



Staff photo by Dominick J. Rebeck Jr.

Judi Brett sits with a copy of the book she wrote. The grant for 'Ethan Conquers his Fear' came from the state Division of Highway Traffic Safety, and copies have been distributed to every second-grade classroom in Cumberland County, as well as to day-care centers and public libraries in the county.

Former Millville High teacher writes her first children's book

By JOYCE VANAMAN
For The Press

MILLVILLE — After 33 years of teaching writing to Millville Senior High School students, Judi Brett rejoices that she's now doing her own writing.

"I do miss the kids, though," said Brett, who retired in June 2004. "I taught mostly 17-year-old juniors for all those years and I felt like 17. I've aged since then.

"I loved teaching 11th-graders. It was like watching a flower bud. They come in and open up in 11th grade and are in full bloom as individuals," Brett added.

Though she still sends e-mails to some former students, even correcting their grammar, nobody ever taught Brett what the word "retirement" means.

"I'm a hyperactive adult — I can't sit still to save my life," admits Brett, 57.

"I taught creative writing 25 of those years, and more than a dozen of my former students have had books published. I'm proud of them, and I wanted to have a book that I wrote published," she said. "Previously, I had a poem, short stories and several articles published, and now I have a book."

Displaying a copy of "Ethan Conquers his Fear," the first in a series of "Adventures with Buck, the Buckle-Up Dog," Brett proudly notes that she wrote it and local artist Diane Roberts illustrated it.

Buck, who has been depicted

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in coloring books and other literature, is gaining star status among Cumberland County's elementary school children. Buck is a lovable, goofy, charming almost 3-year-old large Doberman pinscher who "owns" William Garrison, Cumberland County Sheriff's Department's traffic safety coordinator.

Buck's message to children is to obey safety rules and to buckle up every time they ride in a vehicle.

"In getting ready to write the book, I took a series of pictures of Buck so I could get into his personality," Brett said.

Garrison explained that the grant for the book came from the New Jersey Division of Highway Traffic Safety. Copies have been distributed to every second grade classroom in Cumberland County, to day-care centers and to public libraries in the county.

Brett said she and Roberts are working on a bilingual book for the Buck series and in the future hope to do one for grandparents and their grandchildren.

"I appreciate everyone's help and interest in producing these books, especially Judi and Diane," Garrison said. The

Buck Books Committee will name the next book.

Besides the Buck books, Brett is working on a series of children's books that she hopes to get published. "One of them is about growing up with a blended family, which Chuck and I have," Brett said.

Brett explained that she and her first husband, Murray Talasnik, have two children, her current husband, Chuck, has two children from his first marriage, and she and Chuck, evaluation coordinator at the Education Institute of Rowan University, have two together.

"I am in several writers' groups and I do a lot of editing workshops, including a couple at Rowan," Brett said.

Brett's other part-time paid job is with Curves, where she encourages participants and teaches a weight management class.

One of her favorite volunteer jobs is writing for and editing the "Main Street News," which is published quarterly.

"I love doing this," Brett said. "I love Millville and raised my kids here. I can use my talent and interest and contribute to the community. I enjoy going around and interviewing the people."

Brett is enthusiastic about the revitalization of the downtown and the activities taking place there, including the monthly Third Friday festivities.

An avid reader, Brett said she is delighted to be a member of the Millville Public Library board of trustees. "It's very obvious to me that a new library should be a priority. The library needs to reflect the growth and positive changes taking place in Millville."

Brett said that early in her first marriage, she had a part-time summer job at the library.

"It was a disaster because I went home with seven or eight books and would sit down and read them and burn the dinner," she recalled.

Brett teaches the Pathfinders, an adult Sunday School class at First Presbyterian Church, where she is a deacon.

A native of Ohio, Brett graduated from Marietta College. The summer after her first year of teaching in Millville, she earned six graduate credits from the University of London, an experience she found especially interesting.

It's a toss-up whether Brett is more enthusiastic about writing or reading. She's a member of two book groups. "My all-time favorite book is 'To Kill a Mockingbird,' and my favorite author — since I was 10 — is Mark Twain," said Brett, adding that Pat Conroy is her favorite modern author.