

Sandy's real-life miracle

Dr. Bednar saved his cat's life, and wrote about the experience – for kids

By Nancy Burns-Fusaro
The Sun Staff

It's 10 p.m. and North Stonington resident Martin Bednar – an M.D., Ph.D., board certified neurosurgeon, researcher and senior director at Pfizer – is preparing for a week-long trip to Japan.

Bednar, who develops drug therapies for the treatment of such brain disorders as stroke and Alzheimer's disease, is headed to Japan to meet with Japan's key leaders in brain disease research to discuss possible collaboration. He is excited about the trip and about the extraordinary possibilities going on in his field these days.

As a researcher actively engaged in the production of new brain cells lost after injuries such as stroke, he has seen some amazing results – results that have changed lives. He is passionate about those results and about the possibilities to improve the quality of life of stroke victims.

This night however, he is talking about another of his passions, the children's book he recently completed, "Sandy's Vision." The book weaves together all of Bednar's passions – his faith, his family, his research – and his love of children's literature.

"Sandy's Vision" is a story about changing life's inevitable disappointments into opportunities for growth, says Bednar. It's a lesson, he says, not only for children but for us all.

After all, he asks, "How many of us view a disappointing outcome or an unpredicted result in our lives as a real opportunity for growth?"

"That unpredicted result, the unexpected outcome," he says, "is it a sad, hopeless situation or an opportunity for learning and growth?"

The answer to these questions is embedded in the theme of "Sandy's Vision," he said.

The neurosurgeon says he always wanted to write a children's book, but the "right" subject never appeared. Until Sandy, the stray cat arrived on his doorstep. It was about two years ago, he recalls, when his 8-year-old nephew, Clarkie, was visiting. Bednar and his wife, Arlean, a senior director for the "Pampered Chef," have 16 nieces and nephews, who are frequent visitors to their home. They often come for extended visits, especially during the summer. It was during Clarkie's summer visit that Sandy made his appearance.

Aunt, uncle and nephew immediately warmed up to the stray cat soon after he arrived on the doorstep and named him Sandy. Sandy was older, very friendly and rather emaciated, weighing only half of what an adult cat should normally weigh. And although Sandy certainly appeared to be hungry, he would run away – seemingly in pain – after attempting to eat only one or two bites of food.

After a few days, the three took Sandy to the veterinarian who diagnosed the problem as a serious and life-threatening mouth infection, curable only with a surgery. During the procedure the cat suffered a major stroke that left him blind and unable to walk.

It was in trying to find the way to best explain Sandy's condition to Clarkie that Bednar realized he had a valuable life lesson to teach his nephew. It was then that "Sandy's Vision" began to take shape.

Because life always presents us with obstacles, said Bednar, "some pleasant and some not so pleasant, it's important to figure out how we're going to deal with them."



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Dr. Martin Bednar holds Sandy in the office at his North Stonington home. When Sandy had a stroke, Bednar gave him an experimental treatment. His book, *Sandy's Vision*, explains the difficult situation Sandy faced for children, since his own 8-year-old nephew had to ride the ups and downs of the cat's progress.

"When faced with an obstacle or life challenge," he posed "will we view an unexpected outcome as futile and give up? Or should we look deeper and determine if there be so obvious?"

Life will always present us with challenges. How we react to them is a critical part of our development and why it is important to begin to introduce this topic to children.

"Sandy's Vision" attempts to teach an 8-year-old boy how to react to this situation.

It is essential to learn how to make appropriate decisions and then learn how to deal with the

outcome, says Bednar, a devout Roman Catholic. After all, he says, they could have decided to have Sandy put to sleep.

In his quest to understand his faith more deeply, Bednar, who attends St. Pius X Church in Westerly, says he has learned quite a bit about transforming difficulties into joys.

It's a lesson he has learned with the help of his pastor, the Rev. Ray Suriani, he says.

"You can't be a passive participant in anything you do," said Bednar. "You have to be passionate. The more you put into something, the more you get out."

"Sandy provided me with a clear example to discuss these fundamental yet difficult issues," says the surgeon. "In the story, Clarkie needed to reconcile Sandy's poor outcome – the stroke – following a seemingly good decision, to proceed with life-saving surgery."

In Sandy's case, however, the outcome was rather miraculous.

In an effort to help Sandy recover from the stroke, Bednar used drugs to stimulate the growth of Sandy's brain cells, making Sandy the first animal in the world to receive the drugs. Sandy recovered and is now able to walk and see.

"Sandy's Vision" tells the real-life story about Sandy, and how he

affected the lives of many," says Bednar. "It provides this opportunity for learning about disappointment and about compassion and for sharing that learning."

The book is dedicated to his entire extended family – his parents and 16 nephews and nieces – but "most especially to my wife, Arlean."

It's his wife, he says, that was the initial inspiration for writing a children's book. As a child Bednar was heavily influenced by children's literature. Once, in a conversation with his wife, he referred to a "Br'er Rabbit" tale. When Arlean said she had never read the Uncle Remus tales, he realized that not all children had been as heavily influenced as he had been by the books from his childhood.

"I immediately went out and bought her a picture book," says the researcher. "She has been collecting children's books ever since."

Mrs. Bednar has at least 50 children's picture books he says.

Last Christmas Eve, after nearly two years of writing and researching, connecting with his illustrator Thomas McAteer, and learning about copyrighting and trademarks, Bednar surprised his wife with the first copy of "Sandy's Vision."

"I was really, really surprised," said Arlean Bednar. "He handed me a big, big box and insisted I open it early, before we went visiting the rest of the family."

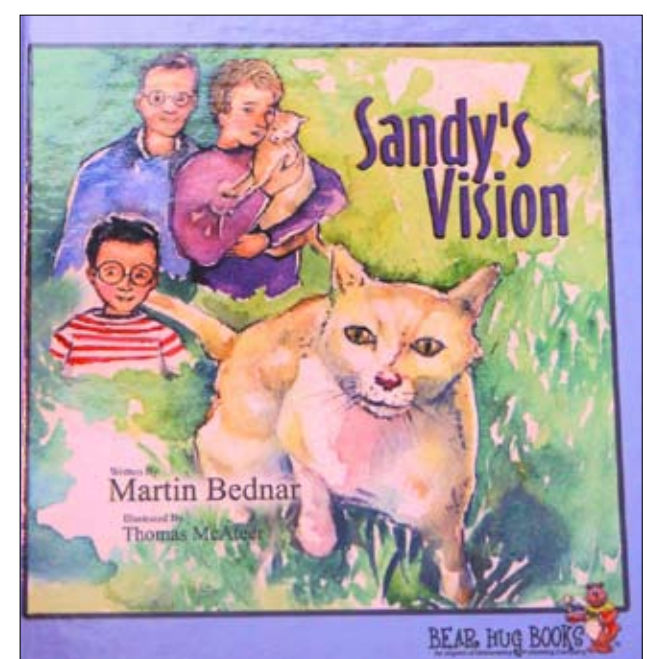
She was astonished. It was amazing, she said, to think about how much time, energy and thought went into the book's creation.

Bednar, who strongly believes that it is in life's challenges that we find life's meaning, says that the themes in his book, themes of hope and confidence are built and strengthened by Clarkie and reinforced by his aunt and uncle.

"These themes are so very vital to introduce and discuss with our children at the earliest possible moment," he said. "Sandy's Vision" also teaches children about perseverance, and about doing something that's really important, even when it's not very easy."

"A young man now stands taller, having learned about compassion, perseverance, opportunity and the love of his family," he adds. "And his uncle and aunt smile, knowing that all of our lives are richer for this experience. These themes are timeless and ageless."

"And we all wonder," he asks, "was Sandy's chance visit to our home that day really just a coincidence?"



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The cover of *Sandy's Vision*, by Dr. Martin Bednar.