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The Boy in the Storybook

Teacher tracks down real-life main character from ‘Jason Wants a Library’

by Michele Armanino
Special to Richfield Reaper

What would compel a teacher to fervently search for a real-life character from a forty-year-old children’s literature book? I’m not obsessive or fanatical, but that’s exactly what I did.

There is a decades-old book sitting on a shelf in my third-grade classroom. When the Common Core Curriculum was introduced a few years back, many teachers recycled or donated these outdated readers. But I accommodate the well-worn book series, which takes up precious space, for one reason—a story in one of the volumes on page 184 titled “Jason Wants a Library” by Margaret Patton. This story captivates my students year after year, and I always anticipate the spring when we read this heartwarming piece together. I never tire of hearing the children’s animated voices when discussing the main character, Jason Hardman, a tenacious 10-year-old boy who started a library in his small, rural town of Elsinore, Utah.

I begin my lesson by talking about the state of Utah, its location, and its interesting history. Then we delve into the story about this young fellow named Jason who, in 1980, lived in Elsinore with a population of 680 people. As Elsinore had no library, Jason, an avid reader, borrowed his sister’s bicycle and pedaled six miles to the town of Monroe to borrow books.

And he began to wonder why his town should have to suffer without a library just because they lived in a backwoods location.

After months of grumbling to his parents about this injustice, Jason, accompanied by his dad (who advised his son that if this was something he really wanted, he would have to do all the talking), spoke at a town council meeting. Jason asked the mayor if he could use a space somewhere in the vicinity to start a library. During the question-and-answer period, the young boy did his best to appear capable and responsible by answering the questions posed by the council members. After the meeting, Jason called the mayor daily, asking if they had made a decision. Finally, six months later, Jason received the good news that he could start a library in the basement of the old schoolhouse in Elsinore's 1890's town hall building.

The Hardman family spent two months cleaning and painting the basement, and Jason and his dad built bookshelves. A reporter from *The Richfield Reaper*, a weekly newspaper in nearby Richfield, learned about Jason and the library, and they printed an article about his enormous project. The article resulted in an avalanche of donated books that flooded the Hardman household from impressed and caring locals.

On opening day in 1980, a hundred people came to see Jason's new library. Little did Jason know that his exceptional project and remarkable actions would be recognized by President Ronald Reagan. Reagan twice invited young Jason to the White House, where they discussed America's rural needs and Jason received an award for service to his small community. Jason was the youngest person to ever testify before a joint congressional hearing.

LeVar Burton's popular children's TV show "Reading Rainbow" featured Jason and his library in one of their episodes, hoping to encourage kids to read. A surprising request to appear on Johnny Carson's popular "The Tonight Show" left Jason feeling nervous but excited. Worldwide, people were delighted by the story of this little boy.

Jason is our class inspiration. Every time I start a new service project with my students, I sing out, "If Jason could do it, so can we!" Through all our third-grade projects and fundraisers, Jason is always in the background empowering my students.

After reading "Jason Wants a Library" again one day, I ask my class, "Should we try to track Jason down, and invite him to visit our class to tell us what it was like to start a library in his little town?" The response is so overwhelmingly positive, I wonder why I hadn't thought of this

before. And so begins the journey to find this budding little librarian who, forty years later, is now a grown man.

First, I contact the tiny Elsinore Library, which is open only a few days a week. I ask the volunteer librarian if she knows what happened to Jason. Her response is disheartening. Jason moved away shortly after high school and no one has heard from him. Then I speak with the mayor of Elsinore, who surely must have some knowledge of this local, well-known family from the past. I'm told they moved to Lehi, a nearby suburb, years ago. Everyone seems to have lost track of Jason.

Disconnected telephone numbers become a regular and annoying occurrence, and I begin to wish they would change the voice on the recordings. I boldly call people out of the blue and expect terse, don't-bother-me responses but that is never the case. People are empathetic as I explain my story, and they try their best to help me.

I scour the internet to see if there are others out there looking for Jason, and find a few twenty-year-old postings from teachers who were wondering the same thing I am now. What happened to Jason Hardman?

I'm elated the day when, gripped in my hand, I have the cell phone number of a friend from Jason's youth. I think the ball is finally beginning to roll. However, I am told that while Jason was just in Elsinore a month earlier visiting friends, no one has a contact number for him. I am surprised by my intense feelings of frustration. The fruitless searches are mounting, making my goal seem more and more unattainable.

I ask myself, *What's going on with me? Why am I so obsessive in my quest to find Jason?* I feel like a dog with a bone.

After much reflection, I contemplate the hundreds of children I've taught during my career, and how I would gladly pay to know if I made a positive impact on their lives. I can still hear their chattering little voices, but they're grown now, possibly with families of their own.

My mind wanders back to the little boy who loved to sew but kept it a secret for fear of being teased. So, I created a sewing project for the class to make a period costume for my dachshund, Lou. Now the boy could sew to his heart's content with no worries about being bullied. What happened to him? Did he become a clothes designer? Did he work in the textile industry? Did I give him the courage to be himself? And the anxious little girl who had to sit

near the open classroom door all year long...did I help to assuage her fears? Is she a functioning adult now? I feel an immediate, intense need to let Jason know what I wish I knew. Have I made a difference in the lives of my students? I am not giving up. He is out there, and I will find him and tell him.

I manage to find an email address for the author of “Jason Wants a Library,” Margaret Patton, and hope that forty years later, she will still be around. It’s a needle in a haystack but I’m going to give it a shot. Not only does Margaret immediately respond, but she is delighted to learn about my search to find Jason and asks to be kept abreast of any findings. She remembers her delightful interview with the articulate young boy, and although she has no information about where to find him, Margaret sends me a cassette tape that includes an interview with Jason, and articles that she has kept about him. Now I really feel propelled! If I can find Jason, the three of us can meet. Won’t Jason be pleased!

While searching for members of Jason’s family, I come upon a fairly recent death notice for Wayne Hardman, Jason’s father. I telephone the mortuary and explain why I am trying to locate Jason. At this point, I am so driven that I have to consciously conduct myself in a calm manner so as not to seem overzealous. The gracious person on the other end of the line tells me that they would be happy to contact Jason’s mother and forward my request. Yes, Linda Hardman, Jason’s mom. I look at her picture on page 190—her kind face gazing lovingly at Jason while he accomplishes the tedious task of sorting through the thousands of books piled in the Hardman living room after his appearance on “The Tonight Show.”

Months pass and while I haven’t received any news about Jason, I am tickled to have begun a pen-pal relationship with Margaret Patton. Peggy, as she asks me to call her, tells me all about her career as a writer and her interesting life in Boston. We connect immediately, having the same sense of humor, interests, and of course, curiosity about what happened to Jason. I begin to think that even if I never find Jason, Peggy Patton is the gift for all of my toils.

One Monday morning while sitting at my desk at school, I open my computer to print out my lesson plans for the day. I stare incredulously at my email inbox. The words “Jason Hardman” in black letters appear on my computer screen. I freeze, afraid to click on the email for fear of deleting it by mistake and losing the results of my exhaustive sleuthing. Taking a deep breath, I open the note and read: *“I received a phone call from my mother in Lehi, UT saying you are trying to locate me.”* The direct, matter-of-fact statement leaves me stunned.

At this point, the bell rings and students are coming into the classroom. I can't wait to tell them that the mystery has been solved. We found Jason! As they sit at their desks ready to begin the day, I slide my computer under the document camera and project Jason's email onto the SmartBoard screen for them to read. It only takes a second before the cheers of thirty-six third graders are heard throughout the school. I try hard not to cry, but the pure excitement of the children's jubilation is beyond joyful.

I respond to Jason immediately, telling him how I wish he could have been in my classroom when the children heard he had been located. Would he be so kind, I ask, to answer questions from the students either by Facetime or email? Jason, who expresses his utter surprise that anyone remembers him, responds that he will be happy to answer by email, as in his line of work, it is difficult to Facetime.

His line of work... Now my curiosity is piqued. What did the youngest librarian in the world become when he grew up?

I assist the class in composing twenty questions, and admit that I slip a few in there myself. Students want to know if his friends treated him any differently after he became famous. Many want to know what his job is as an adult. Some want to know if he was able to play sports while organizing the library. They want to know if he has children. I want to know if he knew what questions Johnny Carson was going to ask him ahead of time. At the end of the email, I invite Jason to come to our class to speak about his library, knowing it's a long shot.

About a week passes. Jason answers each child's question carefully and frankly. Responding to one question about marriage, he says he is recently divorced after twenty-four years and has one beautiful daughter. I am glad he is open about this part of his life as some of the children in the class also have parents who are divorced, and Jason is an example that life continues on.

With each television appearance, Jason says, books galore filled the Hardman household, and it took eight months of sorting and cataloging before he could open his library. He fondly recalls his good friend, Dennis, who helped him with the tedious task. I flip through the book again to see a picture of Jason, his mother, and Dennis sitting on a stoop in front of the town hall as the tiny library was slowly being launched.

Jason sends me a ten-minute-long video of himself—a poised, slender, dark-haired young lad in a powder-blue suit with a Beatles haircut—shaking hands and chatting about his library with the grinning President Reagan in the Oval Office. In one moving segment, Jason preser

the president with the very first library card issued for the Elsinore Library. Reagan smiles warmly at Jason and says, “I raised my kids telling them that they could never be lonely if they had a book.”

Then, catching me off guard, Jason says he would be more than willing to come to San Francisco from Williston, North Dakota, to speak to our class. “It’s been a lot of fun answering your questions,” he says. Winter is the best time, he explains, due to his work. He is a service technician who repairs gigantic cement mixers for a large construction company in the oil fields of North Dakota.

It is now March 2020; a foreshadowing date. Peggy and I are elated. She will try to make the trip out to San Francisco too. I inform Jason that our school is closing for a few weeks because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but I will be back in touch with him shortly.

What transpired after that email in the field of teaching was exhausting, overwhelming, and trying. Keeping my head above water while endeavoring to focus my third graders on Zoom was an experience I had never encountered in all my years of teaching. The next eighteen months consisted of putting one foot in front of the other, guiding students, and hoping and praying that they were learning.

In May of 2021, as the virus numbers start to decline in San Francisco, I once again contact Jason hoping to reconnect and schedule a wintertime visit. I receive no answer. I am well aware that no business has gone unscathed because of the effects of the pandemic, so I don’t want to bother him, at least for a little while.

One Sunday evening a few months later, I’m just about to send Jason another note when I feel compelled to Google his name. I find an obituary that reads *Jason Hardman: Born 1969, Died 2021*. I want to pick up the computer and hurl it across the room.

I read on: “Jason was particularly close to his parents and would call his mom every day on his way home from work”—the kind and loving mother who patiently stood by him as he organized his library in the Elsinore town hall’s dusty, dark basement.

One thing strikes me as I continue to read his obituary: “Jason would do anything for anyone.” He didn’t even know me, this phantom teacher from San Francisco who had persistently tracked him down, yet he was willing to answer questions from a group of third graders, and

grant my huge request to fly out to San Francisco to do a meet-and-greet with my students. My heart is broken for him. I feel as though I've lost my grip and am slipping down a mountain.

I think about Peggy in Boston. The winter reunion in San Francisco we had planned will never come to fruition. We have always communicated by computer, but understanding the reverence of this sad news, I use the pretense of never having heard each other's voices as a good reason to chat in person. Peggy is delighted with the idea. It's a pleasurable phone conversation with feisty, sharp-witted Peggy, with whom I feel very comfortable speaking.

Finally, tapping into the script I had prepared for myself, I softly announce Jason's passing. I hear a gasp on the other end of the line, then silence. She tells me it's not fair that he died and it is so sad. I blurt out that I am totally devastated. In my mind, Jason is still just a little boy.

I want to meet Linda Hardman, the woman who guided her youngest son through such a quick rise to fame. The mortuary is once again my successful connection. I like Linda immediately. She sounds strong and is pleased to talk to me.

Linda tells me all about those lovely library years, what an honor it was to visit the White House, and what fun they had watching the filming of "Reading Rainbow." She tells me about the red dress she bought especially for the White House visit, and how she was embarrassed when she found out it was Nancy Reagan's favorite color. I can hear the happiness in her voice as she reminisces about her son.

Sadly, she tells me that Jason never felt he had accomplished what he should have in his life. He felt like a failure. I am astonished to hear this! I tell Linda I am grateful that I connected with him when I did and that forty years later, he was aware that children were still enraptured reading about him and his monumental venture to begin a library in his small town at such a tender age.

At the end of our conversation, I spontaneously announce to Linda that I am coming out to Utah to meet her. It seems only right to honor Jason in this manner, visit his library, and meet his mom. Linda is thrilled. I ask my husband, John, if he is interested in accompanying me. His response is that he's been following my story for years and is just as intrigued as I am about this man—so yes, he's coming too.

Shortly after speaking with Linda, I receive a text from Jason's twenty-two-year-old daughter. Alexandria, who tells me that she is willing to chat by text only as she is still having a hard

time dealing with her father's death. Alexandria tells me that her dad hardly ever spoke about his childhood fame, about the Japanese television crews that arrived in Elsinore to film him in his library, or his appearances on "Good Morning America," "The Tonight Show," and "The Phil Donahue Show." He didn't speak about the articles in *Reader's Digest*, interviews for children's literature textbooks, his full scholarship to USC, or the two visits to the White House Oval Office and Rose Garden, where he received an award for service to his community. Alexandria tells me that at Jason's Celebration of Life, she laid out memorabilia from this time. Most family members were not aware of what Jason had done for his community.

July 25, 2022 is the day my husband and I finally meet Linda Hardman and Alexandria in Millcreek, a tiny suburb of Salt Lake City. We meet for lunch at a location halfway between our hotel in Park City and their residences. John and I arrive early at the Brickyard Bar. I bring a small vase of white flowers for Linda and set them on our wobbly little table on the outdoor patio, which is surrounded by huge, long-haul trucks in the parking lot.

The waitress motions to the flowers and jokes, "What are you trying to do, fancy up this joint?"

I laugh and tell her that the flowers are for a special guest.

And then, there is Linda. She touches her hair first before opening the door to the restaurant. I jump to my feet and hug this petite, gray-haired woman who for so long has just been an angelic picture on a storybook page. I can see a reflection of Jason in her kind face.

A few minutes later, Alexandria arrives. She has taken the day off work to meet with us. There we are, sitting on a patio in Millcreek in 92-degree heat to talk about a little boy from long ago...a son, a father, an acquaintance. Peggy Patton said it so well the day I delivered the heartbreaking news to her: It's not fair. Jason should be here.

I ask soft-spoken Alexandria, now an electrical engineer, when she first knew that her father had been a famous child.

"He never talked about it," she says. "Until one day I had a school project about our family, and that's when he shared it with me."

Alex then quietly states that Jason never felt that he could accomplish more than he did at that young age.

"He felt like a failure," Linda adds.

This is the second time she has mentioned that to me, and the words pain me because I know the delight his story continues to bring to young children. My students love the photo that shows the charming way he looks into the camera as he holds up an old, tattered copy of *Little Women* and tells his young audience when it was written, proudly stating that it is now in the Elsinore Library.

Alexandria tells me that Jason never had more than a hundred dollars in his bank account because he was constantly giving money to anyone who needed it. He never asked to be repaid. “That’s just who he was,” she says. “He would do anything for anybody.”

I already experienced that firsthand, I tell her, when Jason agreed to come out to San Francisco to talk to my class.

At one point, Linda thoughtfully gazes down at her plate and says she really believes that Jason is looking down at us from above, finally understanding what a big impact he had on children’s lives.

I smile as I listen to Linda and Alexandria discuss taking old VHS tapes of Jason’s many TV appearances and converting them to disks. I can feel that this gathering has been the right thing to do—it is a catalyst for the healing process that needs to happen. We are all heavy-hearted but this lunch is uniting us, validating Jason, and giving us a purpose.

From our car, I watch Alex put her arm around Linda as they leave the parking lot. *Are you watching this, Jason?* I think.

We fill our rental car with gas and head north from Park City for the three-hour trip to see Jason’s library in Elsinore. Kim, the volunteer librarian for Elsinore’s current library, is more than happy to rearrange her schedule and meet us there as the library has limited hours. Surprisingly, I am just as excited to see the library as I was to meet Linda and Alexandria.

As we drive along on this hot, humid day, I again watch the “Reading Rainbow” video of Jason, articulate and confident, speaking to his young audience. “It just goes to show that if you don’t give up on a dream, your dream will eventually come true,” he says.

Yes, I think. A dream that took incredible perseverance for a ten-year-old child. I picture the library card issued so proudly to Ronald Reagan, and I’m thankful for Michael, the diligent

archivist at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library who sent me the photo and videos of that thrilling meeting in the Oval Office.

After an hour of driving through the valleys of Utah, surrounded by enormous mountains with occasional small, cascading waterfalls, I begin to wonder...where in the world is this town? Is there really a town out here past the miles and miles of dry, empty valleys? We finally reach Richfield, a larger town about eight miles south of Elsinore. This is where the article in *The Richfield Reaper* originated that sparked an inundation of books in the Hardman living room. Then there appears a little turnoff sign for Elsinore. I quickly check the internet: *Elsinore: founded in the nineteenth century by Danish Mormon immigrants*.

Kim stands on the top stairs of the tall, charming, 1890's town hall building to greet us. It is a muggy, still day with blue skies, looming white clouds, and wide streets with no parked cars. Two children are playing in the small playground adjacent to the old town hall that houses the town's library. I feel Jason, the little boy, with us as my husband and I ascend the stairs to the building. I can feel Jason's pride that I have come after all these years to see what he created for this little town.

Kim leads us down the dim, steep stairs into the basement of the old building. Motioning to a small area, she comments that this was the space that Jason initially used for his library. "These are the shelves that he and his dad built together," she says.

I run my fingers across the boards and ask Kim if she knew Jason.

She nods. "Yes. He was always smiling. Such a happy boy."

But she tells me that the library changed Jason. People only wanted to talk about the library, not about what he did afterward or what he wanted to do in the future.

Kim's comments remind me of the song "Garden Party" by Ricky Nelson, a rock-and-roll singer from the 1950s. Ricky played Madison Square Garden in the early '70s, and was booed off the stage because nobody wanted to hear his new songs—they just wanted the old, familiar tunes. So Ricky wrote "Garden Party" about his painful experience and sang wisely that you can't please everyone, so you've got to please yourself. Jason was just a little boy though, too young to understand.

While taking pictures of the library, I envision the camera crews and hordes of people who must have crowded the streets when it opened. I have my picture taken standing in front of the library doors as the two playground children curiously look on. While standing in the middle of the library, I picture Jason sitting cross-legged, head bent down, sorting through piles of dusty, donated books. What fortitude it took to bicycle a few miles a day in the winter snow and sit in the coal-heated basement to get his job done.

I look around but cannot find a plaque or picture of Jason anywhere in the current library.

“There isn’t one,” Kim says sadly.

But there will be... I think with resolve. Then I ask her what I have been wanting to ask for many years now. “May I please have an Elsinore Library card?”

We drive away, mission accomplished. Through the rearview mirror, I see two children kicking up dust as they climb the steps to the library. Maybe Kim will tell them about Jason.

My search is over now. From an old, time-worn children’s textbook came friendships and love for a young boy who tried his best to create a library for his tiny, isolated rural town. I’m elated that I was able to find Jason in time to let him know that, forty years later, children are still carrying his heartwarming story around in their heads. He was anything but a failure. A photo of Jason shaking hands with Ronald Reagan now hangs prominently on a wall in the Elsinore Library.

I continue to read “Jason Wants a Library” to my students, and tell them that even though some people are no longer here, what they have done and who they are will remain with us and inspire us forever.

Thank you, Jason. My love of teaching increased tenfold that very first day I read your story to my third-grade class.



Forty-five years ago the Ritchfield Reaper ran an ad from a 10-year-old, Elsinore, Utah boy named Jason who requested books as he was opening a library in his small, rural town. Jason was catapulted into fame overnight. Michele Armanino is an elementary school teacher in San Francisco, California and writes for a Sonoma County, California, newspaper.