

Story reveals author's inner hero

Loveland's Nick Roussos to have book signing Saturday in Fort Collins

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Nick Roussos, right, chooses buttons on his "Eco2" communication device to talk about his life in Africa and growing up with cerebral palsy. Sue Kittel, left, works with him several days a week to market his new children's book, "Helping in Action" and promote his business website, "Awesome in Action." (*Jessica Benes / Loveland Reporter-Herald*)

"I was born in Ethiopia in Africa. I went to school in England. My father and brother have a safari business," says Percy, the mechanical voice that speaks for Nick Roussos through a communication device called "Eco2."

Roussos carefully pushes another button on his communication device to note that "tomorrow" is the day of his book signing and a Halloween shop is where he would like to go today to look at "witches" like the one from the "Wizard of Oz."

He doesn't always put full sentences together, but uses words or phrases to remind people of his thoughts.

If you go

What: Book signing for "Helping in Action"

When: 5-7 p.m. Saturday

Where: Red Tail Coffee Shop at the MAX South Transit Center, 4915 Fossil Blvd.

More info: Visit <http://awesomeinaction.com> for details about this and future books.

Roussos was born with cerebral palsy. He uses a wheelchair and isn't able to speak. He can't move his body very well except for his arms. But none of these things has stopped Roussos from kayaking, horseback riding, "singing" karaoke, water skiing, snow skiing, racing with "Athletes in Tandem" or writing a children's book.

Roussos, with the help of Audrey Hendricks, wrote a children's book about his life in Africa growing up with a baby lion and learning to thrive.

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He is having a book signing for the book, "Helping in Action," 5-7 p.m. Saturday at the entrance to Red Tail Coffee Shop at the MAX South Transit Center, 4915 Fossil Blvd., in Fort Collins. The book was illustrated by Pam Marcus-Bause.

The story is about a boy who realizes he is capable of being a hero when he finds a lion cub in need of help.

The tale combines fiction with Roussos's own experiences in Africa.

Roussos lived in Ethiopia with his family for 15 years and then attended a school with a special-needs program in England.

His father was born in Ethiopia and his mother met his father while she was on a trip.

Roussos's father found a baby lion cub in the bush and brought her home when Roussos was little. They bottle fed her and helped her learn to hunt when she was older. Eventually, she was strong enough to make her way back to the wild.

"That's the main part of the story," said Sue Kittel, with the Supported Employment program through the Colorado Department of Human Services. "And introducing Nick and his family and where they lived in Ethiopia, and the lake they went to a lot."

The Supported Employment program works with people with disabilities to find employment and keep jobs.

Hendricks, also with Supported Employment, worked with Roussos for about two years to write the story.

"The cool thing is, Roussos never went to his preprogrammed words," Hendricks said.

Instead of using his device to use phrases to tell the story that he had used before, he would point out a phrase he wanted to say by using words like, "lion, head, water, hippo." Hendricks and Roussos had a conversation about what he was trying to say - that the lion was sitting on the hippo's head - and she would write down several variations of a sentence with a question mark at the end.

He would point to the sentence he preferred, or he would point to the question mark if none of the sentences were right.

Hendricks said she is proud of him because he made the story his own by using unique and whimsical word choices.

"A lot of his life is guided and he doesn't have a choice or his choices are limited," she said. "With this, he had complete freedom. There were no physical limitations with the character. No one was telling him this is how the story should go."

Roussos also had interactions with a hippo and a snake in Africa that will show up in later editions of the children's book series.

Kittel said the words "wheelchair" and "disability" are never used in the book, but it shows Roussos as a child living a full life, spending time with his family and participating in adaptive sports.

"It shows him helping. That's the hope that is not only to inspire people with disabilities but also all kinds of people to just see him doing and being in the world," Kittel said.

Roussos's parents live next door, and his brother lives down the block with a wife and baby.

"For him, (cerebral palsy) has affected everything profoundly," Kittel said. "He can't walk without assistance. He has always been nonverbal. But he has some use of his arms and he can tap his toes to music. He can smile and make sounds."

She once found him humming to a song on TV and realized he was singing along.

"Music is really big for him," Kittel said. "He likes to do it with a group."

Kittel and Hendricks also take him into the community, which means he has become well-known at some local venues, such as Coffee Tree on Fourth Street in downtown Loveland.

Roussos advocates for people with disabilities and gives presentations at schools. "I think the way he has become an inspiring man is doing what he does in life. His caregivers and family have always helped him have new opportunities," Kittel said.

"There's a lot inside here," she added, patting his chest. "Part of his advocacy is understanding what is inside here and that there are a lot of people like him. If you take time to get to know them, your life will be enriched."

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