

Beachcombing ...

Turns into a tale
of a Mermaid
by Branford
grandmother

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By Lisa Reisman

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THIS IS A STORY ABOUT A STORY CONCEIVED BY AN 86-YEAR-OLD Branford grandmother, and assembled, part by part, with the help of a neighbor, her cleaning lady, her sons, and a New Haven graphic designer, along with her part-Labrador, part-border-collie Misty.

It's a story about a woman who was afflicted with polio at the age of 4, and with the help of her pharmacist father, retaught herself how to walk.

Maybe that explains why Madelyn Kavanaugh, who will read aloud "Mermaid Tears" at Branford's First Congregational Church Jan. 15, can be found ambling with Misty along a trail by the Long Island Sound and down to a small beach near her home in virtually every kind of weather and at least twice a day. Or maybe it doesn't.

What's clear is that without those walks — 24 years of those twice-daily walks, to be precise — there would be no exquisitely rendered "Mermaid Tears."

That's because for 24 summers of those 24 years, the snowy-haired East Haven native with the sky-blue eyes watched kids playing on the beach, collecting sea glass, turning it over and over again as the sun glanced off its face. She observed them showing the sea glass to their parents and grandparents, then gaz-



Madelyn Kavanaugh, a newly-minted children's author at 86, will be giving a reading on Jan. 15. The book came out of her long walks on the beach with her dog. Book cover above; photo at right by Lisa Reisman.

ing at the sparkling waters. Gradually an idea formed.

On one of those summer walks, she encountered a neighbor. As Misty poked around in the rocks and then settled at her feet, she told the neighbor that she'd been jotting down notes for a story about children and sea glass and a mermaid and the power of believing. She just wasn't sure how to put them together. Or, if it was even worthy of a book.

Email me the notes, the neighbor said.

Kavanaugh had a computer,

but only her three grandchildren used it. She didn't know the first thing about word processing, much less how to email. All her notes were in longhand.

Eventually, though, she carefully folded three sheets of handwritten notes on loose-leaf paper into an envelope and left it in the neighbor's mailbox.

"I told myself I had nothing to lose," the long-time volunteer for the St. Mary's Ladies Guild recalled on a recent



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Mermaid: Branford woman writes first children's book at age 86, inspired by the sea

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afternoon.

Over the few months, the two transformed the notes into scenes and the scenes into a story. Meanwhile, Kavanaugh mentioned to her cleaning lady, Monica Loomis, that she'd been working on a book for children. Loomis had trained at the Rhode Island School of Design and illustrated children's textbooks and storyboards for years, she said. Lately, however, those kinds of jobs were hard to come by. She offered to help.

"Of course I had no idea how gifted an artist she was," Kavanaugh said about her cleaning lady. Not until, that is, having led Loomis on a tour of the "magical path," as she likes to describe it, the two trading ideas on which details to include, she beheld Loomis' whimsical, vibrantly colored and breathtakingly detailed illustrations.

Perhaps the steely determination forged in her youth accounts for what happened when one of her sons found a publisher online offering to take the text and illus-

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— Madeline Kavanaugh

Monica Loomis had trained at the Rhode Island School of Design and illustrated children's textbooks and storyboards for years, she said. Above is the colorful centerspread from the book, a charming seashore scene.

trations and print a book. The catch: the cookie-cutter design, the paperback cover, and the astronomical sum for the 500 copies she would be required to order. She balked.

"I still wasn't sure if anyone would want to read it, much less buy it," said Kavanaugh, of her decision to put it together herself. "All I knew was that I wanted a quality book, a hardcover book, one with quality paper. I could only see those gorgeous illustrations on quality paper."

There were bumps along the way. A graphic designer in the area agreed to take on the job, quoting what seemed an exorbitant hourly rate. When Kavanaugh pressed her for an estimate of how many hours the job would entail or, alternatively, for a fixed price, the graphic designer abruptly backed out.

Kavanaugh despaired. She not

only knew nothing about the self-publishing process; she didn't know anyone who knew anyone she could trust to guide her through it.

Just as she was about to give up, she learned through a neighbor of a graphic designer in New Haven. After giving her a high-low range for the project, Virginia Blaisdell made a mock-up of the text and pictures on heavy stock paper. She found typefaces for Kavanaugh to choose from. At her kitchen table, the two pored over each page of a sample copy from a commercial printer in Rochester, New

York. With trepidation, Kavanaugh ordered 100.

That was in July. Over the next four months, word of her book spread. Neighbors stopped her and Misty along the path, requesting copies for their children and grandchildren. She did readings at the Canoe Brook Center and for the St. Mary's Ladies Guild and a first-grade class at the Mary Murphy School in Branford. The response was uniformly enthusiastic. Along with the First Congregational Church, the Blackstone Library and the Sliney School have agreed to host upcoming events in town.

And just last week, a woman phoned. She had given her granddaugh-

ter "Mermaid Tears" for Christmas, she said, and having read it aloud to her, the little girl had taken to carrying it around with her all day.

"That kind of call makes the whole process worth it," said Kavanaugh with some measure of delight and wonder at how it all came together. "The story that's been in my head for years is out in the world, it's making people happy, and I'm having the time of my life."

"Mermaid Tears" is available at the Branford Book & Card Shoppe, 1024 Main St., 203-488-5975 for \$25 plus tax or by calling 203-483-0055. Public reading takes place at 10 a.m., Jan. 15, at the First Congregational, Branford Church 1009 Main St., Branford.



Reading of Mermaid Tears

Mermaid Tears

By Madelyn Romano Kavanaugh
Illustrated by Monica Lornis



BRANFORD - Inspired by her many walks on the beach and the vision of children endlessly searching for seaglass, Madelyn Kavanaugh, a Branford grandmother, will read "Mermaid Tears" at an event sponsored by Blackstone Kids at Blackstone Memorial Library.

This event is for pre-K through second grade and will take place on the Branford school system's half day from 2 to 3 p.m. on March 26 at Blackstone Memorial Library, 758 Main St. Phone: 203-488-1441. Registration for this program is not required. Questions for the author are welcome.