

Community gathers around Tohickon Valley kindergarteners after bus accident

By Ricki Stein, QCSD Community Relations Coordinator

What is there to write about? Just ask 19 Tohickon Valley kindergarteners who escaped injury Tuesday, April 20, when a pickup truck slammed into the back of their bus. An instant outpouring of adult care and kindness helped the children keep emotions and nerves in check and the kindergarteners went about their Kid Writing business as usual on Wednesday.

Tohickon Valley Principal Scott Godshalk and kindergarten teacher Beth Davco called all of the adult helpers “heroes.” Policemen, firefighters, emergency medical services personnel, Levy Bus Company personnel, QCSD Transportation Director Lynn Routson and St. Luke’s Hospital employees all fit the heroes’ profile at the end of the day.

Frankly, sounding out the words and drawing pictures for Kid Writing could not match the excitement of the verbal stories children told around the carpet in class on Wednesday. Eager boys and girls regaled a reporter with tales told with large arm gestures, wide eyes, hiccups and gap-toothed grins.

“A guy in an old pickup truck was going so fast. I heard a big boom!” Anthony related, winding up and clapping his hands in front of his face. “I saw all the smoke. We got straight out of the bus and then I saw all the damage on the front of his truck.”

“I was crying because I never went in an accident before,” said Karly. “We hit our necks on the seat and then we got off the bus and sat under a big tree.”

“We got to sit in wheelchairs at the hospital and pick our own snacks,” Cody F. added.

School bus driver Sue Cramp picked the children up in front of the school at 11:45 a.m., as usual. A few students got off at the first stop. At 11:55 a.m., she turned on the flashing red lights and stopped at the second stop, on Brick Tavern Road, less than a mile from school.

Before Victoria could get out of her seat to head out the bus door, the truck slammed into the back of the bus and pushed it 20 feet down the road.

Ethan claimed he saw the truck “flying” fast before it hit the bus, but considering that “Miss Sue” makes all students sit in the front of the 48-passenger bus, properly in their seats, and reminds them of the rules every day, that witness account most likely did not happen! Her rules include, “Do not get out of your seat until the bus has completely stopped.”

As students settled into their seats for the ride home Wednesday, Mr. Godshalk stepped aboard and praised them for



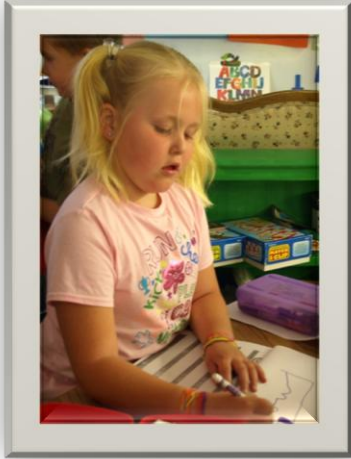
following the rules. “It kept you all safe,” he told them, adding, “And that’s why Miss Sue is the best bus driver in the world!”

Shaking off the jolt she felt upon Tuesday’s impact, Miss Sue dialed 9-1-1 and Levy Bus. In a hurry, two ambulances, police cars and a fire truck arrived on the scene, followed quickly by Mrs. Routson, Len Pawlowski from Levy, Mrs. Davco and Mr. Godshalk.

“Like magic, they were there!” Victoria said.

As soon as she got the phone call in her classroom, Mrs. Davco jumped into her car and sped to the scene, less than a mile away. After parking her car, she ran toward the children.

“They thought I had run all the way from school,” she said, chuckling.



Police and fire officials moved children off the bus and sat them under a tree until they could make sure everyone was safe. They moved students back on the bus, “in exactly the same seats,” so they could investigate the accident. The seating charts Miss Sue kept posted on the bus ceiling helped expedite the process.

Another bus arrived from Levy and transported the children, Mrs. Davco, Mr. Godshalk and Miss Sue to St. Luke’s Hospital, on Park Avenue. Paramedics said they didn’t think any children were hurt, but they wanted them to get checked.

By the time the bus arrived, 20 hospital employees, including doctors, nurses, custodians and secretaries, waited at the emergency room door with 20 wheelchairs for 19 children and one adult.

“We were really taken aback to see them,” Godshalk said. “They were highly organized. It was very impressive.”

Meanwhile, back at Tohickon Valley, the phone started ringing. Parents waiting at the bus stops started to worry. Secretary Mary Carol Swanson answered phones and called other parents possible, telling them to pick their children up at the hospital.

“Parents called into school or were called. In one way or another, they were all informed and showed up at the hospital,” Godshalk said.

“The hospital staff members were heroes,” Mrs. Davco said. “They were calm and caring. The parents were wonderful. I can’t say enough about all the people involved. Neighbors near the bus stop were helpful. Everyone was. The police officers were adorable with the children.”

Hospital staff worked very efficiently, placing a band on each child’s wrist. Students were able to report their names and some were able to give their address and phone numbers. Asked what their mom’s name was, some kids replied, “Mom.”

Riding in the wheelchairs and the snacks may have been the coolest part of the experience, for the children. Simon tried to jump out of the wheelchair to go talk to Mr. Godshalk. He got caught in the foot rest and fell on the cement.

“The only visible injury on anyone of the whole experience was Simon, from falling out of the wheelchair onto the cement,” Mrs. Davco said. He didn’t want a small bandage, so a doctor wrapped his arm in white gauze, making his little “booboo” look more impressive than it was.

From noon to 3 p.m., when the event finally ended, most people kept their emotions in check. Mrs. Davco said Tyler's grandfather came into the hospital and sat down next to her. He just cried. She also talked to the driver of the pickup truck, saved by his airbag. He also cried. "I told the children he's not a mean man. He was upset and worried about the children."

At 3 p.m., Mr. Godshalk sent a Connect Ed email to all parents at Tohickon Valley. On Wednesday, Miss Sue pulled up in front of TV at 11:40 a.m., right on time. The kids filed up the steps, several remarking, "Nice new bus, Miss Sue!" Miss Sue had a sore leg but she wanted to drive the students home Wednesday, to "keep things as normal as possible for the children." She did bring along backup, Lydia Sheehan, who planned to drive the afternoon students to kindergarten.

Congressman Patrick Murphy phoned from Washington, D.C. after reading the story in the Wednesday morning *Intelligencer*. He plans to visit students and St. Luke's staff members to commend them for making the best of what could have been a more serious situation.



"This group of kids is so good," Mrs.

Davco said. "The boys thought the whole thing was awesome and they were saying, 'Look at the truck.' The girls were consoling each other. Thank god no one was seriously hurt."

As they settled into their Kid Writing and illustrating, the biggest problem a group of girls and boys needed to settle was the color of the truck. The girls insisted it was green and the boys insisted it was black.

"Let's just call it blackish green,"

Lorelie concluded with a flap of her arms.