

# Let's Read!

## Renowned children's author speaks at Oberlin grade school

Oberlin Elementary School students got a special visit to cap off their fall book fair Thursday when author Ben Mikaelson came to talk about being a writer, being the owner of a black bear and most importantly, being different.

"We all know there are lots of ways we can hurt each other," Mr. Mikaelson said, "like with your fists, or how you act. But what's the worst way to hurt someone, kids? That's right - with your words."

The kids smiled knowingly as Mr. Mikaelson showed projections of his life with Buffy, a bear rescued as a cub from a research facility, and what she taught him before she died of old age not too long ago.

Mr. Mikaelson said he was born and raised in Bolivia, in South America, where he grew up as the only white boy in a small Andean town. He said he never went to school until he was in fourth grade, and was always picked on, first, because he was a "gringo," and second, because he was "dumb Mikaelson."

"One day, after school, when I was in seventh grade in the United States," he told the now-captivated kids, "I had been beat up real bad. So I went out to a lake by my house; I can still remember as clear as day. I sat out there and I thought, if I'm going to get picked on no matter what I do, if it's because of the color of my skin or because I can't spell the word 'the,' no matter what I do - if I dress like them and speak their language and I'm white like them - then I might as well do what I want to do. And kids, it changed everything."

He said he started teaching himself to dive off cliffs, and then, started to save up for pilot lessons. He started being himself, even though he still couldn't spell the word "the."

Then, when he was a freshman in college, he spent three hours writing a one-page story for his English class. When he got it back, there was no grade, he said.

"There was so much red ink it looked like pizza," he said, adding that he was asked to stay after class by his professor, and he went to his office with his head hung low.

But the professor didn't say what Mr. Mikaelson thought he would. After he rattled off the entire story of why he couldn't spell, and why he didn't know how to punctuate or what letters should be capitalized, his teacher said:



Ben Mikaelson and Buffy the bear

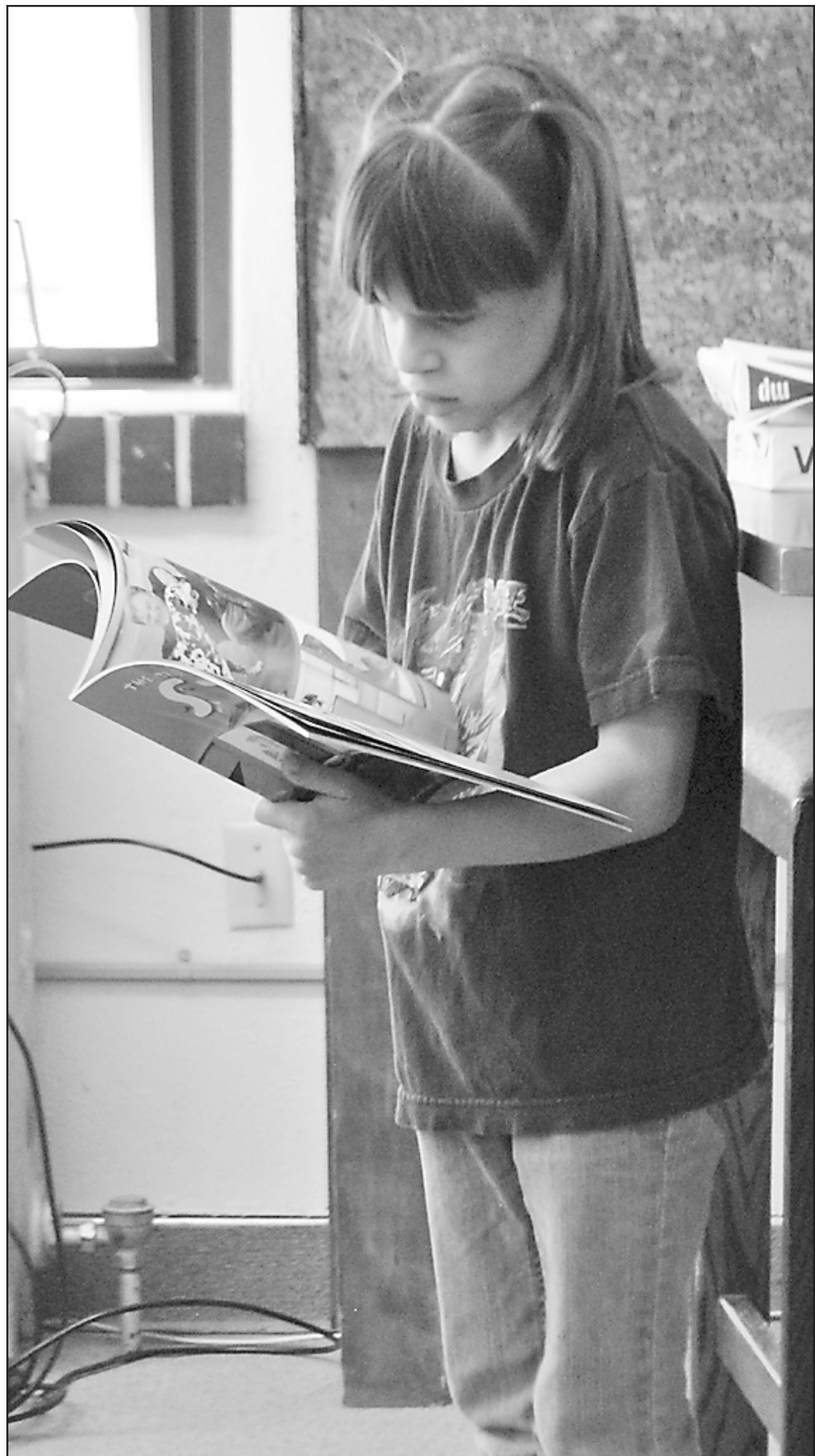
"You think I pulled you in here to tell you that you couldn't write? You're the best writer in this class."

He was dumbfounded. What he had, said his teacher, was a setback, but that didn't mean he wasn't a good writer. Mr. Mikaelson said after that, he worked hard for years, believed in himself and sure enough, he became a writer.

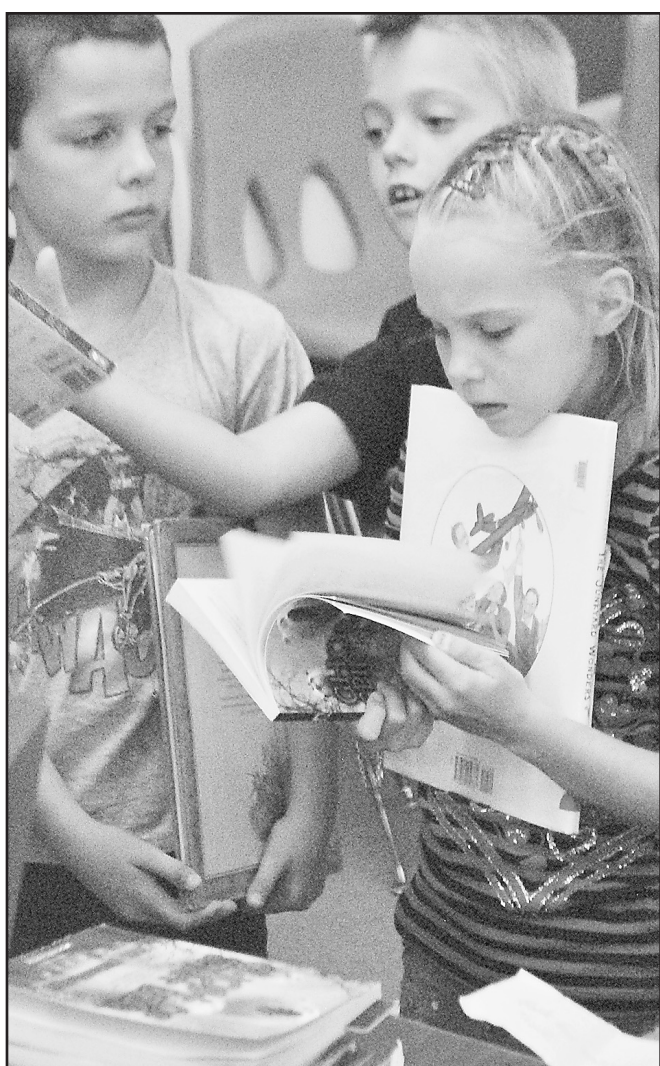
And along the way, he said, he started to have an amazing life - one that his bullies could have never imagined. He adopted and raised a black bear, skydived into the homecoming game at school, traveled the world and even went to the North Pole.

"And you know what?" he asked. "Here's something I didn't want to tell you at first, because for a long time, I was a bully, too. I started hitting and calling names back at people. I got real mean. And it took a 270-pound bear to teach me that I wasn't the biggest guy in the room. I found out the biggest and strongest guy in the room is the one who's nice and does good things."

"So you remember, kids, that you are special. We all know bullies, and there might even be some in here today. And they're trying to feel like the big guys, the tough ones. But remember, the tough ones know that you don't have to hit someone or make fun of them to feel big. Who wants to do that when you have this whole wonderful life ahead of you?"



**IT WAS ALL ABOUT THE BOOKS** Thursday when author Ben Mikaelson came to Oberlin Elementary School to talk with the kids about overcoming life's obstacles and picking up the pen. Afterward, Takota Morgan (above) leafed through a book on the last day of the school's book fair.



**IT WAS A TOUGH CALL** to decide just which books to take home for Jacquelyn Marshall (left), who combed through the book fair's options with Ryan Ketterl (left) and Bryce Peter (back right). Later, Bryce (above) appeared to have narrowed his choice down to two space books as Jacie Fortin put in her two cents worth. During author Ben Mikaelson's talk beforehand, teacher Judy Elwood (below) sat with Erin May, Hannah Quintana and Jacquelyn Marshall on the floor.



Story and photos  
by Stephanie DeCamp