

THE RIVERTOWNS

Enterprise

VOLUME 36, NUMBER 11 • JUNE 3, 2011

The Hometown Newspaper
of Hastings-on-Hudson,
Dobbs Ferry, Ardsley
and Irvington

'Today' veteran tailors headlines to fit Hillside students

By Claribel Ortega

What began as a bath-time tradition for Claudia Heitler's two young children has turned into a monthly discussion of current events at Hillside Elementary School.

Heitler has been visiting the second-grade classroom of Rosanne Cirasella once a month since November, presenting topical stories to the students and engaging in conversation intended to spark their curiosity about the news and answer any questions they might have about world happenings.

"I'm taking this — talking to 24 kids in a classroom — as a responsibly, if not more so, as I did writing and producing for 12 million people at the 'Today' show," said the former producer of NBC's morning TV staple, where she worked for eight years.

Heitler moved to Hastings in 2002. In 2003, after the birth of her first child, she became a stay-at-home mom, but her days in journalism were far from over.

"It all sort of evolved slowly and none of it was really planned or intentional," said the mother of 5-year-old Lois and 7-year-old Arlo, who she said provided the catalyst for her program at Hillside.

"They would take a bath every day and I would sit there with a newspaper or a laptop and I would flip through the paper with them and give them some sense of what was going on in the world," she said, adding that she called the time explaining the news to her children "The Bathtub Report."

Heitler soon realized that finding news stories that she could share with her children was no easy feat, and it would sometimes take hours for her to filter through information and make it appropriate for her kids.

In the fall, Heitler approached Cirasella, who is her son's teacher, and asked if she would be interested in having Heitler discuss current events with the class. Cirasella agreed, and in November Heitler made her first foray into reporting news to children outside



JIM MACLEAN/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Claudia Heitler makes a presentation at Hillside last Friday, May 27.

of her own home.

"They look forward to her visits because they know they're going to go to a different place in the world," said Cirasella of Heitler's presentations, explaining that the former "Today" show producer uses software such as Google Earth to give the children the impression that they're going on a journey. "She puts a lot of time and effort into her lessons,"

said Cirasella, adding that both she and Heitler are hoping to continue the initiative next year.

Heitler said that she tries to make her presentations as "interactive with visuals" as she can, as well as engaging the students in discussion as much as possible.

To date, Heitler has covered topics ranging from the Kentucky Derby to the flooding in Mississippi, with an eye

on sensitivity toward kids at every step. For the first few months, the topics Heitler discussed were what she called "lighter fair," but once events surrounding the earthquake in Japan began to unfold, Heitler found herself choosing her words carefully.

"I don't want to be responsible for introducing any concepts that maybe their parents wouldn't feel comfortable talking to them about, but everybody had heard about the earthquake," said Heitler.

In addition to her monthly visits, Heitler has also started the kids' news Web site Here There Everywhere, where she posts news from around the world in a kid-friendly manner. Heitler began the site about a month ago and called it an "evolution" stemming from her presentations.

Currently, Heitler's Web site gets about 1,000 hits a day from close to 80 countries. Although Heitler said she would "love" to expand her initiative to other schools, for now she does not have any concrete plans to do so.

Heitler credits Cirasella with helping the project get off the ground, saying that she is able to run it successfully because of the cooperation of the students. "The kids are so well behaved because they have such a great system in place, that they're able to listen to you and that is just a huge credit to the teacher to be able to create an environment where that can take place. Without that, it would be very difficult," said Heitler.

Although she writes her news stories in a simplified way, Heitler is adamant that she stays "true to the truth," and said that while working with kids allows for the use of more colorful language, the facts do not change.

"They can be involved in the events and with the people who are shaping our world," said Heitler of why she believes her program is important. "To me, the base idea of all of this is that if a child has some understanding of what's going on in their world, then they can make better choices, follow their interests, and find new experiences."