International Literacy Day in Arkansas: Family’s Book Donations Help Healing Process, Keep Son’s Memory Alive

Arkansas First Lady Ginger Beebe reading to a student at Our House in Little Rock

After the passing of their son Alex, the Courtney family established the Alex Foundation to keep his memory alive through service to others. The family’s first call to action was to create a scholarship endowment to help deserving low income students have access to academic scholarships. Equally important to the family was to share Alex’s giving spirit in different ways.

“One of Alex’s and my previous ‘teachable moments’ was collecting over 3,000 books for students who had been displaced to Arkansas as a result of Hurricane Katrina,” says Angela Courtney, Alex’s mother. “We distributed those books to elementary schools in Little Rock, North Little Rock, and Pulaski County school districts. When I looked in our storage and saw that we still had hundreds of remaining books, I wanted to share them with others.”

A Call to the First Lady

This time around Courtney wanted to extend her reach to the Arkansas Delta, where the family resides, and to include service organizations as well as schools. Knowing the value in partnerships, Courtney reached out to First Lady Ginger Beebe and the Arkansas Reading Association (ARA).

“I went online and completed the request for Mrs. Beebe to join our family’s book donations efforts on a Friday in August, and on that Monday I received a call from her assistant expressing an interest in supporting our cause,” Courtney says.

Arkansas Reading Council Gets Involved

Courtney put the wheels in motion to locate the International Reading Association’s (IRA) Arkansas council. “I emailed the Delaware IRA office and they sent me an Arkansas email contact,” Angela explains. “I was directed to contact Krista Underwood, IRA State Coordinator for Arkansas, who agreed to help us.”

The book donations were delivered on September 7, to celebrate International Literacy Day. Books were donated to Our House and Dorcas House for young transitional residents, to St. Francis House to establish a library for transitional families, and to Dermott Elementary School library and to CB King Memorial School for special needs children.

From left to right: Jane Dearworth (ADE), Wendy Burfiend and Pam Harshfield (Fountain Lake School District, IRA Exemplary Reading Program Award for Arkansas), Susan Bitely and Margie Nanak (Jefferson County Reading Council, IRA Community Service Award), Krista Underwood (ARA), First Lady Ginger Beebe, Malea Ellison (Mountain Pine School District, IRA Technology Award), Chad L. Cumming, Jr. (Alex Foundation), and Rebecca Morris (Mountain Pine School District)
Underwood appeared on TV with the Alex Foundation’s attorney, Chad L. Cumming, Jr., and worked with the Southeast Arkansas Reading Council (a local affiliate of ARA), the Southeast Arkansas Educational Cooperative, the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE), and the various organizations receiving the books to coordinate the transport of the books from Little Rock to the various sites and presentations. Underwood coordinated members of ARA and local reading councils to be present at each site to prepare for presentations and ensure timely delivery of the books. “[The ARA members] lifting the burden of transporting over 1,000 books was a great relief,” said Courtney.

Award Winners on Board to Help

The Alex Foundation added to the excitement by encouraging the ARA to use the International Literacy Day book donation event to recognize the state’s IRA award winners. After several days of conversation, all of the award winners were able to attend the event. All of the awardees also were represented during the IRA Awards Ceremony held in Chicago during the 2012 IRA Annual Convention.

Courtney said that with Arkansas’ First Lady Ginger Beebe and ARA members helping the cause, her family’s goal of getting the books into the hands of children in need was being accomplished. “Partnerships are essential in any endeavor. With the support of our First Lady reading to the kids and ARA members delivering the books to most of the designated book donation venues, our family had an amazing experience. It was a wonderful feeling knowing that our mission to keep Alex’s memory alive was made possible through the gift of giving and reading engaging books to children who are in need.”

About the Arkansas Reading Association

The Arkansas Reading Association (ARA) includes approximately 1,200 members involved in 20 local reading councils throughout the state. ARA membership is open to all educators, parents, community leaders, and anyone interested in promoting literacy. ARA’s state reading conference was held on November 15-16, and they are planning for their Summer Leadership Conference on July 13-14. They offer awards and publish a scholarly journal called The Reader. The ARA website is www.arareading.org, and they have a group on Facebook. For more information contact ARA President Debbie Hardwick-Smith at debbie@arareading.org.

In his new book Alfred Tatum explores the power of reading to help young males of color define themselves, nurture their resilience, engage with others and build reading and writing stamina. Each chapter opens with a Key Point, explains and illuminates the point, and ends with a list of Critical Questions for educators to ask themselves, and discuss with colleagues. The Implementation section showcases practical details—the instructional frame, daily agenda, focus lessons, mentor texts, PowerPoints, assessment, and more—that will enable teachers to effectively apply Tatum’s approach.

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