

A Superhero . . . in Person

Dav Pilkey's Remarkable Visit and Message

ELLEN HUNTER RUFFIN

On Thursday, April 14, 2018, I received an early morning text from an old friend. It said:

Just wanted to share the below text with you. It came from my daughter, whose son was at the Dav Pilkey celebration yesterday . . . He is in the second grade and suffers from apraxia and dyslexia and is struggling to read. My daughter sent this to our family's group text:

"Today Tyler got to listen to Dav Pilkey [author of *Captain Underpants*] speak at USM [the University of Southern Mississippi]. He got a signed book. I know it's the excitement of meeting him but tonight was the first time he picked up a book to read 'just because.' He read the whole first chapter."

Sometimes we forget that lives can be changed through the work we do. Thanks for bringing Dave [sic] Pilkey to Hattiesburg!

That's right. Author Dav Pilkey came to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and lives were changed. He was the honoree at the fifty-first Fay B. Kaigler Children's Book Festival, April 11–13, 2018, and he is the fiftieth individual to receive the silver medallion from USM. The first was Lois Lenski in 1969, so this tradition has a remarkable history.



Just another caped fan waiting for his superhero—Dav Pilkey!

Pilkey graciously agreed to speak to some of our area children, which meant finding a venue large enough for the throngs of requests we had received once it was announced he would be in town! When Karen Rowell, director of the festival, listed the free event on social media, we were besieged with requests. Within two hours, we had requests from more than eight hundred people. It was clear the space we had originally reserved would not suffice.

We decided on the university's coliseum—the only place able to handle the crowds this particular rock star commands. It also meant we would not have to turn away any teacher's request or any parent's plea.



Ellen Hunter Ruffin is the Curator of the de Grummond Children's Literature Collection at The University of Southern Mississippi. A longtime member of ALSC, Ruffin has served on the Newbery Committee, the Legacy Award Committee, Arbuthnot Committee, and is serving her last term as the ALA Councilor for the state of Mississippi.



Author Dav Pilkey checks out artwork by one of his favorite artists, James Marshall, in the DeGrummond exhibit room.

The only concern would be the weather. We didn't want to deal with school buses circling around the coliseum and dropping children off in the rain. The venue required us to jump through some hoops, not the basketball kind, but the accommodating type. We would not be able to open the coliseum up to guests until the women's volleyball practice was finished, around 9:30 a.m.

And we were to use only one side of the coliseum, AND the assistant athletic director had a child who loves *Captain Underpants*. Interpretation: Make sure his child could attend.

The day dawned, and the weather was perfect, sparkling and clear, as a Mississippi spring day can be. The athletes who were supposed to be practicing were not in the coliseum (had Captain Underpants supplanted the women's volleyball practice?!), and all fifty of our volunteers were there with their red capes Scholastic had provided ("Reading gives you Super Powers!") securely fastened. Excitement was building. We were ready! Buses began arriving at approximately 9:30 a.m.—perfect.

What fun it was to observe the children filing into the coliseum. They were respectful and orderly, anticipating seeing one of their favorite authors in person. Upon entering the coliseum, everyone received a red cape, so the entire venue looked festive.

The university's mascot, a golden eagle known as Seymour (full name: Seymour d'Campus), came to entertain the children. He was dressed in underpants and a red cape, and the children loved it. Music was playing, Seymour was dancing, and the audience was excited.

At 10:30 a.m., the mayor, donning a red cape, welcomed Pilkey to Hattiesburg and presented him to the crowd. Captain Underpants himself bounded onto the stage and bellowed, "HELLOOO, MISSISSIPPI," and the audience exploded. From the moment he appeared, the children, parents, and teachers were spellbound. Of course, his presentation was creative and fun, weaving technology and "real time" together. Quite simply, Dav Pilkey was in charge.



Left to right: Ellen Ruffin, Seymour the Eagle, Sarah Mangrum of the Mississippi Library Association, and Karen Rowell, director of the Fay B. Kaigler Book Festival.

When I say Pilkey “told his story,” I mean he was transparent with the audience. As a child, reading had not come easily for him. He struggled with dyslexia, something his teachers did not know how to treat. His experiences with a disapproving librarian colored his entire school existence. She would sniff at the books he chose, making comments about the picture-books he loved. It was an isolating experience for him because he was certain he was the only one with reading difficulties.

However, during those trying years, Pilkey learned he could entertain his friends by drawing pictures, by telling stories with his drawings. He drew cartoons depicting his teacher, which his classmates loved. His teacher did *not* appreciate his drawings, and he remembered what she would say to him—“You can’t make a living drawing silly pictures!”

Fortunately for Pilkey, his parents knew he was not stupid. They encouraged him to read what he *wanted*. Since *words* gave Dav problems, he liked books with lots of *pictures* because he *could* read those. Even though his school librarian did not always appreciate his selections, he knew his parents supported him.

All the while, he continued to draw. He even invented a character known as Dogman, who is still with him! He eventually discovered comics, and he read the classics in comic book form. The point . . . he *was* reading, *and* he was learning.

The talk Dav Pilkey delivered to Mississippi children gave them hope and courage. The text message I received from my friend is proof of that. For the *first* time, her grandson picked up a book to read “just because.”



Dav Pilkey was eager to meet his fans, and fans of Captain Underpants, at his book signing.

The excitement of the morning carried on throughout the entire book festival. I, for one, wore my Super Power cape every day, and I wasn’t alone.

On Thursday, when our university president presented Pilkey with the fiftieth silver medallion that stated, “His talents have enriched the lives of children,” he, too, donned a heroic red cape. The medallion has the likeness of Pilkey on one side, and on the other side is a depiction of his beloved Captain Underpants.

Dav Pilkey is a hero. He is generous and warm to a fault. Children love his books. Teachers and librarians become heroes when they introduce children to Captain Underpants or Dogman or any other Pilkey work.

Much has changed since Pilkey was in school. Librarians and teachers *want* children to read books of their choice. We understand more about how to unlock the puzzles to words. It is a better time. Learning disabilities no longer signal a dead end. Children acquire decoding skills and apply them.

This is not to imply the road to reading is easy. However, teachers and librarians can connect their students to the joy of story. I saw it for myself during that festival when more than two thousand people were transfixed by a true superhero author. &

For more information about the USM past medal recipients, visit <https://www.usm.edu/childrens-book-festival/past-medal-lion-recipients>.