



By Mark Ray

With the power of books, author and illustrator **Peter H. Reynolds** helps children find their North Star.

Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Vashti who didn't think she could draw. Frustrated, she jabbed a dot onto a piece of paper and handed it to her art teacher, who insisted she sign it.

When Vashti returned to class the next week, she was surprised to find her autographed dot hanging on the wall, framed in gold.

To find out what happened next, you'll have to read *The Dot*, the 2003 picture

book by Distinguished Eagle Scout Peter H. Reynolds. We can tell you that the celebrated author, illustrator, educational-media creator and bookstore owner had a similarly transformative experience in seventh grade.

In his case, Reynolds already knew he could draw. In fact, his math teacher, Jim Matson, caught him sketching a comic book in class one day when he should've been paying attention. Matson asked him to stay after class, but he didn't scold him. Instead, the teacher explained that a comic book is

much like a storyboard. He asked his student to create an animation to teach math. It was a moment that changed Reynolds' life forever.

"Mr. Matson challenged me to do something with my talents; he challenged me to teach others, which is fundamentally about thinking of the welfare of others," Reynolds says. "Talents are wonderful, but to use them in service of others is what really matters."

MAKING HIS MARK

That's what Reynolds has been doing ever

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"Talents are wonderful, but to use them in service of others is what really matters."



Author Peter H. Reynolds encourages students to "Make Their Mark" on International Dot Day, which is a celebration of the messages in his book *The Dot*.



Clockwise from bottom left: Peter H. Reynolds and his twin brother, Paul. Reynolds draws during the Boston Book Festival. Last year, Reynolds received a Distinguished Eagle Scout Award. Reynolds talks with a student at an Iowa school during an International Dot Day celebration in 2016.

PETER REYNOLDS ON SCOUTING

“Scouting remains as relevant as ever, and perhaps even more important than ever. In this age of screens, social media and technology, young people are becoming more and more isolated, staying indoors, remaining stationary. Getting kids outside, communicating with each other face to face, collaborating and leading is crucial for a democratic, healthy society.”

since — and not just through the dozens of books he has written and illustrated, including his latest New York Times’ best-seller *The Word Collector*.

In 1996, he and his twin brother, Paul (who made it to Life Scout), founded FableVision, a multimedia production studio that uses media to inspire and teach. Over the years, FableVision has collaborated with broadcasters like PBS, museums like the Boston Children’s Museum, publishers like Pearson Education and educational institutions like MIT, as well as the U.S. Department of Education’s Star Schools program.

FableVision’s tagline is “Stories That Matter, Stories That Move.” Its mission statement is embodied in another of Reynolds’ books, *The North Star*. In that book, a young boy gradually learns to follow the North Star, not the well-trodden path used by others.

“The book metaphorically shares the concept that each of our journeys is unique — and that each of us needs to find our own map, our own compass,” Reynolds says.

If that sounds different from how education works in America today, Reynolds agrees.

“This runs counter to public education’s curriculum that tends to lean toward a one-size-fits-all system,” he says. “Two decades later, the concept of personalized learning is now becoming popular, as is the mindfulness movement. It is comforting to know that society is moving, albeit too slowly for my tastes, toward this more democratic way of helping develop the potential of each citizen.”

Although Reynolds doesn’t claim credit for that change, he probably could. *The North Star* was listed on the National Education Association’s list of the top 100 books for children, while *The Dot* placed 15th on *Scholastic Parent and Child* magazine’s list of the greatest books for kids (right between *The Wind in the Willows* and *Tuck Everlasting*).

Despite all this, Reynolds doesn’t call himself a children’s author.

“I often get referred to as a ‘children’s book author’ and a ‘children’s media maker,’ but my messages are really for all ages,” he says. “I make picture books, which have turned out to be quite an efficient way to share some powerful ideas about bravery, kindness, resilience and persistence — all of which are rooted in Scouting philosophy.”

INTERNATIONAL DOT DAY

Peter Reynolds’ book *The Dot* is so popular that it has spawned a worldwide celebration. (The book has sold more than 2 million copies and has been translated into more than 30 languages, including Braille.) Every year around Sept. 15, schools worldwide celebrate International Dot Day with games, art projects, science activities, Skype sessions with authors (or kids in other schools) and a host of other activities that celebrate the potential in every child — and indeed in every person. To date, more than 10 million teachers, librarians and students in 170 countries have participated.

Each year, Reynolds celebrates International Dot Day at a significant location. Last year, he visited William E. Russell Elementary School in Dorchester, Mass., a Boston neighborhood known locally as (what else?) “Dot.”

COURTESY OF PETER H. REYNOLDS (2); BSA FILE PHOTO; ANDREA CALVIN/FABLEVISION (3)

Reynolds works with Neshama Ryman on her story, *The Klumz*. The Make-A-Wish Foundation of America paired her with FableVision Studios and Reynolds to turn her story into an animated short film. Right: Reynolds (right) congratulates a fellow Scout for earning his Eagle Scout Award.

LESSONS FROM SCOUTING

In fact, Reynolds draws on his Scouting experience on a regular basis. He earned the Art merit badge in Troop 77 of Chelmsford, Mass., where he illustrated campout menus, fundraiser signs and more. He designed the turtle totem used by the Order of the Arrow’s Wannalancit Lodge. And his Eagle Scout project involved hand-lettering a sign for a local senior center.

But his key memories from Scouting have little to do with art.

“Scouting was my ‘second school,’ and in some ways, it was much more attuned to a creative kid with lots of energy and curiosity,” he says. “I loved being outdoors and being challenged constantly — whether it was to build a bridge from rope or swim a mile or start a fire in the rain or get my team through the snowy course of the Klondike Derby. It was all exhilarating.”

He credits Scouting with helping him and his brother become leaders.

“Paul and I were not naturally prone to being comfortable in front of large groups, but Scouting slowly made me feel more and more at ease taking the lead,” he says.

A NEW GENERATION

These days, a new generation of Reynolds boys is learning those lessons. Paul’s sons, Josh, Ben and Nate, all are Eagle Scouts. Peter’s son, Henry, just finished his first year in Cub Scouting.

“My days of derbies, hikes and campouts are about to begin again,” he says.

Reynolds looks forward to those days,

although he knows they’ll be additions to an already-crowded schedule. In addition to writing, illustrating and working with FableVision, he owns the Blue Bunny Bookstore in Dedham, Mass., where he lives, and is president of the Dedham Square Circle, a nonprofit dedicated to downtown revitalization.

That work, too, has its roots in Scouting. “That core idea of ‘you can do better; you can reach further’ has been fuel for my journey,” he says. “The powerful notion of ‘leave this world better than you found it’ is my daily inspiration.”

Or, in the words of little Vashti’s teacher in *The Dot*, “Just make a mark and see where it takes you.”

SUPPORTING SCOUTING

Darrin Johnson, director of program for the Boston-based Spirit of Adventure Council, says the Reynolds brothers are longtime supporters of the council. When the Animation merit badge premiered, they offered FableVision animators as instructors and invited Scouts to tour their studio. And Peter makes regular appearances at the council’s Pumpkinfest event.

“He will spend the entire time, as much as possible, talking to the kids and just having a good time with them,” Johnson says. “You don’t get the sense that he’s a celebrity.”

A self-proclaimed children’s book junkie, Johnson knew of Reynolds’ work long before he found out he’s an Eagle Scout.

“I always say he’s in the top three in living children’s authors,” Johnson says. “That’s the significance of his work.”

