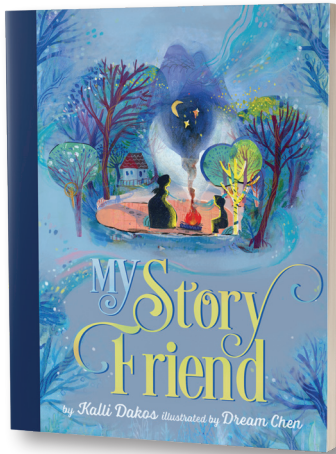




My Story Friend: Interview with the Author



There is the person who tells the story. This is the storyteller. And there is the person who listens to the story. This is the story friend.

Kalli Dakos' *My Story Friend* shows the journey of a child looking for his story friend. Magination Press interviewed Ms. Dakos about creating this beautiful picture book.

Magination Press: What inspired you to write *My Story Friend*?

Kalli Dakos: I've worked with students for over thirty years and have written over 3,000 poems about life in our classrooms and our schools. In order to write these poems, I had to listen carefully to the students' stories. I became a "listener" at a very deep level.

For example, when I found a child "hiding in the bathroom," I listened carefully to the story behind his decision to hide there and to the feelings that he expressed. Then I was able to write a poem that all students would understand.

Children want someone to really listen to them. We are a very busy society and there are so many expectations put upon parents and teachers. But I believe that taking the time to encourage our children to share their stories and their feelings is a form of the greatest love.

MP: Why is it important for people to be able to tell their stories?

KD: To be heard, to be understood at a deep level, is something we all crave. It helps us to feel that we are not alone in this world and that our Story Friend really has our best interests at heart. The child in my book went looking for this experience and found it with the old woman who had both the time and the heart to really listen to his story and the feelings behind them.

He was amazed at how much the simple act of telling his story helped him to understand his problems at a deep level where the solutions could also be found. He learned the value of "listening" at this level and became a Story Friend himself.

MP: Why is it important for people to listen to other people's stories?

KD: Storytelling was used long ago before psychology and psychiatry as healing medicine, and the storyteller was often the most honored member of the tribe or society. It is this healing quality of storytelling that makes it so important through all of time.

MP: The boy in the book struggles to find someone to listen to his story. He doesn't feel he can tell his family, and two other grown-ups tell him they don't want to listen to his story. What does it take to be a Story Friend? How can someone become a Story Friend if they are not one?

KD: It takes a great deal of practice to listen deeply to a child's story. Adults want to jump in and either tell the child what to do or move on to something else that they think is more important. Their own issues may also come in the way of any kind of authentic listening. We become Story Friends by realizing, above all, the healing value of this practice and then working on our skills to listen carefully and deeply.

MP: The boy's story explores his self-image and the impact of friends' teasing. Why did you choose this for his story?

KD: We are a society that values appearances. Children often judge each other quite harshly and the child in this story has taken on the values of the people who surround him. In order to build a stronger self-image, he has to understand that he is far more than his appearance. By delving into the lives of past generations in his family, he uses their legacy to discover his own self-worth.

MP: Self-talk and reframing are important self-care skills taught by therapists and social workers. Were these added to the story intentionally?

KD: I did not do this intentionally. I was telling a rather old-fashioned kind of story and even though self-talk and reframing are taught by therapists and social workers today, they have been used through all of time in healthy families and societies.

MP: You are a professional storyteller. How is that different from telling personal stories?

KD: Personal stories and professional ones can't be separate. They all come together in the magical art of storytelling.

MP: Are you a Story Friend, too? Did you have a Story Friend as a child? Do you have one now?

KD: I had many friends and wonderful family members as a child. But, I did not have that very special person who both understood the value of listening to my stories and took the time to do so. I didn't even realize we could share our deepest thoughts and feelings with others. It took me well into adulthood to understand how much a Story Friend would have brought healing to painful childhood experiences.

In adulthood, I have been blessed to find the real thing — true Story Friends.

MP: What was it like to see your illustrator Dream Chen's interpretation of your text?

KD: Amazing! Stunning! Magical! Her illustrations are so beautiful! They totally captured the story. We couldn't have found a better illustrator.

MP: What message do you hope children will take from this book? What message do you hope or think adults will take from it?

KD: I hope children will realize how important it is to share their stories with someone and to find at least one adult in their lives who will truly listen. If necessary, like the child in this story, they may need to go on a journey to find this person.

I hope adults will deeply listen to each other and to their children. In a society that has gone mad with technological devices, our children need the old-fashioned time, metaphorically speaking, around a campfire where everyone can really listen to each other.

These stories come with healing on their wings and I truly believe that listening with our hearts is one of the greatest forms of love we can give each other. Perhaps, in the end, it is the power of this love that provides the true healing.

This Article's Author

Kalli Dakos is a children's poet and educator. She visits schools across the United States and Canada to encourage children and teachers to write about their own lives. She has written many collections of school poems that include six ILA/CBC Children's Choice Selections, such as *If You're Not Here, Please Raise Your Hand*. She lives in Ottawa, Canada, and has an office in Ogdensburg, NY.