

BOOK

From page A1

the library and through her website, theartiscompanyllc.com.

"It showcases both Aydin in the chair, along with another child that doesn't have to use a chair, doing simple tasks like eating breakfast, taking the bus to school, going outside and playing basketball during recess, which Aydin likes to do," she said. "It shows that a child in a chair can do all of those things, they just do it differently."

Aydin Artis was born with spina bifida, a birth defect that forms when the spine and spinal cord do not form correctly.

"Aydin is the first child in our family that uses a wheelchair," said Michelle Artis. "And so we had to navigate through doing things for Aydin a little bit differently because he always wanted to make sure that he was included. That looked a little different at first, but then with the daily support of our family, we found a way to accommodate all of Aydin's needs."

Now a sixth grader, Aydin Artis said his middle school life is far different from elementary school because he is completely independent.

"In elementary school, they gave me an aide," he said. "But my parents decided I didn't need it any-

more because I was smart enough to do everything by myself. I'm really independent."

Aydin Artis lives a very active lifestyle and said his favorite hobby is playing wheelchair basketball.

He has played with the Wheelchair Basketball Junior Program from the Ryan Martin Foundation for three years and said he hopes to someday play professionally.

"I love basketball because it's a way to express myself and it keeps me active," he said. "It's cool meeting new people from different places and I love the competition. But if wheelchair basketball doesn't work out, then I'd be interested in engineering."

His mother, Michelle Artis, said the art in the book was inspired by actual photos of her son doing activities like getting on the school bus and going swimming to accurately convey not only his likeness, but how active he is on his own.

"I feel like this is really important because one day Aydin is going to grow up and mom won't be there to help him every step of the way," she said. So I really wanted him to gain that sense of independence and I think that starts in school."

Michelle Artis said the handstands he does have become synonymous with showing her son's

active lifestyle and refusal to let anything stop him from doing what he loves.

"He loves having a sense of independence and he's a fun kid to be around," she said.

Michelle Artis said she wrote the children's book in 2021, after jotting some ideas down in the notes app on her phone.

"When I first read the book, I cried because it was so meaningful to me," said Aydin Artis.

Michelle Artis said that with her son's blessing, she underwent the process of self-publishing.

The book was officially published in October.

"I wrote this in 2021 and it's all starting to come together now," she said. "Aydin is growing and may come up against new challenges that he's definitely going to overcome. And so I will keep on sharing his journey for him and to make people feel empowered."

As for Aydin Artis, he said that whenever someone reads this book, he wants them to know that their potential is limitless despite any shortcomings they may face.

"I feel good and I'm happy that my mom found something she loves," he said. "I want people who read it to know that even if you have a disability, you are still no different from anyone else."



Ned Gerard/Hearst Connecticut Media

Aydin Artis, a sixth grader at Madison Middle School, poses with his mother, Michelle Artis, author of the book "I Am Different" in Trumbull on Dec. 12.

HONOR

From page A1

tle with cancer, spent much of her career in Stratford where she taught hundreds of students, according to Harden. She initially worked at the since-shuttered Johnson Junior High School before moving to Stratford High School.

The wing in question was built as part of a relatively recent \$126 million transformation of the King Street campus that also included building a new cafeteria, auditorium, culinary suite and scores of classrooms. The work began in 2017 and wrapped up in 2020.

In a meeting late last month, the board didn't unanimously approve the renaming request, effectively thwarting the proposal. At the time, board officials said Harden had not presented enough evidence to qualify McNeil for the honor.

Since the decision, Harden said he has received an influx of support from McNeil's former students and other community residents with fond memories of his grandmother. He said he has collected more than 10 written let-

ters backing the renaming request — a key step needed for the board's approval.

One of those letters was written by Maurice Scioletti, a former Stratford High student who took English with McNeil for two years. Scioletti called her a captivating educator who encouraged her students to express themselves through their writing assignments.

"I had a really good time in her class," Scioletti wrote. "She was so funny, but one thing is for sure, you behaved because you wanted to behave. She was that kind of person."

Bill Mazzabufi, who graduated from Stratford High in 1989, also spoke about McNeil's sense of humor and described her as a teacher with a lovable and quirky personality. He said he still fondly remembers the way she interacted with her pupils, despite the fact that she sent him to detention a few times.

"There is no one more deserving than Mrs. McNeil for this honor and that is saying quite a lot with the fine cadre of teachers that I had during my time in high school," Mazzabufi said.

Some want the school board to go even farther

than naming a wing after McNeil. Tina Manus, a former council member, has created a petition urging the seven-member body to rename the entire school after the former teacher, arguing that she deserves a larger honor than being named after just part of the building.

"This act will serve as an enduring reminder that diversity enriches education and that committed educators like Mrs. McNeil can make lasting impacts on their students' lives, who will in turn change their community for the better," Manus wrote in the petition, which has garnered only nine signatures.

McNeil was one of the school's first Black English teachers.

The school board allows individuals to nominate longtime district employees or others who have made "exceptional" contributions to the town's children to be honored as the namesake of a previously unnamed building.

To be considered, the person making the nomination must present evidence of the nominee's achievements, provide a resume of the person's public service and produce at least 10 letters of recommendation to a

subcommittee tasked with evaluating the proposal.

According to meeting minutes, the subcommittee voted in October to recommend the full board name the wing after McNeil. But when the proposal came up for a vote, the board failed to unanimously agree to adopt the recommendation, a crucial step necessary for the renaming to be official.

The three members who voted in opposition were then-Vice Chair Lisa Carroll-Fabian and Janice Cupee, the body's two Democratic members, and then-Secretary Amy Wiltsie, an unaffiliated member. Then-chairperson Andrea Corcoran, an unaffiliated member, and the board's three Republicans voted in support.

Carroll-Fabian, Cuppe and Wiltsie have not publicly offered an explanation for their vote or responded to requests for comment about their decision.

But Corcoran, the then-chairperson, said in a statement released a few days ago that the three members voted in opposition because they believed the requirements outlined in the board's longstanding rules around naming school facilities had not

been satisfied, including the stipulation that a nomination include a resume and at least 10 letters.

While Harden presented an online petition signed by nearly 400 people, the application packet reviewed by the school board only included three written letters, according to Corcoran's statement and meeting minutes.

"It is possible that if the application is resubmitted, this time with additional documents, the vote may be different," Corcoran said. "I've certainly learned more about Ms. McNeil's impact on her students and her community over the past few days via social media posts than I had any idea of from the application materials I was presented with. It seems like she was an amazing woman and an inspiring educator."

Corcoran, who was not eligible to seek a second four-year term in last month's municipal elections due to strict term limits, also urged residents to be wary about efforts to distract the public from important issues involving students and the community.

"Mark who is put into leadership positions, who is appointed to com-

mittees, and what these leadership changes may mean for future actions and decisions," Corcoran said. "As a community, our attention to the bigger picture is crucial."

Harden had suggested the decision may have been politically motivated — a claim Corcoran flatly denied. Though Harden is a Democrat, the former councilman has clashed with the local party's leadership in recent years and has frustrated fellow members by sometimes backing Republican candidates.

Several Republicans on the school board, which welcomed three newly elected members on Monday, have signaled support for the renaming request, including the new Chairperson Michael Henrick. In an interview, Henrick said he plans to ask Carroll-Fabian, the only member who voted in opposition on the board, to reconsider her vote.

Henrick said McNeil spent more than 30 years of service teaching students in Stratford.

"She dedicated her life to that and I think it would be a great honor to her and Stratford to put her name on that building," Henrick said.

SCANDAL

From page A1

for interviews federal investigators have begun to request with individual troopers, according to a copy of an email union leaders sent to members this week.

"As a reminder, this is a criminal investigation and unlike the current administrative investigations being conducted by the employer, you cannot be compelled to cooperate or answer questions," Andy Matthews, the executive director and counsel of the union that represents most state police troopers, wrote in the email. Matthews declined to comment for this article.

In June, an audit found a "high likelihood" hundreds of troopers may have collectively falsified tens of thousands traffic ticket records over much of the past

decade, skewing racial profiling data.

The audit sparked multiple ongoing investigations, including a federal criminal grand jury investigation.

CT to pay up to \$250K for legal help

The contract the attorney general signed on Aug. 21 caps the amount the Hartford-based law firm Shipman & Goodwin can bill the state at \$250,000. So far, the state has been billed \$21,000.

Elizabeth Benton, a spokeswoman for the attorney general's office, said officials at the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection sought help from the law firm to assist with responding to the large scope of the federal subpoenas.

"The AG's office would not typically assist a client agency in document production. This would be

handled by an agency's own legal team," Benton said.

The public safety agency declined to comment, citing the ongoing investigations.

Legal experts said there are several reasons the state might seek outside counsel, and they said those reasons could grow as the investigation moves forward.

"One reason might be one of expertise," said Jorge Camacho, a former prosecutor who now researches police oversight as a director of Yale Law School's Justice Collaboratory. "When you're dealing with a federal investigation that carries with it a whole different set of laws, a whole different set of protocols, of investigatory techniques, that the federal government might use, and you feel as if you may not have folks on the inside within your agency capable."

Another potential factor: The attorney general's office in Connecticut is responsible for civil litigation, not criminal cases.

"The attorney general's office doesn't do criminal work," said Stanley A. Twardy Jr., a former U.S. attorney for Connecticut and a partner at the law firm Day Pitney. "They generally don't get involved in criminal cases. I think it's partly because they don't have the in-house expertise."

Twardy said the attorney general's office also might have an obligation to represent individual troopers in a civil probe, if one arises, which could create a potential conflict of interest.

The attorney general's office said the state is obligated to represent state employees in civil matters unless their office determines that employee was grossly negligent.

The office declined to answer whether the state intends to employ outside counsel for the entirety of the ongoing investigations, pointing out that this contract is aimed at helping to respond to federal subpoenas for records.

Troopers called to meet with federal investigators

Matthews, the executive director and counsel of the troopers union, wrote in his email this week that an investigator from the U.S. Department of Transportation — "who is part of the team conducting the federal investigation related to potential fraud involving motor vehicle enforcement activity" — has reached out to some troopers to schedule interviews.

Matthews said in the email he then spoke to the chief prosecutor assigned to the investigation about the probe. Those inter-

views, Matthews said, are not likely to occur until mid-January or early February.

The email reminded troopers they cannot be compelled to cooperate or answer questions.

"If you have been contacted by a federal investigator and would like to be represented during the investigative interviews, please contact us immediately to discuss your rights and a plan moving forward," Matthews wrote. "Next week we will be scheduling individual private (in-person) meetings to discuss your specific case."

The U.S. Department of Transportation Office of the Inspector General and the U.S. Attorney's Office for Connecticut both declined to comment on the email. The U.S. Department of Justice did not return requests for comment Thursday.