in front of my booth. Right there, I said, ‘This is worth it.’ ”

Things have taken off in the weeks since the festival. He sold 75 books at the firm where he works. Barrett’s Bookstore in Darien and Just Books in Greenwich began carrying the book, and it is starting to sell on Amazon.com. It is also available at the Thrifty Boutique in downtown Stamford, where Arruzza volunteers on weekends.

Adopt-A-Dog, which stretches a dollar as far as it can go, has put Arruzza’s \$400 toward the care of the dogs and cats currently on site waiting for adoption. “We take what other people discard as garbage and make sure they are treasures for other people,” says Beggar. The organization finds homes for over 500 dogs each year.

She wants people to know that they will go through an interview process before they receive one of Adopt-A-Dog’s animals.

“Some people want dogs; we want people who want pets. I always ask people where the dog is going to sleep – that’s the tell-tale sign for me,” says Beggar.

“If they say the dog is going to sleep in the garage or in the basement, we turn them away. We want our dogs and cats to be real members of the family.”

Adopt-A-Dog will also receive proceeds from the Spanish version of Sparky’s Walk, El Paseo de Sparky, which has just been published.

“I have a lot of Latin friends, and there’s a growing Hispanic population in Stamford. I thought a Spanish version would help people who have yet to learn English read it to their kids,” says Arruzza.

If you would like to know more about Adopt-A-Dog, please call 203-629-9494 or visit www.adopt-a-dog.com.