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Roxbury mom, teacher keeps kids safe

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By Laura Bruno

ROXBURY -- Danielle Kovach is always telling her children not to talk to strangers.

She knows she can't always protect her three children from every unsafe situation in life, so she wants them to be armed with some basic rules to remember.

The 34-year-old Roxbury mother and Hopatcong third-grade special education teacher recently combined her skills as a mother and teacher to come up with a fun way to teach children easy safety rules.

Creating four fictional superheroes to remind children to stick with friends and check with a parent before taking anything from a stranger, Kovach won a contest that will reward her and her students with a classroom makeover worth \$10,000.

"Being a parent, you just want your children to be safe," Kovach said. "They are going to face situations where you can't always be there to protect them ... It's important to give them a foundation so that hopefully they'll remember, be brave and speak up."

Kovach, who is on maternity leave this year but has been a teacher since 1997, submitted her superheroes lesson to the "Got 2B Safe!" awards program, sponsored by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and Honeywell and was chosen as one of five grand prize winners out of 1,000 applications.

Her classroom makeover could include receiving new furniture, technology, a reading nook and wall art, she said.

Jeff Nesnay, Kovach's principal at the Tulsa Trail School, said he wasn't surprised when he heard Kovach won, despite her not being at school this term.

"She is a teacher 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year," Nesnay said. "She's always looking for ways to improve herself, her students and her colleagues. She's on maternity leave, and she's still finding time to think about how to improve her class."

Just two years ago, Kovach won a \$16,000 SMART Board package for her classroom and designation for her school as a SMART Showcase School, for a video she produced showing how she uses the technology in her classroom.

This time, Kovach wrote a lesson incorporating the "Got 2B Safe!" four basic safety rules: Check first; go with a friend; it's my body and tell a trusted adult.

She created four "Superheroes of Safety" that students can relate to and use to write comic book stories about situations they might face in their everyday lives.

The Super Friends draw their power from being together, so they never go anywhere alone.

- Dr. No can yell "no" so loud, it can be heard throughout the world, scaring away unwelcome strangers.
- Capt. Check knows how important it is to check with parents and guardians before accepting anything from anyone they don't know.
- Chat-A-Girl knows how talk to a trusted adult when she feels scared, and she keeps her cell phone always in reach.

Kovach said that when she returns to school in the fall, she will follow her own lesson plan and have her students write stories. She said she hopes to have them share their work with other classes and possibly sell their stories for a nominal fee in the community to help raise money for the national center.

Earlier this week, Kovach was in Washington, D.C., to accept her award, tour the national center in Alexandria, Va., and meet with the designer for her classroom makeover. It was sobering learning about how many children are victimized, Kovach said.

Every year in America, an estimated 800,000 children are reported missing, with more than 2,000 each day, according to the national center. Of those, 115 children are the victims of the most serious abductions; they are taken by non-family members and either murdered, ransomed or taken with the intent to keep.

An analysis of attempted abduction cases by the center found that in 84 percent of the cases, the child escaped would-be abductors through their own actions. Nearly 50 percent recognized something was wrong and walked or ran away, while 35 percent actively resisted by yelling, kicking, pulling away, running away or attracting attention.

"I just wanted to go home and hug my kids," Kovach said.

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<http://www.njherald.com/story/news/28MAKEOVER-web>



Photo by Bruce A. Scruton/New Jersey Herald
As a television crew tapes the event, Tulsa Trail teacher Danielle Kovach greets her incoming class of students Thursday to give them a tour of their redesigned classroom. The makeover was the grand prize in a competition sponsored by Honeywell and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to honor programs designed to teach children how to be safe.

[Click here to view the Photo Gallery](#)

Hopatcong Classroom Gets New Makeover By Bruce A. Scruton August 28, 2009

HOPATCONG -- Although she has been working in the room for much of the summer, Danielle Kovach gave the appropriate smiles of surprise for the cameras as she entered her Tulsa Trail School room Thursday.

The surprise was not that Thursday was Danielle Kovach Day in the borough -- that announcement was to come later as a real surprise -- but that her classroom had received a \$10,000 makeover as one of five grand prize winners in a contest sponsored by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary. Four years ago, the Honeywell Corp. teamed with the center to create the program "Got 2B Safe" and began the awards program for teachers who created innovative ways to teach children about ways to stay safe. This year, more than 1,000 teachers entered.

Kovach, who has been with the district since 1997, has developed a stable of superpower superheroes to help her students be aware of the four rules of child safety.

Her characters include Dr. No, who can yell "NO!" loud enough to be heard around the entire world; Chatta Girl, who has the gift of gab and knows how to talk to a trusted adult about anything that makes her feel uncomfortable; Captain Check, who knows to always check with a parent before accepting anything from anyone; and Super Friends, whose power grows with the number of people in their group when they are out in public.

During the year, her class uses the superheroes to create their own comic books, which they then share with other classes in the elementary school, as well as through a Web site: www.kovachkids.com

"Our goal is to reach 200 other students through the project," Kovach explained.

The makeover includes several electronic components, as well as new furniture and storage areas in the classroom.

The formal unveiling was Thursday with Honeywell bringing in a television crew to tape the event, which included Hopatcong Mayor Sylvia Petillo proclaiming Aug. 27, 2009 as "Danielle Kovach Day" in the borough.

Kovach said her favorite part of the change is the VIP lounge set up in a corner. It includes a lounge chair, as well as a special table with chairs where students can "read a book or hang out with friends," she said.

That also seemed to be the draw for her students, some of whom got their first look at the classroom Thursday during a schoolwide open house.

Kovach said the issues of children being put in harm's way still are with us and the celebration of the makeover is "actually bittersweet. While we now have more resources to teach our children about it, we're all here today because of it."

The U.S. Justice Department reports nearly 800,000 children are reported missing every year.

Tulsa Trail School Principal Jeffrey Nesnay said the makeover "is nice, but it's really all stuff. It's the recognition of teachers, like Danielle, and what they are doing that's important."



**A classy new look in Hopatcong
August 28, 2009**

HOPATCONG -- Danielle Kovach of Roxbury, a third-grade teacher at Tulsa Trail Elementary School in Hopatcong, received a \$10,000 classroom makeover for winning the Got 2B Safe! awards program sponsored by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and Honeywell.

Kovach won the contest through her creation of four fictional superheroes who remind children to stick with friends and check with a parent before taking anything from a stranger. Kovach was one of five grand-prize winners out of 1,000 applicants. The national design firm DesignCentrix undertook the makeover, which was unveiled Thursday. The work included a total redesign of the classroom with new technology and safety materials.