

Making a difference, one book at a time

Assistance League's spring reading event helps young children develop love of books

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■ MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Making a Difference is a partnership between The Hinsdalean and Assistance League Chicagoland West, whose mission is to deliver education and outreach programs that address needs and help transform lives in local communities.

When the Assistance League of Chicagoland West was formed in 1995, its first initiative was to improve literacy in the community. That commitment continues today, through the Hinsdale-based organization's Early Reading Program and its spring read-aloud tradition.

Assistance League member Barb Keller, co-chair of the reading event, has been part of the tradition for 14 years.

At each stop, Assistance League members read aloud to small groups of early readers and children just beginning to make the connection between letters and the sounds they make. It's a day that member and event co-chair Carol Park looks forward to every year.

"We find books that they haven't read over and over again. We try to have something brand new for them," Park said.

A small committee of members, mostly former teachers themselves, works with teachers at some of the area's most poorly funded schools to carefully choose books for each early-reading grade level. Most of the books are selected to work with what the children are currently learning in school.

Anne M. Jeans School in Burr Ridge was the first visit on this year's spring reading tour.

Keller admits she was a bit apprehensive when she real-

ized the book she would share with first-graders read more like a text book than a story. She wondered if the book would hold the children's attention. But she needn't have worried.

"They already knew a lot of the ideas that the book introduced," Keller said of the selection, which explains the sun's role in moving water across the earth.

"They really wanted their knowledge to be known," said volunteer Judy Iantosca, who read to a pair of first-grade boys.

She's been participating in the reading event every year since moving from Ohio five years ago.

"I really love to help people and the Assistance League is amazing with helping so many people," the retired social worker said.

The reading event is a reminder of how a small gesture such as reading a book can have a big impact.

"They were so excited about reading," Iantosca said. "All they need is someone to read to them."

Volunteers allowed time for questions and discussion,

which in Keller's case included remarks about a child's dislike of broccoli and the fact that another's grandfather grew tomatoes. A worksheet reinforced the lessons in the book and allowed time for coloring, an activity that Iantosca said the children enjoyed.

Many children were surprised when the ladies of the Assistance League offered them their own copy to take home. Through ongoing partnerships with Hinsdale Bank and Trust and Anderson's Bookshop, the Assistance League purchased and distributed 300 books this spring.

"We put their names inside," Keller said. "It's really special."

Park said she enjoys the chance to spend time with young readers and to share with them her own love of books. That opportunity to make a hands-on difference in her community is what Park said she enjoys most about being part of the league.

The organization doesn't wait until spring to have an impact on early reading. A second component to the early reading initiative provides some of the community's most underfunded schools with books throughout the school year. Backpacks filled with a book, crayons, paper and parent guidelines for reading to their child are available for children to borrow.

It's all part of the group's ongoing philosophy that a lifelong love of reading can begin with a single book.



Nancy Newell (top) of Assistance League of Chicagoland West discusses a book with two eager early readers at Anne M. Jeans School. ALCW member Barb Keller shares "Rivers of Sunlight," a book about how the sun moves water throughout the earth, with students at the Burr Ridge school. Members of the Assistance League of Chicagoland West read aloud to students and left them each with their own book to take home. (Jim Slonoff photos)