

Friends of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries help fund community literacy program

Once a month during the spring and fall semesters, students from the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS) bring books, craft and activity supplies, and lots of creative energy and enthusiasm to the low-income Allied Drive area of Madison. Allied Drive Literacy Time is a community engagement program connecting SLIS students with children enrolled at the Allied Learning Center, which is an afterschool Safe Haven facility run by Madison School and Community Recreation (MSCR). The Learning Center serves kids from kindergarten through fifth grade.

“Our mission is to support the development of literacy skills by making reading a fun, confidence-building experience, and to create a strong connection between reading and positive growth,” says SLIS faculty associate Allison Kaplan, who serves as the program’s faculty sponsor. Book purchases in support of this program have been provided by grants from the Friends of the UW-Madison Libraries.

Allied Drive Literacy Time provides book-based programming for children from kindergarten to grade three. For the younger children, the monthly programs focus on engaging read-alouds, songs, and crafts. The second- and third-graders pair with SLIS students and volunteers for one-on-one reading. “When our group walks in the door, the kids run over, each one picks out a book, and then grabs someone by the hand to start in reading right away,” Kaplan says.

The program had its beginnings a decade ago when a mapping project conducted by the UW Water Resources Library identified the Allied Drive section as a geographically isolated area. Residents had no easy access to workplaces, shopping, or libraries. Librarians from several UW campus libraries began monthly visits to the neighborhood to read to kids. Soon SLIS students began to get involved, and

the program became more structured. When Kaplan joined the SLIS faculty in 2006 as a youth services specialist, she wanted to expand the program: “Often, library students think they want to work in Youth Services, but they have no opportunity to actually work with kids in a library setting until after they’re done with their studies. The Literacy Time program gives them that interaction and helps them decide in what direction they want to go.”

Beginning in fall 2010, student visits to the Allied Learning Center became part of a new one-credit course, Topics in Community Engagement, which was designed to help students understand how to work with community organizations with information needs. Students enrolled in this course gain practical experience developing children’s programming.

“During class meeting time, we discuss what books to purchase for the Allied Drive program. This helps SLIS students learn about collection development. They also keep journals and prepare lesson plans and parent handouts for each monthly visit,” says Kaplan.

For a typical monthly visit, two student workers, three students from the Topics in Community Engagement class, and six or seven other volunteers will make the trip. For the younger children, SLIS students and volunteers lead the group in a half hour of stories and songs followed by a craft activity for 15 minutes, all centered around a theme such as “fish,” “friends and friendship,” or “imagination.” The books the SLIS students bring relate to a theme, such as “mystery” or “poetry.”

“Another goal of the program is to get the kids to identify with UW as a cool place, to give them a level of familiarity with college students,” Kaplan says. “Children naturally look up to those who aren’t that much older than they are — at least as compared to their parents and teachers — and

they just love interacting with our SLIS students. At the same time, our students are able to get off campus and learn about a neighborhood and population with which they might never otherwise have any contact. It’s truly what community engagement is all about.”

A highlight for the children is the book giveaway that takes place at the end of each semester. “We set up the books and help kids pick them out,” says Kaplan. “Each child gets a bookmark and can choose two or three books that they can keep. We need to make sure there’s a range of reading levels, and we try to mix the quality of literature, from classics to pop culture, such as graphic novels and series books.” Grants from the Friends of the UW-Madison Libraries enables the purchase of new books for these giveaways, which Kaplan stresses is an important factor.

“We’ve done giveaways with used books, and it does make a difference with the kids,” she says. “Used books have other kids’ names scratched out, they’re written in, they’re a bit worn — the kids know it’s charity. To be able to bring home brand-new books that belong only to them is a great feeling.”

Kaplan expresses that everyone involved in the program is grateful to the Friends of the UW Libraries for the grants that have contributed to the Allied Drive Literacy Time project. “We’re thankful from the bottom of our hearts! It’s such a great program,” she says. “The community loves to have us there, the SLIS students learn so much as pre-professional growth, and the kids just love to read! It’s not only a feel-good kind of thing; it’s professional and personal growth for everyone involved.”

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