

Mingo nonprofit builds literacy through innovative program

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In a county where illiteracy rates soar, local children will meet several noted authors

Kermit, W.Va. - "She's here!" an 8-year-old girl cried out with excitement as the author from out of town approached the front door, books in hand. Hearing the announcement, the girl's fellow students hustled to their seats to await the woman's entrance.

In this county where literacy rates are among the lowest in West Virginia, one group of children here have a new weapon to help them beat the odds.

ABLE Families, a nonprofit agency that runs a thriving after-school program at its Kermit site, this week introduced Authors After School, an innovative program designed to develop students' enthusiasm for reading and writing. The keystone of the program is several visits by noted authors of children's literature to the afterschool site.

On March 25, the children met Anna Egan Smucker. The Bridgeport resident's award-winning books include "No Star Nights," "Golden Delicious," and "A History of West Virginia."

In April, Sarah Sullivan will visit the after-school site, followed by a visit by Marc Harshman in May. All three writers have made significant contributions to children's literature, and each is a West Virginia resident.

But the Authors After School program includes more than just author visits. Three days before each visit, every child in the ABLE Families program receives his or her own copy of one of the author's books. They read the book together aloud, then talk about what they read with afterschool staff.

Over the following days, the kids engage in a series of creative and engaging activities related to the characters, events, and themes in the book.

Prior to Smucker's visit, every child in the program received their own copy of her book "No Star Nights," the story of a young girl growing up half a century ago in Weirton, where her father worked in that city's steel mills. The children read it together, discussed it, and created arts projects and ate snacks related to the book. A local miner was invited to come and talk about what it's like to work in the mines, the local equivalent to the Weirton mills. One staff member led the kids in a fascinating discussion of memory and what they think they'll remember about their own childhoods when they're grown.



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Author Anna Egan Smucker reads to children in the ABLE Families program in Kermit.



The whole process culminates with the author's visit. Smucker talked with the students about the joy of reading and writing, and she led them in a mini writing workshop. The children peppered her with questions about coming up with story ideas, writing, and publishing.

"We all have stories to tell," Smucker told the kids. "You have stories to tell."

Before Smucker left, she signed each kid's copy of her book.

ABLE Families' mission is to help people get out or stay out of poverty. We can't say that being able to read and write well guarantees a person will never be poor.

But being illiterate is a pretty sure guarantee that a person will be. Illiteracy and poverty go hand in hand. So getting these kids fired up about reading is pretty crucial," Hudock said.

Mingo County's literacy rate is one of the lowest of all counties in the state. The National Institute for Literacy has reported that nearly 30 percent of Mingo County residents have difficulty reading beyond a fourth grade level. Only two other counties (McDowell and Summers) have lower literacy rates.

"We came up with Authors After School to help get kids more interested in reading and writing. We're also showing them that there are fascinating people right here in our state who are making some great achievements with these skills. These writers are wonderful role models for our kids," said Barry Hudock, executive director of the ABLE Families program.

ABLE Families' Authors Afterschool program is funded in part by a grant from the West Virginia Humanities Council. Gifts from individual donors will fund the remainder of the expenses.

ABLE Families was founded by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Wheeling (now the Congregation of St. Joseph) in 1995. Its mission is to confront the systemic causes of poverty by supporting low-income families as they make positive changes in their lives.

In addition to after school, the agency's other programs include in-home family education on maternal and infant health, adult education, nutrition education, summer camps, and more.