

BigAppleParent

OWL Gives a Hoot (*about early childhood literacy*)

Meryl Feiner

June, 2003

If it takes a village to raise a child, it may take a community to teach a child to read. In South Jamaica, that's just what they are trying to do. With the help of Literacy, Inc. (LINC), neighborhood schools, businesses and non-profit organizations are raising awareness about the importance of making reading a part of children's lives, and are sponsoring events to improve literacy.

The collective Jamaica group, which formed in October, calls the program Our World of Literacy (OWL). The partnership, including P.S. 140, Roy Wilkins Park, Amistad Educational Center and the Girl Scouts, kicked off its first reading event in January; it has been gaining momentum ever since — something the group hopes will last through the summer.

Events so far have included a storytelling event at P.S. 140 with students from pre-kindergarten through sixth grade performing, reading and listening to variations of the classic fairytale, Cinderella, as told in their different native countries. The McDonald's restaurant on Baisley Boulevard hosts Family Literacy Nights on the third Tuesday of each month with guest readers entertaining patrons; the Linden Boulevard McDonald's has supported a weekly parent-child book night at South Jamaica Houses. The group also gets senior citizens involved in reading to children in their classrooms and, at P.S. 140, sixth-graders are given the opportunity to read to students in the pre-kindergarten classes.

How it got started

The groundwork for these events was laid long before the kick-off. Frances DiPretoro, LINC's Queens team leader, started working in the neighborhood in August 2001. "The first year, Fran spent mapping and making herself available as a knowledge source," says program director Kim Suttell, referring to the process by which LINC staff members go into a community to identify potential literacy partners. Partners might be local restaurants, the corner laundromat or places of worship — any place where parents and children gather can provide an opportunity to foster literacy. "In our vision, every organization in the community can do something to promote attitudes about literacy. The idea really caught on in the neighborhood surrounding P.S. 140," says Suttell, adding that the school's principal, Elaine Brittenum, is very supportive of the initiative. LINC was invited into South Jamaica by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) in connection with the state's development of a "One Stop" comprehensive service delivery center, according to Suttell. NYSED "recognized the importance of bending the bar to go full circle and realized that the parent who helps a young child read is improving his own skills," she says. "New York State recognized these are parents of kids the State is most worried about in terms of literacy. They want to break the cycle by reaching adult learners to promote family literacy."

A grass roots approach

DiPretoro has made herself a familiar face in South Jamaica over the past year-and-a-half. Her territory includes three schools; P.S. 140, P.S. 48 and J.H.S. 8. LINC team leaders and neighborhood coordinators take a grass roots approach to spreading the word about the importance of early literacy. DiPretoro says some of the methods she uses include speaking at PTA meetings, talking to parents in the schoolyard, and getting herself invited to various meetings within the community where she can network with local citizens and community leaders.

"LINC typically has one day events [in the communities that it works with]. This is the first time a community has taken on a concept that will stretch through the summer. The idea is that OWL never ends," says DiPretoro. "It's an ongoing process that will constantly remind the community about the importance of reading."

LINC founder and chairperson, sociologist Mimi Levin Lieber, says, "Every child, with enough support, has the capacity to learn to read, and every community and neighborhood has the resources to make that happen if they are organized around that goal." Founded in 1996, LINC is a non-profit organization with a mission to provide a system of outreach and coordination of community resources that builds language-rich neighborhoods where all young children read.

"It's easy to get excited about what we do; there are no politics involved and not a lot of money needed. We energize a neighborhood to do its own wonderful work," she adds stressing that LINC strives to empower community members to take on the literacy challenge in a way that works for their particular neighborhood.

"We focus on where people are and what they are about," Lieber says. "There are enormous resources, goodwill and energy, especially when it's on behalf of kids."

According to Suttell, LINC's goal is to build sustainable community literacy networks.

"We are always working our way out of a job," she says, explaining that it is important for communities to continue the effort on their own, and to use LINC only as a resource for information and troubleshooting once the networks have been fully integrated into the community.

"LINC wants us to plan far in advance," DiPretoro says. "The community group decides what they want to work on. We help them to think outside the box."

LINC focuses on early literacy and targets children age 8 and under, according to Lieber, but their efforts clearly impact older children and teens as well. In South Jamaica, DiPretoro says, "We usually ask teachers for students who are not the best students or strongest readers. We have found the teens gain self confidence, leadership skills and improve their own literacy skills by helping the younger children."

LINC is currently working in 60 school neighborhoods in New York City, providing 3,200 hours of additional out-of-classroom reading time each week in lower-income communities. The organization is in the process of creating a model that can be used in other cities across the country, Lieber says. Their work in Queens is supported in part by a grant from Verizon. For more information on upcoming LINC events, visit the organization's website at www.lincnyc.org, or call (212) 620-5462.