Essex County therapist Ronnie Sidney used his own struggles as a student to help others

When Ronnie Sidney was a middle school student in Essex County years ago, life was a constant struggle.

No matter how hard the Tappahannock resident tried, he seldom succeeded, leaving him frustrated and increasingly angry, often acting out.

When testing and teacher involvement turned up the fact that Sidney had a learning disability, for a while things even seemed worse.

"All of a sudden, I was also getting teased for being a special ed student," said Sidney, who said he wrongly felt ashamed and stigmatized. "Kids can be brutal at that age."

Because Sidney and a handful of his teachers refused to give up—a few teaching him the organizational skills needed to succeed—the young man graduated from Essex High School in 2001, eventually enrolling at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College in Richmond. He went on to Old Dominion University, where he received a Bachelor of Science degree in Human Services in 2006. He then earned a Master of Social Work degree from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2014.

These days, he lives in Essex County and is an outpatient therapist at the Middle Peninsula—Northern Neck Community Services Board, working with court-involved youth.

But Sidney hasn’t forgotten the traumatic struggle he went through in his youth. Indeed, he’s using it to reach children and families who might be going through something similar, with one driving goal: To help make it easier for them and inspire them not to give up.

The vehicle for that help is a book called "Nelson Beats the Odds," which shares the emotional ups and downs of his own story, adding a healthy dose of perspective that he hopes will de-stigmatize the challenges faced by students with learning disabilities.

"I want kids and families to read this and realize they’re not the only ones who have dealt with these challenges," he said, "and to realize there are resources to help and ways for them to succeed."

Sidney will be in the Fredericksburg area over the next week or so for a "Nelson Beats the Odds" book tour, which he describes as an opportunity for students, parents and educators to meet him and "discuss topics related to being learning disabled and having an ADHD diagnosis."

He will appear at several different Central Rappahannock Regional Library locations: Friday at the Porter branch from 2 to 5 p.m.; Wednesday at the England Run Branch from 6 to 8 p.m.; Dec. 18, at the Snow branch from 2 to 5 p.m.; and Dec. 19 at the Headquarters branch downtown from noon to 3 p.m.

The graphic novel is something that kids can connect with easily, the characters look and act like typical teens and Nelson (Sidney) at times explodes with statements like "I hate school and I’m never going back!"

Thankfully, his is a story where readers will find that determination and help from caring teachers makes for a happy ending.

"Some of the point is just letting children who face special challenges know they aren’t alone," he said. "And to help them understand there’s a reason things are so hard for them."

Sidney, who’s done everything from counseling youngsters with substance abuse to providing therapeutic writing workshops for state inmates, said those workshops moved him to put this book together.

He wrote the story, found an illustrator, raised the money to publish it and markets it himself, traveling to fairs, parades, churches, schools and anywhere else he might find an interested audience.

He’s got helpful links in the book, a guide for teachers who might use it with students and plans to produce several more.

"There are all sorts of issues I want to deal with," said the soft-spoken author, who is also a professional speaker. "Topics like parental abuse, grandparents raising children and colorism, light-skinned African American students who get teased by those with darker skin."

His former special-ed classmates are the models for the characters in this book, and will be in future ones.

You’d think Sidney would have enough to keep busy, what with his work, two children and marketing of the book. Somehow, he also found time to create, among other things, an app that lets young readers put their pictures and responses into Nelson’s world. It’s all under the umbrella of his business, Creative Medicine: Healing Through Words.

"My hope is to eventually make my writing, speaking and similar work into a full-time job," he said.

To purchase books or learn more, go online to creative-medicine.com

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