

Maria Guzzo pens children's book with Jewish twist



Cindy Davis

For many Montrealers, the name Guzzo is synonymous with the major movie theatre chain. But the Guzzo family is also deeply devoted to children's mental health issues, announcing earlier this year that they had shifted the focus of their charitable foundations to benefit this cause.

Maria Guzzo, vice-president and head of charitable donations for Guzzo Cinemas, is a full-time master's student at McGill University, in the department of psychiatry, specializing in child mental health – specifically, the efficacy of expressive writing on children and adolescents.

Having heard of the work of Kids Write Network (KWN), an organization that developed a revolutionary six-step mental health program that utilizes a mix of literary and therapeutic skills through a unique book-writing experience, Guzzo wanted to further study this approach.

Before proposing and funding a larger study of this concept at McGill, she decided to test the writing method herself by penning and publishing a children's book through KWN's imprint called Kids 4 Kids.

How to Train Your Dreams is the story of Elliot, a boy who is unhappy with life. In order to negate his sad realities, he learns to escape his problems by dreaming about things that make him happy. Along the way, he visits many popular Montreal landmarks, including St. Viateur Bagel, Mount Royal and Schwartz's delicatessen and plays with his chassidic neighbour named Ari, with whom he can relate.

"I wanted to write a book that not only dealt with a child's emotions and feelings but also brings in a cultural element," explains Guzzo, who feels it's important to send the message to children that cultural barriers only reinforce misunderstanding.

"I really wanted to incorporate the chassidic community because I feel that they are sometimes misread. There are lots of myths about them that are false and pre-judgmental."

Though she enjoys working with many cultures, Guzzo admits that she has a particular affinity for the Jewish commu-



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ity of Montreal. "I grew up in Outremont – in the heart of the chassidic community, and I only left when I went to university. Growing up for me, there was no culture barrier," says Guzzo, who has worked with several Jewish groups through the years. "The Jewish community in Montreal is made up of such amazing people."

That is why, she says, when the Jewish Public Library approached her to tour local schools with her new book, she couldn't refuse. Later this month, Guzzo and the JPL will present her book

to students at United Talmud Torah, Solomon Schechter Academy, JPPS and Merton School. In an interview format, her publisher will ask Guzzo child-friendly questions that will be accompanied by an interactive slide show. The kids will also be able to ask questions of their own.

"We are thrilled to be partnering with Maria Guzzo on this book tour. Her work and efforts through this initiative embody the values of education, literacy and the overall well-being of children, values which the JPL also holds so dear," says the library's director of development, Shannon Gaskell. "It's a natural partnership and one that we hope to build in the future."

While the official results of the McGill study on the effects of expressive writing will only be out in 2017, Guzzo has found that it has a cathartic effect on the participating children. "By disclosing one's feelings and emotions, it helps release whatever negative feelings one has inside."

How to Train Your Dreams can be purchased online at notteinbianco.com or on Amazon.com. All proceeds go to Guzzo's Foundation. ■