

## Book's message moves McMillan students

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Lauren Vlasak, left, has a book signed by author Brenda Woods, who visited McMillan Magnet Center on Tuesday. With Lauren, 12, is sister Kirsten, 10, brother Jack, 8, and father Mike Vlasak.

Students at McMillan Magnet Center know firsthand that books can intrigue, inform and inspire.

Several said a novel they've just read as an entire school, "Emako Blue" by Brenda Woods, has done all of those things. Seventh-grader Akia Brown said Omaha's mayor and other officials grappling with the city's gun violence problems should read all 124 pages.

The book was given at the start of the school year to each of the 698 students at McMillan, a seventh- and eighth-grade magnet school in the Omaha Public Schools.

McMillan offers unique opportunities in mathematics, engineering, communication arts and technology in order to

draw students from all over the district to the school at 3802 Redick Ave.

The book's namesake character, Emako Blue, has a record contract waiting for her after graduation. She is a hard-working student who has transferred to a new school in an effort to stay on the right path. She is full of promise.

But that promise is snuffed out by a bullet - fired during a drive-by shooting - that was meant for her brother.

Throughout the book, Emako's friends - who, like McMillan's students, come from a variety of backgrounds - struggle to make some sense of what happened and begin to move forward, each telling his or her own story.

"It's one of the first books I read all the way through," said Matt Dean, a 13-year-old eighth-grader. "I wanted to find out how she died. I just couldn't believe it. . . . I don't know what I would do."

Matt said he couldn't imagine what it would feel like to lose a close friend. Other students said the story was close to home.

"She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time," Akia said. She hoped a movie would be made from the book.

Lindi Walter said she cried through most of the book's last 30 pages. "When she got shot, I was bawling," the 13-year-old said. "I live in north Omaha. There's a lot of drive-bys. It felt really close, like that could be me."

The eighth-grader said she would recommend the book to anyone.

Shawn Watts, who has two children at McMillan, said she planned to read the book because she has heard so much about it from her kids. She said her children, Amadi and Ayoma Watts, couldn't put the book down.

OPS' African American Achievement Council provided the free books to McMillan students. Media Specialist Kelly Arbuckle said "Emako Blue" was selected because "it speaks to all young people because the characters are so diverse."

The council also gave a grant to McMillan that allowed author Woods to visit and provided supper for families during the school's open house and African American Achievement Family Night on Tuesday.

About 200 families attended. Matt's Grill served 435 meals of meatloaf, mashed potatoes and green beans.

Each family that attended Tuesday night's event also received a free copy of Woods' third novel, "My Name Is Sally Little Song." Woods, a Los Angeles author who visits schools as often as she can, spent time signing books and talking with students.

In addition to hearing from Woods about the writing process during the school day Tuesday, students have discussed the book in classes and on their own time with friends.

Amadi, 13, and his sister Ayoma, 12, said they read "Emako Blue" from cover to cover because they could relate to the story and its characters. Ayoma, a seventh-grader, said she likes to sing, like Emako, and she found the story compelling.

Eighth-grader Amadi said the story struck him because "so many people are in these situations." He said the violence in the story was similar to Omaha's tragedies.

"It was a book not only for African-Americans," he said. "It was a book for all people."