

Laying Down the Law

By NICK HANNAH

Dayton attorney Merle Wilberding is back in the spotlight thanks in large part to a grant from the Ohio State Bar Foundation. In January, more than 40,000 students across the state—with 1,200 in the Dayton Public School System—received the second edition of Wilberding's children's activity book, *Haki and the Rule of Law*.

Wilberding found himself in the national spotlight in 2011 when he represented the family of slain Marine Lance Cpl. Maria Lauterbach, who was denied a base transfer after accusing a fellow Marine of sexual assault and was later murdered while eight months pregnant.

With *Haki and the Rule of Law*, Wilberding set out to provide the historical background and framework for the U.S. Constitution and rule of law in a way that children can understand.

Haki and the Rule of Law follows the journey of Haki—the Swahili word for “justice”—and explains to children the basic rights and protections they are



Merle Wilberding

granted as American citizens. Wilberding wrote the first edition in 2009 and educators welcomed it at the annual Law and Citizenship Conference in Columbus. Educators found that the simple language

and the visual art enabled young children to better understand what can be a complex subject matter.

“I was intrigued by the idea of educating children. I want to help underserved children understand the rule of law and the role it plays throughout their life,” says Wilberding. “I aimed to make them more receptive and accepting of the police in their community, to let them know they serve a good purpose.”

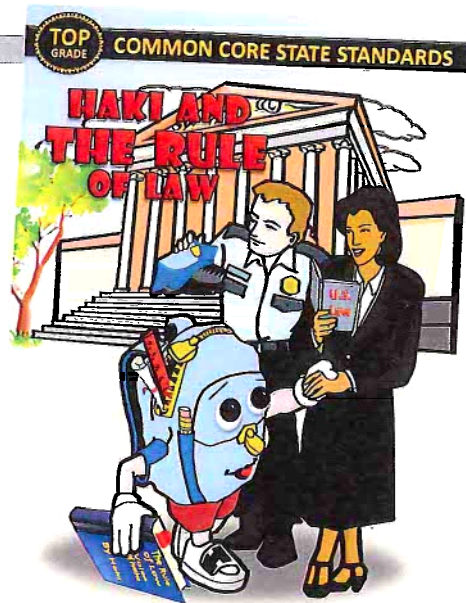
Schools across Ohio have been incorporating the book into curriculum with successful results and feedback. The grant from the state bar allows the book to reach more students across the state.

“Whether the kids are waiting for the school bus, obeying a stop sign, waiting in lines, behaving in school or dealing in encounters with police, I want the kids to know that if they follow the rules they will be treated fairly,” adds Wilberding.

Haki and the Rule of Law transports children to 1215 for the signing of the Magna Carta, the framework for the U.S. Constitution.

“To really help children understand what the rule of law is, we have to go back to how it came about and how it developed,” says Wilberding. “What I like about the Magna Carta is that it stated that the King of England was subject to the rule of law itself, and I thought that was an important statement to make.”

“It’s certainly not a perfect system, but you start out with a perfect principle, which is that everyone is equal in the eyes of the law.” ■



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