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Win the hearts of children — read to them

By JEREMY GLOVER
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Many young children grow up in conditions where they have very little contact with older, positive role models, but the latest phase of a local literacy project aims to remedy those situations.

A Bookcase for Every Child literacy program was established last year to provide personalized oak book cases to children from low-income families in an effort to motivate them into a lifetime of reading. The project was started by Jim Davidson of Conway, a nationally syndicated columnist, who was looking for a fresh approach to dealing with the nation's literacy problems.

In what Davidson describes as the next phase of the project, he has enlisted a group of volunteers, many of them retired residents, to go to local Head Start centers to read and spend time with small groups of children.

"A lot of older people have perspective and observations of life to share," Davidson said.

Davidson said the lessons the children are exposed to are beneficial, but the main idea is just to show the children love and give them some attention. Many of the volunteers are male and Davidson stressed the importance of children having a male role model in their formative years.

Dan Merry said he became interested when Davidson began describing to him what he was doing with the literacy program and wanted to get involved with this phase of reading to children.

"It's hard to look at the potential and not want to help in that potential you see out here, and make a difference," Merry said.

"They need examples and people they can look to. Not just their parents ... we all have had examples in our life that have influenced us. They need that influence, especially when they're young like this."

Dale Wynkoop is another volunteer that praised the program's benefits for pre-school children.

"You can do more right here to help future generations than anything else I can think of," Wynkoop said.

"A lot of these children are single-parent families and a grandfather figure means a lot to them."

Wynkoop, Merry and the other volunteers spend three 20-minute sessions with small



Dan Merry reads to a group of children at Head Start. As part of a continuation of the Bookcase for Every Child literacy program, Merry and other

volunteers are reading and spending time with small groups of children at Head Start centers. JEREMY GLOVER PHOTO

groups of 3- to 5-year-olds. Besides reading books to them, the volunteers also engage the children with "show and tell," looking at maps, learning how to tell time and going over colors, shapes and numbers.

Merry said at that age children have short attention spans and he will frequently share

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the time."

Merry said the most important aspect he and other readers provide is affirmation.

He highly recommends to anyone that has spare time and wants to help make a difference in children's lives to get involved in the program.

"It's been a long time since I've been around kids since my grandkids," he said. "It doesn't make any difference whose kids they are, you can love the children. I look forward to it."

Wynkoop agreed, saying he hopes more people will get involved with the literacy program.

"I would say to anyone that takes delight in children to come in here and be a part of it," Wynkoop said.

"They need love and they need someone interested in them — someone they can look up to and relate with. Love is the main product. They can tell if you love them. That's their chief requirement. They need it as much as they need food and shelter and they respond to it positively."

Wynkoop said he remembers when he was growing up being around older people that had an influence on him.

"They were just ordinary folks," he said. "You will never see their names in history books, but I remember them. If you want to be remembered, you may never get your name in a history book

or a newspaper, but, if you want to be remembered, win the heart of a child."

Evidence of the children's appreciation can be seen when Merry or Wynkoop greets the next group of children and they all want to give the men hugs.

Merry said he is getting as much out of it as the children.

"I have enjoyed it tremendously," Merry said. "I have been really impressed with the kids."

Wynkoop said he looks forward to seeing the children each week.

"It's a hoot," he said. "It keeps you young."

When Davidson began the Bookcase for Every Child literacy program, he brought together a cross section of community leaders and civic-minded residents.

The committee members include Conway Mayor Tab Townsell; Merry; Amanda Moore, director of Bailey Library at Hendrix College; and Bill Hegeman, former general manager of Conway Corp.

Davidson views the program as part of a larger need to make literacy more of an issue in our society.

"We will never improve literacy in our country until the homes of America make reading a top priority once again," he said.

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