

GOODNESS InDEED

Lawyers for Literacy: Helping Children “Read to Succeed”

Barbara Marshall

What will bring together in January 2012 almost 70 volunteer lawyers, judges, law students, and other professionals with 3rd graders from eleven Pinellas and Hillsborough County elementary schools for 12 weeks? *Reading – for just one hour a week.*

Lawyers for Literacy, a local nonprofit based in St. Petersburg, is dedicated to helping 3rd graders with below-



average reading skills prepare for and pass the reading portion of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. FCAT is the statewide, mandatory exam for 3rd to 11th graders to take annually in mid-April for promotion to the next grade level.

Founder and president Lucas Fleming is a long-time St. Petersburg criminal defense attorney and a resident of Snell Isle. Mr. Fleming formed LFL in 2003 after witnessing daily the growing epidemic of teens and young adults in the criminal justice system. He explains “the U.S. Department of Education reports that 85% of children and teens in the juvenile system have below-average reading and comprehension skills.” Examining this correlation between illiteracy and crime among young people, Mr. Fleming wished to create a program for early intervention and support to help prevent at-risk youth from getting caught up in the juvenile system. He enlisted interested elementary schools and volunteer legal professionals to assist kids struggling to keep up with their reading levels. Students are selected by school officials with family approval. More than 300 students have participated in the LFL Success for Reading program since 2003.

LFL focuses on helping 3rd grade students pass the reading portion of the FCAT. All volunteer tutors are paired with a student and meet for an hour weekly at the noon hour at the student’s elementary school for 12 weeks. The tutor picks the school that best suits his/her location and noon-time schedule. LFL provides a brief tutor orientation session the week before tutoring begins. Mr. Fleming explains that the noon hour has proven to be the best time for volunteers in the legal profession. Typically, 5-10 tutors are connected with each participating elementary school. LFL instructional materials are designed for the full tutoring program, and 15 books with different reading levels are given to each student for their keeping. Steve Graves, LFL’s executive director, says that the “backpack” of books is designed and created in consultation with participating elementary school administrators and reading specialists.

Skip forward eight years to 2010 when LFL reports that 94% of its 2010 LFL students tutored were promoted to

4th grade. These students were selected for the reading program because they were at risk of not advancing to the 4th grade because of their low reading skills.

Here are some terrific experiences of LFL volunteer tutors who have served multiple years.

Dan and Sylvia Leeper share that the reward of working with their students outweighs the time commitment of just one hour a week for 12 weeks. “The return with the students is incredible. Rarely do we get a chance to do something that doesn’t take a lot of time, and has significant impact: a promote rate to the next grade of 94%.” Ms. Leeper is starting her fourth year with the program, and Mr. Leeper is starting his second. The Leepers



are financial donors to the program, as well, donating books at New Heights Elementary school in St. Petersburg last year.

Judge Kathleen Hessinger just completed her fifth year as a program tutor. What has been rewarding for her is witnessing a child’s self esteem improve throughout the 12-week program during which the student sees his or her own progress and growth.

Scott Wagman is starting his seventh year with the program. He notes the concept is simple: a no-cost situation for professionals to spend one hour a week with a child reading, talking, encouraging, and having fun. All students have been

eager to read the well-designed book selection compiled by LFL. One of his recent joys was tutoring two sisters, two different years in a row. He also enjoys the excitement he and his previous students share when he returns to the same school the following year to tutor another child. Mr. Wagman and his wife Beth Houghton are financial donors to the program, as well, donating books to Douglas Jamerson Elementary school in St. Petersburg.

Jennine Williams is beginning her fifth year with the program. She relates the story of a recent student who was very shy in the beginning, did not like to read, and admitted to it. Ms. Williams discerned as the program progressed that this student



didn’t have books at home for her reading level. The more she read the books provided by LFL, the more engaged she became, and at the end of her 12-week session, she expressed how much she loved to read. Ms. Williams, like other tutors, tries to seek out their past year students.

President and founder Lucas Fleming contends that another important component of this reading program is helping a child build all-around confidence in themselves which will inspire them to do well on the FCAT test. It is well-documented that children who are solid readers perform better in school and have a healthy self-image. Furthermore, literacy is essential to fully developing a sense of well-being.

So, what’s the next “when and where?” LFL is recruiting more tutors! Tutoring begins the week of January 16 and ends the week of April 9. Tutors can select a school based on convenient location. LFL’s tutor orientation session will be held during the week of January 9 so tutors can meet one another, too. If you can’t join in at the beginning, Mr. Fleming says it’s not too late to join in mid-way. And if a tutor cannot make all sessions, LFL finds a substitute tutor.

Participating elementary schools in the January-April 2012 program are:

St. Petersburg: Campbell Park, Douglas Jamerson, New Heights, Sanderlin, Woodlawn

Clearwater: High Point and Sandy Lane

Tampa: Rampello K-8 Magnet, Dunbar and Westshore

Donations to support the program are accepted, as well. Visit www.lawyersforliteracy.org for suggested levels; however, any donation amount is welcomed which support purchasing books and other supplies for the program. The good news is that LFL received financial contributions this past year that enabled LFL to provide over 1,000 books to students, tutor instructional materials, plus other supplies for the program. LFL welcomes your involvement as a tutor/donor to help benefit young people in our community. Please feel free to contact Lucas Fleming or Steve Graves at 727-323-4020 or email office@LawyersForLiteracy.org. ■

Barbara Marshall is owner of House to Home Relocation, a move management business that helps individuals and families downsize and relocate, with special focus on the older population. She and her husband Jay (residents of Historic Old Northeast) are members of the National Association of Senior Move Managers, and are trained in senior move management. www.hthrelocation.com.

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