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Best-selling author advises teens on how to become writers

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CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. - What would you do if a woman claiming to be Oprah Winfrey left a phone message stating she wanted to "start the largest book club in the world" with your debut novel?

Author Jacquelyn Mitchard erased the tape. Twice — because Winfrey called back the next day.

"I thought it was a friend playing a prank," Mitchard explains. "On the third day, my intern said, 'I think it's really Oprah because listen how mad she is!'"

Mitchard called back and "The Deep End of the Ocean" launched Oprah's Book Club in 1996; the book sold more than 5 million copies worldwide and spent three weeks in the No. 1 spot on the New York Times book list. The novel also was made into a film starring Michelle Pfeiffer in 1999.

"That proved to me that stories are powerful," the author recently told a rapt teenage audience at Chattanooga State Community College.

Just under 200 high school students — many of them aspiring writers — recently attended the Young Writers Conference to hone their creative writing skills in breakout sessions led by Chattanooga State faculty. Following lunch, Mitchard gave them advice based on her journey to success.

"Jacquelyn Mitchard is such an amazing guest for us this year," said Dr. Stanley "Buck" Weiss, Chattanooga State event organizer. "On top of being a

"There is one thing you can't get around: If you want to be a writer, you've got to be a reader."

JACQUELYN MITCHARD, AUTHOR

New York Times best selling author of 11 adult novels, she has written seven young adult novels as well. Even more interesting to our students, she is the head of her own young adult imprint, Merit Press.

Mitchard is one of numerous authors who have established themselves in adult fiction then crossed over into young adult novels. Some of the others: John Grisham, with his Theodore Boone: Kid Lawyer series, James Patterson's Middle School series, and spy-master David Baldacci's Vega Jane fantasy series.

"It's very appealing to be able to reach out to readers that you've never met, and that the usual books you write might not appeal to," says Mitchard.

"Also, it's smart for writers to do that. Teenagers are young now, but they are going to be adult readers later on."

"That part of yourself that is 16 years old never really goes away. Oh, you grow up and act differently, but that essential feeling you have at that age, you are never going to be that open to experience again in your life. That's part of why (writing YA fiction) is so attrac-

tive, because you can remember being that age."

Young Adult is aimed at ages 12 to 18, according to the Young Adult Library Services Association, although Mitchard narrows that span to 14 to 18. Typically, the protagonists of YA novels also fit within that age span, and their stories are told through their eyes.

Mitchard points out that writing for teens is "actually the only segment of publishing that is growing. It's growing not just in numbers, but in respect. Some of the best writing out there is for teenagers and young adults."

The YA publishing category raked in \$2.78 billion in net revenue in 2015, according to the Association of American Publishers. The number of YA titles more than doubled from 4,700 in 2002 to over 10,000 in 2012.

"Sales in young adult novels have tripled in the four years I've been here," concurs Kelly Flemings, community business development manager at Barnes & Noble Booksellers in Hamilton Place.

"It's shown growth ever since Harry Potter came out. I've seen a huge increase in both the number of new authors and crossover authors coming from adult to young adult. It's wonderful. It has grown the next generation of readers because of the quality of the work," he says.

Some market estimates say 70 percent of all YA titles are being purchased by adults ages 18 to 64.

Flemings agrees. "We see a lot of adults who are getting

over the stigma of going to the 'Kids Section' to read incredibly popular literature. A great deal of that movement is because YA subject matter is geared more around plots, characters and situations — without the adult language," he says.

At the Chattanooga State writing conference, Mitchard, mother of nine children, leveled with her teenage audience the same way she would with her own kids as she talked about pursuing creative writing.

She told them she hated every day of school, but she was proud to be the first in her family to graduate from high school. Her mother encouraged her love of reading, and Mitchard says she paid that forward at the conference.

"There is one thing you can't get around: If you want to be a writer, you've got to be a reader," she told the audience.

While she encouraged them to pursue a college degree, she assured them it didn't have to be in creative writing in order to become a writer. Her's in biology, she said, because she planned to become a doctor.

"If you develop a skill set in writing, there are a million things you can do with it," she said, revealing that she wrote warning labels for blow dryers and paint sprayers at one point to earn money.

Despite advice they may be given to "write every day if you want to be a writer," that really isn't necessary, she confided. She explained she works in "chunks of time. Long periods at a time."

Nurse

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"I just collapsed and she held me up."

Frank DuPree lived to be nearly 10. He lived a great life, his mother said. Bern DuPree, his brother and a past board chair of Clement's Kindness, was too young to remember his older brother's treatment, but "I do remember Ruth's presence."

"I remember her being around all the time and fast forward to now, I think she's served our board incredibly just by having a voice to be able to understand the needs of the families that we serve and to give her input on how we can better serve them," he said. "She's been an incredible asset to our board, as well as an incredible support for my parents and my brother."

Cook was one of the first people Dr. Cary Stroud, a pediatric hematologist-oncologist, met when he arrived at the hospital in 1973.

He knew then that he wanted her on his team, he said. And "from that day to this, she'll always be the head pediatric nurse to me," he said.

"If you spend a little time with Ruth you'll learn two things. First, she's a great lady. She really, really is. And second she is a special force for children," he said.

Cook can't explain exactly why she's always had a special love for children.

"They just always seemed to be drawn to me and I could relate to them," she said. "Children were just my thing and they still are."

Being a nurse was also her thing. Cook said her mother told her that she would tell people she wanted to be a nurse when she was a little girl.

One man said when Cook told him that "we laughed at you. She can't be a nurse. What is she talking about?"

Stroud, former medical director of



Clement's Kindness Fund dedicated a rocking chair in the BI-LO Charities Children's Cancer in honor of retired nurse Ruth Cook, seated. Pictured with Cook, from left to right, are Dr. Cary Stroud, medical director of the Pediatric Palliative Care GHS Children's Hospital, and Priscilla and Knox Haynsworth, founders of Clement's Kindness.

the BI-Lo Charities Children's Cancer Center and current medical director of the Pediatric Palliative Care Greenville Health System's Children's Hospital, said Cook's story is a remarkable one.

Though she could see Greenville General from her front porch, she couldn't go there for nursing school. She had to go to Atlanta.

"How wonderful times have changed," he said. "But she was up against discrimination, not enough money. She overcame all those things and she never seemed bitter about it, which is remarkable."

Cook said her parents had nine children. They were poor, lived in the country, and "got by the best they could."

Her mother would wash and iron clothes for people for \$2, while her father worked in the old Camperdown Mill.

When Cook graduated from high school, she told her mother she wanted to go to nursing school.

"My mother told my daddy and he said, 'She can't go. We don't have the money to send her to school,'" Cook said. "My mother said, 'I told him she's got to go.' So, they found a way to borrow the money for me to go. I'm so grateful for my parents."

Her job at Greenville General was her first after she graduated and returned to Greenville. Cook said she was promoted to head nurse in 1965, the first black in the hospital.

She did that for 25 years, she said. Cook said she then went to the University of South Carolina in Spartanburg to earn her degree. She was 70 when she retired in 2008.

At that time, she said, "I was completely fulfilled."

"I had 50 years of doing something I loved and enjoyed so much," she said. "I still get letters and cards from parents, grandparents, nurses and calls from so many."

"I had had what I wanted from of nursing. It's been a wonderful life."



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