***No Steps Behind: Beate Sirota Gordon's Fight for Women's Rights in Japan***

by Jeff Gottesfeld, illustrated by Shiella Witanto

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Guided Reading Level T, Grade Level Equivalent 5, Interest Level 4-7 ; CCSS/Instructional Strand: W.5.1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 9b, 10; SL.5.1, 1c, 1d, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6; RF.5.3, 3a, 4, 4a, 4c; L.5.3, 4, 4a, 5, 5a, 5b, 6; RI.5.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10.

Educational Description: Picture book, biography; Cultural diversity, government, history, the Japanese Constitution; Story elements: setting, 1929, WWII, Japan & America, plot and character development, Japanese words and phrases, figurative language: simile, metaphor, idiom, proverbs; illustrations enhance meaning and tone; conflict man vs man, man vs self, man vs society, man vs fate; Comprehension strategies: identify cause and effect relationships, compare and contrast, draw conclusions, identify new vocabulary in context, and author's purpose. Back Matter: Author's Note, timeline, references. Themes: Women's rights, women's history, social justice, discrimination, equality, immigration, dual cultures, the ability to make a profound difference in the world.

Discover the unlikely true story of Beate Sirota, a young woman who grew up in Japan and returned as a translator working for the American military after WWII. Fluent in Japanese language and culture, she was assigned to work with the delegation writing the new post-war constitution. Thanks to her bravery in speaking up for the women of Japan, the new constitution ended up including equal rights for all women.

**Themes and Activities:**

*Social Justice*

As a young girl growing up in Japan, Beate noticed that girls and women weren't treated the same way men were. Give examples of ways things weren't fair to women. What freedoms did men have that women didn't?

The author uses proverbs throughout the book to show popular beliefs about women. How are the proverbs insulting to women? Give specific examples.

Proverbs or sayings can often draw on stereotypes. Can you think of American proverbs that do that? Can you think of common sayings about boys, girls, men, women that show stereotypes? Some examples might be: “Boys will be boys.” “A man's home is his castle.”

*Women's Rights and History*

When Beate presented her addition to the new constitution, Colonel Kades objected, saying that Beate had given more rights than American women had in the United States Constitution. What was Beate's answer to that?

Beate grew up in a country where women had few rights, but when she went to college, she studied at an all-women school, Mill's College in Oakland, California. What did the experience give to her? What did she learn about women's rights?

*National Identity/Bridging Cultures*

Beate was born in Austria, but grew up in Japan. Her parents were Russian and Austrian Jews. She went to college in America. What country would you say she belonged to? What was her culture? What was her national identity? Can you have more than one culture and nationality?

Talk to your parents about your own background. What countries are your parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents from? What languages did they speak? Do you have more than one tradition/culture in your home?

*Diversity*

Beate grew up as a Jewish girl in Japanese culture. Did she feel like she fit in? Point to evidence in the book showing why or why not.

Beate grew up speaking several languages and familiar with several different cultures. Do you think this made her life richer and more interesting or poorer and harder? Why?

Beate was going to college in California when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and the United States declared war on Japan and Germany. All communication with Beate's parents was cut off, leaving her alone in America. Did she feel like she fit in? How did she feel about her childhood home and her new home fighting each other? Point to evidence in the book showing these things.

*Determination/Growth Mind Set*

Beate asked the U.S. Military to hire her as a translator and researcher in Japan after the war. Did the Army want to hire her? Did they think a young woman belonged in post-war Japan? How did Beate convince the military to use her? What skills did she have that were valuable to them?

What was Beate's assigned task once in Japan? What did she actually do? How did she convince both the Americans and the Japanese to agree to her ideas?

How did she make a difference in the lives of Japanese women?

*Ordinary Heroes*

Some people would call Beate an ordinary hero. That is, she was a regular person who did something extraordinary. The women of Japan still consider Beate a national treasure. Look at the quote on the copyright page of the book. What did the Empress of Japan say about Beate? Now look at the quotes on the back cover of the book. What did Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor say about Beate?

Do you know of other ordinary heroes, people who made a difference through determination and hard work? A firefighter who rescues someone from a burning building is an ordinary hero. Can you think of other examples?

Are there people in your school who are ordinary heroes? If a student helped another student who was being bullied, would you consider them a hero? What if a student notices that another student is lonely and reaches out to eat lunch with them? Would they be a hero? List some small ways you could make a big difference in another person's life, from recycling to helping to being kind.

About the Author:

Jeff Gottesfeld is an acclaimed writer of books, screenplays, and dramas. His work has won awards from the American Library Association, Association of Jewish Libraries, International Reading Association, Writer's Guild of America, and the National Council for Social Studies, and has been translated into many languages. He lives in Los Angeles.

About the Illustrator:

Shiella Witanto grew up in Indonesia and studied illustration at the Academy of Art University of San Francisco. *No Steps Behind* is her first book. Before she could finish the art, new immigration policies forced her to return to Indonesia, where she now lives, still drawing as much as she can.

Additional reading on Japan and WWII:

*They Called Us Enemy* by George Takei, illustrated by Harmony Becker

*Barbed Wire Baseball* by Marissa Moss, illustrated by Yuko Shimizu

*Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston

*Baseball Saved Us* by Ken Mochizuki, Illustrated by Dom Lee