

# DARA TAKES ROMANCE TO NORTH TEXAS

By Suzanne Welsh

In our mission statement, Dallas Area Romance Authors, Chapter 56 of Romance Writers of America<sup>®</sup>, states we are a non-profit, voluntary association of writers dedicated to raising and maintaining quality in the Romance genre and its sub genres. DARA works to accomplish this through advocating high professional standards and through the dissemination of information on writing and the publishing industry.

Throughout our history, DARA has accomplished these tasks by holding seminars, then conferences to help educate our members regarding the craft of writing and increase their knowledge of the industry in order to advance their writing careers. Eventually, DARA's conference grew until we were also donating the proceeds of our Friday night, mega-author book-signing to charities. Including this year's donation to the Genesis Women's Shelter, DARA has donated over \$6400 to local charities.

This year's Dreamin' In Dallas conference featured keynote speaker Linda Lael Miller. We had a film producer, as well as three editors and three agents, all taking appointments for pitches by our authors. For the first time, registration could be done on line, and sold out within a month of opening. The Friday night book signing garnered \$1500 for the Genesis Women's Shelter, who were very appreciative of romance authors and their readers.

DARA's authors have often been featured in metroplex publications, but in 2005 DARA became more visible in the public eye with articles in the North Texas media. In the Author, Author section of the Plano Profile, a series of articles about local authors featured DARA's Kathleen Baldwin and Sandy Blair, with an interview of DARA President, Lorraine Heath which appeared in the October 2006 issue. In Kathleen's interview, Plano Profile July 2005, she discussed the lower rate of divorce among romance readers vs. the general public. She also explained how, "When [the readers] face conflict in their own lives, they have vicariously experienced the overcoming of conflict repeatedly as they read these romances."

In Sandy's interview, Plano Profile January 2006, she discussed how writers should not only write what they know, but "write what they like to read". She explained how her love of fifteenth century Scotland has influenced her choice of sub-genre on which to focus her writing. Sandy also advised authors that flawed characters help the reader relate to the character in an emotional way.

In the Sherman Herald Democrat March 2006, e-published author, Kay Sisk spoke about both the romance genre and the new e-publishing format. "A romance novel is not about the destination, the destination is a committed relationship; it's about the journey, how they're going to get there," said Sisk. Experienced with e-publishing, Kay explained how it has opened up markets for writers in the new electronic format. "You go to their Web site, and you can buy the book as a download. It comes to your computer, and you can put it on your pocket reader or your Palm, or just read it off your computer."

In her article for Southlit.com, DARA President and *New York Times* Best Selling author, Lorraine Heath teaches readers that "the process of writing isn't easily explained. The road to publication actually doesn't come with a roadmap either. Every author travels a different path. Very often we get lost along the way, even after we're published."

With the assistance of a panel of published DARA authors: Kara Lennox, Lori Wilde, Caroline Clemmons, Sandy Blair, Kay Sisk, and Sylvia McDaniel; Lorraine gave us a glimpse into the complicated process. Questions about what makes a good romance writer, finding each writer's own voice, the business of writing romance, the daily routines and disciplines of the professional writer were posed to and answered by the panel.

This year DARA was asked to participate in the Plano Book Festival to support the Plano Library system's adult literacy program. Katherine Garbera, Lorraine Heath and Shanna Swendson spoke on panels at the all day event. Both published and unpublished authors manned a booth to educate North Texas readers about DARA's presence in the community, the upcoming Dreamin' In Dallas conference and book signing, as well as give away free signed copies of the authors' novels. Many of the patrons of our booth met the authors and expressed interest in the upcoming conference.

Another opportunity for helping to promote future writers came to DARA in the form of The Extreme Writing Challenge for young authors, sponsored by the Lewisville Library. DARA provided 5 judges: Sandy Blair, Catherine Spangler, Katherine Garbera, Franny Karkosak, and Lorraine Heath. DARA also provided the DARA mousepads as prizes. Other prizes were donated by Cathy Spangler, Nicci Burham, Mike Spradlin, and Lorraine's YA publishing house--HarperCollins Childrens'. With over 90 entries, DARA was able to make an impact in encouraging young writers to pursue their dreams and get positive feedback about their work. The judges felt that the entries they judged were of high caliber, incredibly creative, and quite simply amazing.

DARA is acquiring a name among the younger area writers. We actually received a loud "whoop!" and applause from one corner when DARA was mentioned at the awards ceremony, in which Lorraine and fellow author, Gretchen Craig handed out the awards. Several of the teens sitting there had either just turned 18, joined RWA, and were planning to join us for some meetings or anxious to turn 18 so they can join us. In the past year, Lorraine has spoken to the Allen and Lewisville teen writers groups and is incredibly impressed by their knowledge of the industry and their enthusiasm for writing.

Yet one more opportunity for DARA to help the fight for literacy and promote romance among readers presented itself this year. DARA authors, Sandy Blair, Jane Graves and Cathy Spangler worked on the Richardson Library Committee to produce the first annual Richardson Romance High Tea, Buns and Roses, on Sunday, October 22, 2006. DARA enthusiastically supported this event and many of our members attended, contributing to the estimated \$5,000 raised.

The keynote speaker, New York Times Bestseller, Elizabeth Boyle, gave a passionate and humorous speech about the power of romance novels in the day-to-day lives of average women. She also spoke on how we as romance writers and supporters of the romance genre must support literacy efforts that puts more books in the hands of more women.

With all these opportunities to educate the North Texas Area about Romance, DARA has made a positive impact in the community, which we hope to continue in 2008 and the years to come.