

The Wichita Eagle

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'Jester' continues to spread its joy

■ Fans of the book by the late David Saltzman find meaning in a children's story.

By Denise Neil
The Wichita Eagle

Eddie Blue's eyes still fill with tears every time she reads "The Jester Has Lost His Jingle," a children's tale about a jolly jester searching for the laughter he fears is missing in his mythical world.

Several years ago, the grandmother was scheduled to have heart surgery, and she was scared. But 45 minutes before she went on the operating table, doctors decided the surgery wasn't necessary.

Blue read the story many times during that period, and it always helped her find a smile.

"It just gives you a lot of faith through darkness," she said at a reading of the book Tuesday night at

Borders Books & Music in Wichita. "My smiles and my jester carried me through."

The book, finished just before its young author, 22-year-old David Saltzman, died of Hodgkin's disease in March 1990, has similarly affected many others since David's parents, Barbara and Joe, published it three years ago.

Acting on a promise they made to their dying son, the Saltzmans took out a mortgage on their home and borrowed money from friends to print the colorfully illustrated hard-back book, which big publishing companies rejected, saying the 64-pager was too long.

Three years later, those same companies are clamoring to buy the Saltzmans' small operation, based in the three-car garage of their home in Verdes Estates, Calif.

At Barbara, who now tours the country to read and sign copies of the book that last year hit The New York Times' best seller list, wants to make sure the story survives. She won't trust her late son's dream to a big company.



Travis Heying/The Wichita Eagle
David Saltzman was 22 years old and had just completed his children's book when he died of Hodgkin's disease in 1990.

"It's taken on a life of its own now," said Barbara, who has appeared on innumerable television programs and been featured in publications such as People, USA Today and The New York Times. "It's gotten to the point that you can go into any bookstore in the country and ask for the book, and everyone knows what you're talking about."

Today, at least 300,000 copies of the book are in print, and at least 30,000 of those the Saltzmans have donated to sick children.

On Tuesday, a hoarse Barbara asked her son, Michael, and his Wichita-raised wife, Jennifer Glimpse Saltzman, to read the book.

The Saltzmans, who spend most Christmases with their daughter-in-law's parents, Jack and Joyce Glimpse of Wichita, also gave a reading last year and said they hope to make the readings an annual holiday event.

Many of the almost 40 Jester fans piled into Border's children's section. Tuesday had the same hope.

Five-year-old Mikala Payne, holding tightly to her stuffed Jester doll, had received the book as a gift from her mother, Lori Payne. The story taught her that it's no good "when you have sad faces," she said.

Mikala's grandmother, a Derby schoolteacher, discovered the book through a colleague; it is now a staple in the Payne family.



Travis Heying/The Wichita Eagle
Barbara Saltzman, right, answers questions about her late son David Saltzman's book, "The Jester Has Lost His Jingle" Tuesday at Borders Books & Music. Barbara, her son Michael and Michael's wife Jennifer Glimpse Saltzman of Wichita, left read and signed copies of the book, which David completed just before his death in 1990.

If David were still alive to see the success of his book, he'd have a hard time controlling his own laughter, said his mother, who stayed after the reading to sign copies.

She's heard many stories over the years from people like the Paynes and Eddie Blue, who gives the Saltzmans a jar of her homemade pickles each time they visit Wichita.

"He would just really be astounded to see what he had created," Barbara said. "He loved writing the characters and developing the story, but I'm not sure he had any idea the impact this book would have on peoples' lives."