



STORY BY
KAREN PATON-EVANS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ST. LOUIS STUDIO

KRISTI MASON

Teenaged Authors Can Do Spirit Triumphs Over Disorder

IN A FEW SHORT WEEKS, KRISTI MASON of Tecumseh will become one of Canada's youngest published authors. Her book of fiction, written for children, is the teenager's first literary attempt. *The Adventures of Connecticut: Connecticut's Journey to Grand Central Station* will be sold in Chapters and Indigo bookstores, where Kristi will sign copies and chat with readers.

That a teenager could imagine and produce an original book in her spare time is remarkable. That the finished book would be accepted and published by an important publisher is incredible. That the project was driven by the determination of a special education student is nothing short of miraculous.

Kristi has apraxia, a developmental coordination disorder that creates fine and gross motor difficulties, affecting speech, written language, thought process and physical agility. Her mom, Jodi, says, "Kristi is not afraid at all of expressing her individuality or being judged. She lives with no fear."

Even so, "Kristi has always had to work way harder than other kids," Jodi believes. In facing so many hurdles throughout her young life, Kristi has learned to accept challenges, knowing she must put in great effort to achieve her goals. Rather than permitting her disabilities to curb her dreams, she just goes for it.

Difficulties with motor coordination did not thwart the girl's desire to play piano. She

took lessons and graduated grade one piano at age of 10. "It was a lot of work but great for her self esteem," Jodi recalls.

In grade eight, Kristi's ambition turned to politics. Wanting to become the prime minister of her elementary school, she threw herself enthusiastically into the race, making campaign signs and soliciting votes. Even though Mom expected her spunky girl would lose the election, she told her to keep dreaming big. When the ballots were counted, Kristi was declared the winner by one vote.

Reflecting upon the astonishing outcome, Jodi says of her daughter, "She just won the hearts of so many kids....I think it has to do with her spirit. She is so genuine people want to encourage her."

One of Kristi's greatest encouragers is her aunt, Shelley Awad, who also lives in Tecumseh. Kristi hadn't shown much interest in books until 2009, when Shelley's first children's book was published. Kristi eagerly read *The Greenhouse Kids*, Dan Delion's *Secret*. Then she made up her mind to write her own story.

The fledgling author didn't know how to go about crafting a book, although she had past experience in forming storylines and developing characters: Kristi has written plays and cast friends and relatives for her summer productions at the family cottage. Last year's theatrical sensation was *How to Be a Good Boyfriend*. This season's play is titled *Roger's Girlfriend Battles Cancer*.

After a birthday trip to New York City in June 2009, Kristi returned home with a head full of ideas. Juggling classes and homework, the St. Anne's High School student, then aged 16, spent most of her free time from September through December at the family computer, letting loose her creative powers. Onto the screen emerged a 17-year-old boy, named Connecticut in honour of the state governed by his mother at the time of his birth. Horrifically, his parents were killed by thugs storming the hospital. The orphaned infant was taken in by his grandmother. Years later, when the ailing grandmother went into a nursing home, teenaged Connecticut was adopted by a family secretly living in Grand Central Station, where *The Adventures of Connecticut* really took off.

"It just kind of came to me," comments the author of her surprising plot, geared for readers age 9 to 12 years old. Any

violence Kristi has witnessed has been on television, so she drew upon prime time TV images for the shocking killings. As for the book's primary setting in the massive marble train station, her firsthand experience and fertile imagination provided the details required to foster Connecticut's escapades.

As the book took shape, "it gave us a real look inside her heart and the way she looks and feels about the world," says Jodi. "Kristi is not very well-spoken, not refined in her language. What we learned was her thoughts come out much easier through writing." Mom also finds, "Fantasy helps her cope with her disabilities."

When Kristi felt she had done her best, she asked Aunt Shelley to read and critique her story. Shelley was impressed by her niece's achievement and agreed to help get it ready to present to her own publisher for consideration. The task of editing and rewriting took nine months. "The challenge for me was not making it mine but keeping it hers," Shelley admits. "I kept the storyline as close to what Kristi had written as possible. The end result is really her story."

Shelley presented the book to her publisher, Borealis Press in Nepean, Ontario. Niece and aunt were thrilled to have their co-authored work accepted. *The Adventures of Connecticut* is scheduled for release this spring.

"Borealis Press believe she's the youngest they have ever published," Shelley says of her niece. "It's very exciting for anyone to get published. I think because Kristi is a special education student, that makes it that much more special."

Believing Kristi "will be an inspiration," Shelley commends her co-author for living the idea: "If you really want to succeed at something and keep trying, you can."

With one book about to launch, Kristi is hoping *The Adventures of Connecticut* will continue as a series written in partnership with her aunt. "We'll see how this book does," she says.

Her future plans combine careers as an author and an educational assistant to help students with special needs.

Right now, however, Kristi is looking forward to official book signings with Aunt Shelley. Her family is hinting about a celebration. Visits to local schools, with emphasis on special education classes, are being planned. Thinking about addressing students, Kristi has decided, "I'm just going to say to them: If you have a dream, follow it to the end because it might come true. And work hard!"

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