

HACF Rolls out Literacy Initiatives to get Kids Interested in Reading at an Early Age

Frederick, MD, Dec. 7, 2018 – Malcolm X once said that people don't realize how a man's whole life can be changed by one book. Imagine then the exponential power that books can make in the lives of children and you'll understand why getting kids to read at an early age is germane to success.

The Housing Authority of the City of Frederick (HACF) Reads program aims to jumpstart a love of reading in some of their youngest residents through a series of early literacy efforts and hope this love will follow them into adulthood.

Cindy Powell, youth education coordinator at HACF, said the efforts at the Success Center at Lucas Village include weekly story time, books for all ages, board games, computers, snacks and fun – an arrangement supported through a partnership with Frederick County Public Libraries. The center is open after school for students to come in by appointment for one-on-one tutoring, to do their homework and to take part in other activities as well.

The Curious Iguana bookstore, a benefit corporation that donates a percentage of all proceeds to global and local nonprofits, has a unique partnership with HACF. The bookstore arranges author meet and greets in the community and has hosted children from public housing at author events in the store. So far, the bookstore has helped to bring national bestselling authors, Matt De La Pena and Jacqueline Woodson and illustrator, Christian Robinson, out into the community to meet housing authority residents ranging in age from small children to teenagers.

Recently, De La Pena and Robinson discussed how they grew up with similar backgrounds as the students and how important it is for children to see themselves as successful career adults, on the other side. Also, Woodson came out to Lucas Village in support of HACF Reads and read excerpts from one of her books.

In addition to the smaller events with residents, the authors also took part in larger community events in Frederick.

These efforts and others undertaken by HACF, in collaboration with The Curious Iguana, will likely be long lasting, said Marlene England, the downtown Frederick bookstore's co-founder, along with her husband, Tom. Meeting a successful author helps to enlarge a child's dreams and expand his or her notion of who they can become when they grow up. It shows them the possibilities in a real, tangible way, she said.

"These kids will never forget this experience. It's magical really and it's so important. You just never know what seed might be planted," England said. "They (HACF) do such extraordinary work. They build one on one relationships with families and kids to help them thrive."

The Curious Iguana gets Advanced Reader Copies from publishers as a preview for ordering new titles, and the store moves those books on to the Success Center for community use.

Powell said she is thrilled at the increased momentum these types of events attract. And she hopes to capitalize off of them to drive home the importance of reading.

Reading starts at home, Powell said, although she acknowledges that reading is not always a top priority with struggling parents who have so many other things vying for their attention in their daily lives. Powell's plan is to get children excited about books, thus increasing the likelihood that they will bring that excitement home and ask their parents to read to them.

"The more we read to kids, the more likely they are to ask a parent or caregiver to read to them," Powell said. "In a perfect world, I would love to see more of our adult residents become readers."

HACF's literacy initiatives couldn't be timelier. Although improvements are occurring gradually, nationally, 80 percent of lower-income students are not meeting reading standards, compared to 49 percent of higher-income peers, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Powell said according to a report by the foundation, if children are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade, chances are higher that they will continually struggle in school. To counter the dismal statistics, Powell said, HACF is "working on a goal of improving reading scores so our children are reading on grade level by grade three."

