

## Elementary students learn the

Write  
stuff

By JEANIE LUNSFORD  
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**MOSS POINT** — The secret to noted children's author Irene Smalls' success is right in front of her face. "I write about things that are at the tip of my nose, and I show children how to do that," said Smalls during a recent reading performance at East Park Elementary in Moss Point.

The author of 18 largely autobiographical children's books, Smalls loves traveling throughout the country to talk with children about how they can become authors.

"Children are my hobby," said the mother of three. "Some people like sports — I like children."

"I want to encourage them to write their life stories," said Smalls. "I want them to have a sense that writers are real people just like them."

Smalls showed East Park's students pictures and told them stories about the actual people on whom her stories are based. She described how a small incident — like taking a walk with her son or seeing her husband and son clean the house together — can be the germ of a story.

Smalls told the children how a story goes from what she calls "the

sloppy copy" or rough draft stage, through 300 to 400 editorial changes, before being submitted to a publisher.

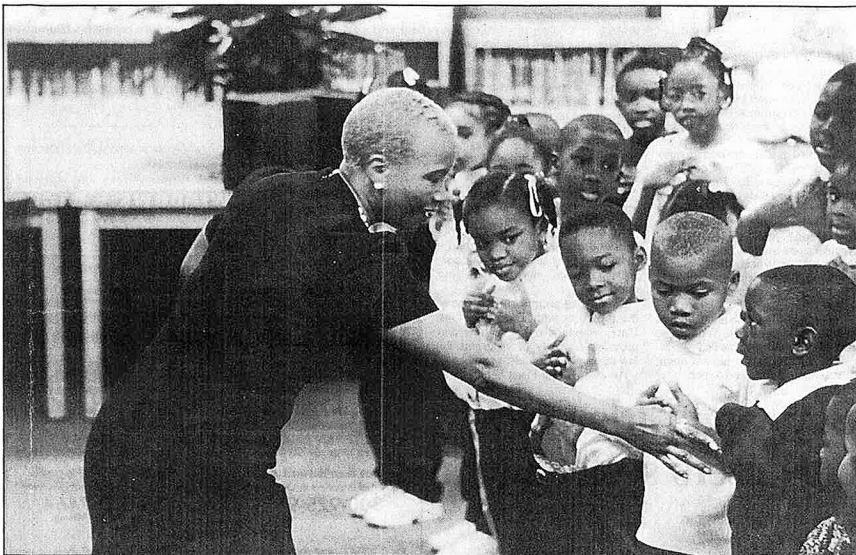
The desire to inspire children to write led East Park Elementary teacher Kim Alda to bring Smalls to East Park.

"It has been a dream of mine to get an author to our school," said Alda, the school's reading facilitator. "I wanted them to see that their life stories can become books."

Alda used the Internet to research authors who might be willing to speak to her students and located Smalls, who is based in Boston. Alda began calling and writing local businesses and foundations to raise the funds necessary to fly Smalls to Mississippi.

Kmart/Pascagoula, MediMart Pharmacy, Chevron, Litton Ingalls, International Paper, Delta Sigma Theta sorority, Mitchell Ellerby, Dr. and Mrs. Wayne Adkison, the Mississippi Arts Commission, and East Park's PTO all came through with donations.

In December, Alda began getting all the students excited about the visit. Students read Smalls' books, made T-shirts and decorated doors and hallways with their favorite characters, and planned their interview



Children's author Irene Smalls gets the attention of students at East Park Elementary in Moss Point.

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questions for the big day.

"Their writing has really gotten better with our reading program," said Alda. "I thought this would be the push to motivate them to write more."

Smalls understands how critical it is to help children understand they have the ability to become writers. When she was a child, most of Smalls' teachers in Harlem told her she was a terrible writer. Only her kindergarten teacher, to whom she dedicated one of her books, led her to believe she had talent.

Years later, Smalls — who has an MBA from New York University — remembered this inspiration when she was temporarily unemployed. She saw an article in which the

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Kim Alda,  
East Park Elementary reading facilitator

publishing firm Little, Brown & Co. said that "new writers are the lifeblood of our business." On a hunch, Smalls called them and got an interview.

"One of the strengths of growing up in the inner city is that if someone calls your bluff you have to show what you can do," said Smalls. Having claimed to be a writer, she had no choice but to follow up with a

book.

Smalls decided to write about what she knows: Harlem in the 1950s, which she says was a small, quiet, Southern town that just happened to be located in the north. She writes and speaks with great fondness about the Harlem of her childhood, a place she says was so safe no one ever locked their doors.

Smalls writes about her own

children, as well.

"They think it is normal to have a mother who writes about you and gets it published," said Smalls.

"Louise's Gift" maybe the most telling of her semi-autobiographical stories. In it, she describes getting a sheet of blank paper as a gift from her grandmother. Angry at first, she soon learns that this blank page is "the gift of creativity."

Smalls has spent her career trying to share that gift with children. If the excitement generated by her talk at East Park Elementary is any indication, Alda said, this is a gift that will keep on giving in the years to come.

*Jeanie Lunsford is communications director for Moss Point schools.*