



Miriam Epstein of Books to Dreams collected autographed letters from children's authors that she is now selling to raise money for children who need books. This letter came from Beverly Cleary.

In Focus

Turning autographs into needed funds

Books to Dreams has letters from children's authors to sell

by Jan Tarr

While growing up in Glastonbury, Miriam Stannard Epstein's dad instilled a love of books that carries on to this day. She was an elementary school teacher and the mother of four when she launched Books to Dreams some 15 years ago.

Through her program, more than 300,000 books have gone to children and their parents in homeless shelters, soup kitchens, prison and even schools out of the country; as well as some 150 organizations. Two years ago, grant money became tougher to come by — Ms. Epstein doesn't do any solicitations or fund raising — and the focus was turned to Head Start programs.

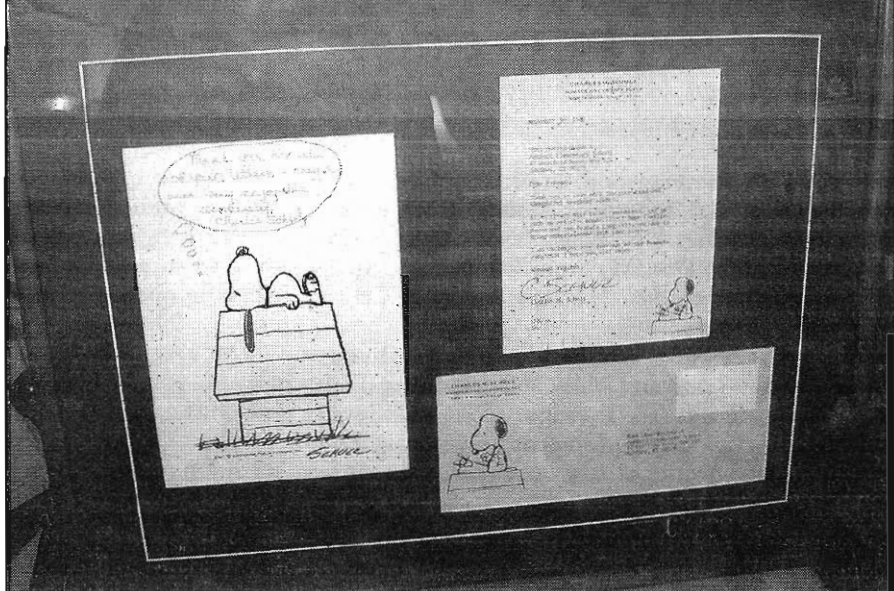
Although neither she nor her husband, Howard, a University of Connecticut engineering professor, are grant writers, they learned how. "For the first 16 years my husband and I spent an inordinate amount of

time" writing grant proposals and anxiously waiting each time to learn whether something was numbered wrong or out of sequence and, therefore, disqualified the application. Despite the angst, they were successful and for several years grants were a good source of income but "extremely time consuming." When they decided to focus on getting books to children in Head Start, they also decided to stop seeking grants. More than 7,000 books — of 14,346 distributed in 2010-2011 — have gone to 40 Head Start programs. The donations include books for parents, classroom libraries and teachers.

"We have been zigging and zagging trying to find books for children in need." She even did a 17-mile walk and sent out postcards telling people about it. Books to Dreams received \$4,000. With the help of

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Charles Schulz wrote to Miriam Epstein and now she plans to sell it to raise money for her non-profit Books to Dreams that gives books to children in Head Start.



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faithful donors and memorial gifts, "We have been able to keep our promises." The program needs about \$10,000 a year.

Now the faltering economy – which also means more children than ever are in need – is forcing her to turn to selling her beloved autographed letters from children's authors such as Beverly Cleary, Charles Schultz, Richard Scarry and Sid Fleischmann that have hung on the hall wall of her beautiful Ferguson Road home for some 20 years.

She received the letters when she was a teacher. "The children read every single thing that we could find by the author." They celebrated the author's birthday and took photographs. She had the children draw "their own art work from the stories that they had read; that really impressed the authors."

She got a book about authors that told the students more about the writers than book cover. When the children wrote to the authors they could ask specific things about them.

"Each letter was unique and original and showed that the children had pored over the books and had really absorbed them." And they warranted responses from seven authors that ended up framed and hung in Ms. Epstein's home. Primarily the responses thank the children for celebrating their birthday. In 1981, Richard Scarry sent a typewritten note along with an autographed photo that said "I want to thank you one and all for your best wishes on my birthday. I was very touched."

"I am so happy you enjoy my books and am surprised there are so many talented artists in your class.

"Perhaps some of you will grow up to be artists and writers, too.

"Goldbug, Lowly Worm, Huckle, Dingo and all my other characters as well as myself send you all our best wishes and love,"

In the same year, Beverly Cleary hand wrote a note to Ms. Epstein and sent it along with an autographed photo. The author of books about Ramona and her various adventures wrote, "How pleased I was to

receive an envelope containing birthday cards, notes and a lovely letter from the teacher! Thank you for remembering me and for telling me you enjoy my books. Strange, but one day last week I seemed to have happy birthday ringing in my ears – could it have come from you?

“My next book, which will be published in August, is Ramona Quimby, Age 8. I hope you will enjoy it, too.

With love,
Beverly Cleary”

And from perhaps the best-known author of all – Charles Schulz – who sent a typed letter saying “Thank you so very much for your kind and thoughtful birthday wishes.

It is always nice to be remembered and in such an artistic manner!!! I hope Charlie Brown and the Peanuts gang will continue to bring entertainment into your lives.

“I am enclosing some drawings of the Peanuts gang that I hope you will enjoy.

“Kindest regards,
Charles Schulz”

Handwritten over a cartoon of Snoopy lying on his doghouse –

“Thank you for all of your letters – they’ve been very enjoyable! Sincerely,

Charles Schulz”

Sid Fleischman, a 1987 Newbery Award winner, wrote, “I’m pleased you are having fun reading my books – they’re fun to write.

The framed pieces include the envelopes and photographs. Ms. Epstein has sent out “feelers” to people she believed might be interested in buying her treasures but has not had any response.

One of the problems is she doesn’t know how much they are worth. “I know that they are worth something. I have been told so.”

Steve Mooser, president of Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators in Los Angeles, wrote in an email “I think it matters more who the people are rather than if they are alive. Charles Schulz is worth something – so would be Maurice Sendak who is still alive – also it would matter if the content of the letter discussed writing or illustrating.”

Ms. Epstein said she doesn’t know how the sale will go but “I’m always hopeful. It has always worked out in my life.” **ML**

Anyone wishing to donate new books for children up to 5 years old, make a monetary donation, learn more about the autographed letters or get more information may go to www.bookstodreams.org.