

A writer's life learned at Alta Vista

by Dawnya Pring

All 18 pairs of eyes in Niki Herrin's third-grade classroom were on Monty, a nonvenomous bald python.

"What does he like to eat?" guest speaker Lori Polydoros queried while she cradled Monty in her hands and walked with him around the room.

"Anything is OK... you're creating a character," said Polydoros, who was one of 40 professional writers participating in Alta Vista Elementary School's fifth annual Student Writers Conference — "The Write Stuff."

Remember, she said, he can eat anything.

"A peanut butter and jelly sandwich?" questions one writer-in-training. Or maybe Monty only has a hankering to munch on pink cupcakes, yells another.

"Anything," Polydoros says.

Polydoros' workshop "Voice — Making Your Own Characters Come Alive," was just one of 56 seminars conducted by professional writers and offered to the third-, fourth- and fifth-grade students at the

Redondo Beach elementary school last Friday.

The mission of the writers' conference is to help children become better writers by encouraging them to enjoy the writing process, think critically and use their imaginations, said parent and volunteer Candace Greene.

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"One of the real benefits of this conference is it is organized just like expensive writing conferences for adults," said Greene, herself a writer. "These kids are learning about real writing and getting

professional tips from working writers."

Greene, who has volunteered for the event for the last four years, said she plans to continue next year even though her daughter Frankie will be moving on to Perras Middle School and her son, an Alta Vista student, is still too young to attend.

"It is just a fabulous, fabulous event," said Greene, whose first professionally published piece will appear in the July issue of Working Mother magazine.

The conference is the brainchild of parent Janet Barker, who was inspired to create it after attending an international writing conference more than four years ago. Barker, along with third-grade teacher Sona Marsh, developed the Alta Vista program in 1999. It started with one fourth-grade classroom and has spread to all third-, fourth- and fifth-grade classes.

Scribes of all genres participate, from cartoonists and movie scriptwriters, to poets and journalists.

"I think it's a great way for children to see the many different writing careers out there," said Redondo Beach School Board President Arlene Staich, who attended the

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