

Stories



WILLIAM CASPAR GRAUSTEIN
MEMORIAL FUND

January 2009
By Sandra Wilson

Submitted by Greenwich

Ready, Set, Read!

In a town bordering New York State, a community of parent leaders (and their children) meet to discuss how they can improve their schools and community. Greenwich, known for its wealth and history of celebrity homes and eye-catching mansions also cradles another community, one that is economically disadvantaged. Many Connecticut natives are not aware that there are families in this town that are disadvantaged, let alone economically lacking.

“We are a small, but vital part of this community and we do exist in Greenwich,” says Natalie Queen, a parent advocate and facilitator of a now successful school readiness program entitled, “Ready, Set, Read!”

With the help of the District Social Worker of Greenwich public schools, Mary Ann Murray, “Ready, Set, Read!” has created a great deal of excitement in Greenwich, particularly in Adams Garden, a public housing community. Ready, Set, Read! was introduced to Greenwich by Mary Ann and emerged from the EPIC program (Every Person Influences a Child). Many of the same families that once attended EPIC now attend Ready, Set, Read! and convene in the Town Hall of Greenwich.

“We see some of the same familiar faces at Ready, Set Read! workshops,” says Angela Valentine, another parent facilitator recruited through EPIC. Most of the families are invited by flyers that go home with the children at school. The flyers note the date, place, location and topic of the day. There are no reservations and no special requirements other than being a resident of the area and having a child that attends preschool or elementary school up to sixth grade.

This program is offered to Greenwich residents as a five-week workshop for preschool through sixth grade parents. The program teaches parents about brain development and how oral awareness through books influence their children. Ready, Set, Read! encourages parents to read to their children starting at preschool age.

Each week a parent selects a book to bring it home to read to their child. All books are provided by EPIC and some are bilingual. “We have a bilingual facilitator by the name of Liliana who is great with the parents and also trains in Spanish as well,” says Natalie.



Parents are taught how to weave ready into everyday tasks such as cooking and cleaning.

Families from many different cultures and countries, including Guatemala, Ecuador, and Columbia participate in the program. Each family that attends receives childcare and dinner, along with a small stipend for parent facilitators like Natalie and Angela provided by funding through Discovery dollars from the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund.

Recognizing that families with two working parents have less time to read to their child Natalie suggested that the parents record themselves reading and have the child listen so they can discuss the stories when they get home. She felt this was the best solution for families with parents that have busy schedules. “It takes care of the necessary element of a child hearing a parent read to them, allows the parent and child to spend quality time, and functions as a literacy tool simultaneously.”

Ready, Set, Read! has empowered many parents to become their child’s first teacher and is a free resource to encourage home reading. Parents learn various ways to read to their children in hopes of paving the way for future reading and educational success. Many parents improved their own reading skills as well.

Natalie says that many of the Greenwich parents involved in Ready, Set, Read! have discovered that schools place a great demands on children to read outside of the classroom and this program helps parents meet some of those demands. Now, parents are able to add to their own libraries at home for their children and help create an atmosphere of excitement about reading. It's also rewarding to the Spanish-speaking parent and child to be able to read the multilingual books as well.

What does the future hold for Ready, Set, Read!?

Due to the success of Ready, Set, Read! Natalie has been contacted to expand the program to surrounding communities. She has met with representatives of Norwalk to implement the same program, but due to the lack of funding they have not been able to get it off the ground yet.

Even though Natalie understands the challenges, she is positive about the future.

“It is my hope to share this program with other communities and collaborate with other community leaders to improve literacy throughout Connecticut,” says Natalie.

Ready, Set, Read! has empowered parents to become a crucial participant in their child's literacy development. It's a powerful example of how to strengthen literacy through community collaboration and parent engagement. ■

The William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund works collaboratively to improve education for Connecticut's children by supporting school change, informing the public debate on educational issues, and strengthening the involvement of parents and the community in education.

