



Junior League

is Turning the Page on Illiteracy in Alachua County

By Anita Webster | Photos by Photography 35



A page is turning at the Junior League of Gainesville. For 76 years, this local sisterhood of mothers, wives, business owners and professionals has gone about its mission, bettering the lives of this community's women and children, one project at a time.

Their year-round efforts include operating a thrift store on Main Street and providing toys and bikes for disadvantaged families at Christmas through Miracle on Main Street.

Other endeavors called signature projects by the League are carefully developed to be handed over at project's end to a separate entity. In other words, Junior League also acts as an incubator for non-profits, specifically chosen and formed by these community women to address issues they feel are challenging local women and children.

For example, in one past signature project called Give a Kid a Chance, the League selected five local child care centers for low-income families that needed support, said President Kim Beach.

"We fixed them up, gave them books and other educational materials, provided scholarships, purchased playground equipment, advocated for early childhood education support locally and helped some of the centers get their accreditation," Beach said.

Yet, despite the thousands of people who have benefited from the League's efforts, some members feel the organization is relatively unknown or misunderstood.

"So many people don't know about the Junior League of Gainesville," said Laurie Denny, co-chair of this year's signature project. "They don't know about Miracle on Main Street. But easily 100 children every Christmas get a bike and 350 families get toys."

Denny hopes this year's project starts a new chapter in the League's story of giving, a chapter that brings as much development and growth in the League itself as it does in the community.

This year, when the League sat down to vote on its next endeavor, they tapped a collective idea so passionate they ultimately devoted five years to this signature project.

With headlines of the downward slide of public education and the 2010 FCAT scores fresh in their minds, League

members voted overwhelmingly that literacy was a critical challenge facing this community, Beach said.

According to the Florida Department of Education, Alachua County reading scores for grades third-10th fell below state average in fourth-seventh grades. The highest percentage of passing scores was in third grade, with 73 percent passing. Tenth grade scored the lowest, with 45 percent passing.

"Up to third grade," Denny said, "children are learning to read. After third grade, you read to learn. Literacy has a direct correlation to community. Being able to read is the core to being an intelligent person."

Denny began her project research with Jennifer Tragash at United Way of North Central Florida.

"Jennifer was so generous with her time and her own vast knowledge," Denny said. "She moved her chair over to a vast filing cabinet, opened the bottom drawer and said, 'This is all about literacy.'"

United Way runs Success by Six, a program supporting early learning, child care, parent education, health and literacy in North Central Florida.

Tragash invited Denny to be part of United Way's Community Solutions Team, whose members of local childhood development leaders included Ann Crowell, the director of Head Start.

When the team convened to identify, by age group, the area's most critical issues and to offer solutions, everyone identified family engagement and parental involvement.

Everything Denny learned from her research about literacy success pointed to "parental involvement – reading with your child, talking with your child, engaging your child."

When Denny brought her new knowledge back to the League, she laid down a question.

"If we want it to be our mission to give every single child in Alachua County a book, absolutely we can do that," Denny said, "but I feel we have to ask ourselves a question about what we'll have accomplished. It's generous, but we're not fixing anything. Someone needs to read the book to them."

That pivotal piece of literacy success is what propelled the League to give the signature project its current shape, its





five-year span, and its official title – Read with Me: Learning and Bonding through Stories.

“Just giving books isn’t enough,” she said. “Our goal is empowering parents in how to read this book, helping them understand you don’t need to read every word. Look at the pictures and talk about them--just communicating. Opportunities where we have access to the parent and the child are those that we are interested in so we have the opportunity to do a little training session on how to read with your child.”

And the word “with” versus “to” is important, Denny said.

“Hopefully our message comes across to parents that it’s about engagement, it’s about spending time with your child just talking, just learning,” she said.

For Read with Me’s first year, the League will partner with Head Start, drawing on Denny’s connections with Crowell.

Head Start is a federally-funded, comprehensive child development program of Alachua County Public Schools. It serves children from economically disadvantaged families and children with special needs from birth to age five.

“What I’ve enjoyed about the project and also from being in the League in general is the idea of working for a greater good and not recreating the wheel,” Denny said. “Head Start staff members have given me samples of their curriculum so that we can tie what we’re doing to their program. They haven’t asked for anything; they’ve just given. They’ve just been incredible. It’s just an awesome experience.”

Crowell feels Head Start and Junior League share a common goal.

“We both believe early intervention is critical to the child’s development, parental involvement is essential, and combining resources, expertise and enthusiasm increases our effectiveness,” she said.

Additional benefits come from the League’s partnership with Head Start. Head Start students are in the program for two years and are given assessments at year-start, at mid-year, and at year-end. By following the same children’s progress, the League can measure Read with Me’s impact and better gauge the project’s development.

Also at Head Start, parent meetings are

mandatory, at orientation and throughout the school year. Crowell invited Read with Me volunteers to attend, providing the access to both parent and child that Read with Me seeks.

At these meetings, volunteers will give books, educate parents on literacy importance and train parents how to read with their child.

“Anytime we give a child a book, there will be tips for parents on reading this book with their child,” Denny said.

In addition to educating parents, Read with Me volunteers will also come to Head Start classrooms to read to the children one day a month, according to Beach.

Another fresh face reading to children during this project’s first year will be Read with Me mascot – Paige Turners.

“At our first committee meeting, I presented the mascot idea, even though it was not part of our original plan,” Denny said. “They were so excited about it, we were designing costumes.”

Denny, who works for O2B Kids, got her inspiration from O2B’s Morning Magic character, Maggie.

“Paige Turners will be like a special treat,” Denny said, making special appearances to read stories.

Although details of Paige Turners’ look are still being decided, the League agreed her hair color will be Junior League red.

Beyond Read with Me’s first year, Beach and

Denny said the League has ideas for expanding its work into kindergartens, creating a weeklong summer reading camp, and developing a reading-themed park.

“If we’re going to be successful, we’re going to need more than just the literacy committee,” Denny said. “If we bite off the 640 children that is Head Start, we will have to have support of the League. I hope Read with Me brings us closer. I hope that it will also help us increase our roster. You need validity. It’s an awesome organization of women. We’re going to make a difference.” **H**



How the community can support Junior League’s Read with Me:

Bring books for ages 3-5 years by the Junior League Thrift Store, 430 N. Main Street, Gainesville, FL 32601.

Become reading volunteers.

Offer financial support.
Contact Junior League
352-376-3805 or
office@gainesvillejrleague.org

Become a Junior League member.
Visit www.gainesvillejrleague.org

