

"Share a Book ... at Home"

A Literacy Project Sponsored by the Elkin Public Library

by Joan Sanders

"You mean I can keep this book?"

"I don't have to return it?"

These are typical enthusiastic responses to the Friends of the Elkin Public Library's gift of a book to every participant in its annual summer reading programs. In 1990, in response to data indicating that over 50 percent of the adults in Surry County had not finished high school, and that 30 percent had not completed the eighth grade, the library launched its literacy outreach program, "Share a Book ... at Home." Funded by the Winston-Salem Foundation, the project's goal was to give each child in area day care and Head Start centers a book to take home to keep. Objectives also included giving each center a core collection of books, and organizing and training volunteers to present weekly story hour programs at each center. Much of the plan was grounded in *Early Literacy* by Joan McLane and Gillian McNamee.

Volunteers were recruited from the active Friends of the Library group and through the local newspaper. The volunteers were offered training in a workshop with Pat Seigfried from the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. A canvas of area day care facilities identified six centers that wished to participate. A staff member volunteered to design a logo, button, and book-mark. Teams of volunteers were matched with centers and "Share a Book ... at Home" began.

The project has grown to include several more area agencies. In 1991, the renewed Winston-Salem Foundation grant helped the Elkin Public Library expand its goals to include giving each new baby born in the Hugh Chatham Memorial Hospital a board book to keep. The auxiliary of the hospital assumed the annual cost of purchasing these books in 1992. In 1995, the auxiliary board designated funds from their annual bazaar for the "Share a Book" project and requested that Spanish titles be added to their annual book gift list. Approximately 300 babies receive these books each year. They are packaged by Friends, who include library materials and who tie the package in blanket binding from the local Chatham Manufacturing Company.

In 1992, the success of the "Share a Book ... at Home" project led to the development of the countywide literacy coalition, "Surry: A County of Readers." Smart Start has used the project as a model for early literacy as well. Also in 1992, the State Library of North Carolina awarded a mini-grant to the Elkin Public Library to expand the "Share a Book" project to the local pre-school hearing-impaired satellite class of the Western Carolina School for the Deaf. Sign language books and videotapes were added to the library's collection and placed in the children's classroom.

The Tri-County United Way became involved in 1993 when the directors voted to underwrite the cost of the hardback books given to approximately 250 pre-school children in the area day care and Head Start centers. Presentations to various boards, radio spots, and a regular newspaper column helped to keep the public aware of the goals and needs of the project.

In 1994, through a second State Library mini-grant, the "Share a Book ... at Home" project included story sharing during parent meetings at six Head Start centers. The Motherhead model was used, and Lynn Wright-Kernoble from the North Carolina Humanities Council served as the initial presenter. Staff members from centers in three counties attended an in-service training day, receiving reading tips and examples of effective story hours. Titles used in

small planning groups included: *Flossie and the Fox*, *Goggles*, and *I Have a Friend*.

After this workshop, the Head Start literacy coordinator helped the library staff lead parent group meetings in six Head Start sites. *Ferdinand the Bull* was a favorite title with the groups, who entered into the story and shared ways their children could become involved. The evaluations of the parent meetings were positive, and books suggested by the Motherhead program were contributed to each center.

The teams of Friends volunteers who present story hour programs at the centers for ten weeks each spring hold an annual evaluation session. A committee of the Friends chairs the project, selecting book titles and gathering ideas for project developments. Positive outcomes of the project are increased library registrations from day care and Head Start families, more volunteers, and — most important of all — books in the homes of more children each year.

Project evaluations have brought about book lists for parents and staff at each facility, a designated box of favorite books at the library, and book lists for story sharing. The need for increased awareness among the children of what a library is and does became evident. The result was the production of a short video by the Elkin Public Library's Kids' Club. The students, assisted by an experienced volunteer, created an entertaining film about the Elkin Public Library building and library services for the children. Now story hour volunteers are accustomed to being greeted as if they are "library": "Thank you, library!" "Good-bye, library!" "I love you, library!"

Currently, the Elkin Public Library staff and Friends are in the sixth year of "Share a Book...at Home." With suggestions from the 1995 volunteers, goals for 1996 were formed and a grant was approved by the Winston-Salem Foundation to expand the project to include story kits, books, and staff training for the centers. Marian Lytle, Children's Librarian at the Rowan County Public Library, presented "Shazam: Connecting Children and Books" in January 1996 to staff members from the centers at a state-accredited in-service workshop. Following a hot meal provided by a local caterer, the group enjoyed new and classic book titles as Lytle wove the stories into story hour themes. Those attending remarked that the workshop was the most practical and enjoyable one they had attended in years! The grant's final objective is the donation to each center of a collection of books and story hour stretchers, including puppets. Marian Lytle's book list is well worn!

The "Share a Book ... at Home" Literacy outreach project achieves its yearly goals by providing books to 300 newborns and 250 young children to take home to share. For many of the young children in the centers, it is their first book. The volunteers are still hearing the comments which began the project: "You mean I can keep this book?" "I don't have to return it?"

In a county where over 50 percent of adults have not finished high school and 30 percent do not have an eighth grade education, the Elkin Public Library and its community have come together to make a difference.

Reference

McLane, Joan B., and Gillian D. McNamee. *Early Literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.