

# Author Shares What It's Like To Be A Writer

By MEGAN WILLIAMS Daily News-Record

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Tami Charles knows a thing or two about elementary school students, particularly a thing or two about fifth graders.

The children's and young adult novelist was a teacher for 14 years, teaching third fourth and fifth graders.

Her familiarity with this group of students was evident on Thursday afternoon at Bluestone Elementary School, as she kept the school's fifth graders hanging on to her every word and laughing at her jokes.

Charles had a busy day on Thursday. She traveled from her home in Newark, N.J., to Weyers Cave, and spoke with fifth grade classes at Smithland Elementary School, Keister Elementary School and finally, Bluestone Elementary School.

"This is the part of my job that I like the most," Charles said. "Being an author, it can be very solitary. Usually, it's just me in my basement all hours of the day and night."

Ever since her first book was published in 2018 — "Like Vanessa" — she has been traveling all over the country talking to students, relating to them, and sharing what it's like to be an author. She has since published an additional four books.

"I love getting out and meeting the people who I write about and for — kids," Charles said.

Her travels have taken her all over the states and even to Dubai. But Thursday was her last appearance for 2019. Charles is planning to take the rest of the year off, not to take a break but to focus on writing. According to her website, Charles has five books slated to be published in the next two years.

Charles was speaking to students Thursday as part of Harrisonburg City Public Schools Superintendent Michael Richards' "The World is My Classroom" initiative.

During his first year as superintendent, Richards has only one academic initiative, which centers around this idea. It helps empower teachers to think beyond the classroom by providing resources and events, such as Thursday's with Charles.

During his time as superintendent, it has become clear to Richards that this type of opportunity has been needed for awhile, he said, but teachers can feel limited by standardized testing. It's the responsibility of the division, he said, to provide teachers what they need.

"It's about engagement and deeper learning that students will retain and use," he has said.

Students at all three elementary schools read the same book in preparation for Charles' visit — "Fearless Mary" — and came up with their own instructional unit to accompany the reading, said Suzanne Miller, language arts coordinator for the school division.

Smithland students read the book and then wrote persuasive letters to Charles about which character she should explore more in another book. Keister students made their lesson based on Charles' upcoming book, "Freedom Soup," which tells the story of a Haitian recipe and family traditions. Keister students are going to come up with their own recipes and persuade their classmates to try them.

Bluestone students focused on the concept of "unsung heroes," and wrote about characters from other books they've read that deserve more recognition.

"I want to break down the stereotypes about writers that occur, even within my own family," Charles said. She talked about how hard and tiring writing is, and said sometimes the feedback she gets isn't what she wanted to hear.

"I want students to take away that it's OK to mess up a little bit, and to make that connection to the classroom," Charles said, adding that once students see the final product, they can feel a sense of pride.

Contact Megan Williams at 574-6272 or [mwilliams@dnronline.com](mailto:mwilliams@dnronline.com). Follow Megan on Twitter @DNR\_Learn