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UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON TACOMA

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Circle time—Belinda Louie reads to an attentive audience at the community center she helped create.

ONCE UPON A BOOKWORM

Professor of Education Belinda Louie brings Chinese children's stories to life—and a wealth of literature to students.

By Sandra Sarr

Ever since Belinda Louie was a little girl growing up in Macau, China, her best friends were books. She could pick them up anytime she wanted, and they offered her comfort, wisdom and adventure. But these friends weren't easy to come by. There was no library in her hometown, located 40 miles from a major city. She relied on her father to bring her books he purchased while away on business.

"Other kids hugged their stuffed animals. I hugged my books," says Louie, who found a way to parlay her love of books into a shining career.

'I wanted children in the United States to read traditional Chinese stories about outstanding Chinese children in history.'

A founding professor in UW Tacoma's Education Program, Louie is a children's literature expert who recently wrote a book of her own, *Learning Chinese Through Stories and Activities* (2007, Book Publishers Network).

"I wanted children in the United States to read traditional Chinese stories about outstanding Chinese children in history," she says. "Children are the main characters in the stories, and they are good problem solvers."

Louie conveys, in both Chinese and English, 10 traditional tales in fresh language so that children in the United States can access authentic, traditional stories that portray Chinese cultural heritage.

"Stories will stay with you, and so will the language. Language and culture cannot be separated," she says, noting that Chinese-language learners often have difficulty finding engaging, relevant material that goes beyond the functional level of "Hello, how are you?"

The stories in her book are famous in China, but they have not been available in this country, according to Louie, who received the Virginia Hamilton Essay Award last year for her contribution to multicultural juvenile literature.

She believes that her book fills a gap in children's literature. And after 17 years in the field, she knows the territory. She serves on six national literacy projects, reviewing children's books and overseeing a program in which children review books for publishers.

The mother of son, Philip, and daughter, Andrea, both University of Washington students, Louie believes it's important to show that Chinese people can be outstanding in many ways, not just intellectually. The book's central characters are important historical figures in Chinese culture, and their actions and choices show they're bold and courageous.

"When they encounter difficulty, they stay and deal with the situation," Louie says. "They're calm, and then they can resolve the problem. Some are life-and-death situations."

Some of the stories in her book involve pain, and that's a good thing, according to Louie. Exposing children to difficult stories in a supportive environment is a healthy way to prepare them for the harsh realities of life.

"It provides a distance from pain, a psychological immunization," says Louie. "We cannot shelter our children. But we can prepare them. Children must learn to be problem solvers."

Her research shows that children empathize with literary characters their own age, rather than adults. She wants young readers to see how they can emulate the child heroes in the stories by observing how they deal with hard situations. In this way they build psychological resilience to life's challenges—all while learning the Chinese language.

One of the stories in Louie's book shows the son of the imperial librarian asking his father's permission to tour the country outside the quiet walls of the library. The boy, Sima Qian, has studied ancient texts and yearns to see the places he's read about in stories. At age 20, he sets out on a dangerous trek and collects information that eventually leads to his writing *Chronicles of the Chinese Dynasties*. People still study it today, according to Louie.

"What kinds of problems do you think that Sima had to overcome when he traveled?" Louie asks young readers in her book's question for reflection. Such a question accompanies each story, along with an activity to help students integrate the lesson.

Louie began studying English when she was in kindergarten and can appreciate the challenges of learning a foreign language. Like the character Sima Qian, Louie, too, set out for foreign lands at age 20, when she came to the United States to enroll at the University of Washington. Now she holds degrees in English, history and education.

In 1981, she married Douglas Louie, a family practice doctor and minister. In 2006, in honor of their 25th wedding anniversary, he gave \$25,000 to the University of

Washington to establish the Professor Belinda Y. Louie Children's and Young Adult Literature Endowed Collection at the University of Washington Libraries.

Her son, Philip Louie, says he was influenced early on by his mother's collection. "As a child, I remember getting lost in the world of my mother's children's books. Her wonderful collection allowed the both of us to journey into different worlds and adventures. Her love for learning and her passion to work with children has truly inspired me to approach situations with both an open mind and an open heart."

Husband Douglas has committed to adding 5,000 books to the collection housed in the UW Tacoma Library and commissioned paper-cut artwork by Bellevue artist Aki Sogabe, who collaborated with Louie on her book. The framed piece hangs in the UW Tacoma Library.

"Each of Aki's pictures is a work of art. She doesn't take creative license on cultural details. She's researched the clothing, architecture and other details pertinent to my book's stories. She has taken care to portray images that are culturally accurate," says Louie.

The library endowment in Belinda Louie's name and the Louies' careers in medicine and higher education are only some of the ways she and her husband go about fulfilling their vision. They want to benefit as many people as possible now and in the future.

In 2002 they co-founded the Chinese Christian Church of Tacoma in a 10,000-square-foot building the church purchased to house multiple services the Louies offer to the community. In addition to the church, it also houses their Chinese Community Center, Ruston Christian Child Care Center, and Evergreen Chinese Academy. The academy, accredited by the Northwest Association of Schools, offers instruction in Chinese language, culture and heritage, as well as classes in Chinese harp, brush painting, tai chi and integrated health, and a summer Chinese Immersion Program. Many of the classes are open to both children and adults. Their Pearl Street church facility, located in Ruston, houses classrooms, a computer lab, libraries for both students and instructors, a music room, tai chi room, an outdoor playground and garden, and a kitchen, where free homemade breakfasts are served to the community the Louies have served over the past six years.

In recognition of their participation in the community, the Northwest Asian Weekly Foundation presented them with its Outstanding Contributors Award in 2006.

Back on the UW Tacoma campus, Louie can be seen rolling boxes of books down the hall to her "book closet" (actually her faculty office), so crammed with tomes that she refuses to let visitors glimpse inside. It's her private haven, her sanctuary made of books. And it's where she researched and wrote a content analysis of 100 years of Korean children's literature, a five-year project. Now she's tackling Chinese children's literature throughout the past 150 years.

"I always stay in the world of stories. They're my excuse for avoiding housework," she says, letting loose familiar peals of laughter that can be heard any time she's near.