



Meriden Parents Work with Seniors to Help Kids with Reading

We all know there are not enough resources to help students these days, but many of us just shake our heads and wish that things were different. Not Meriden parents Cathy Lewis and Donna Mordarski. Several years ago, Cathy Lewis was frustrated because her niece, who was having reading problems, was on a waiting list to get extra help in school. Help did not come quickly enough, though, and her niece was held back a grade. Rather than dwell on the lack of services, Cathy, a Meriden Parent Leadership Training Institute graduate, and Donna Mordarski decided to do something to help children who were struggling with reading.

While attending a budget meeting organized by Meriden Children First at the local Senior Center, Cathy talked with an active senior who she saw as a “wealth of information.” “I realized that seniors have so much to offer and the time to share their talents and experiences, but we just don’t engage them,” recalled Cathy. Less than a year later, Cathy and Donna launched the Senior Buddy Readers Program.

The program began at Meriden’s Benjamin Franklin Elementary School with seven volunteers. Volunteers are paired with 1st and 2nd graders who are in need of additional reading help, as identified by their teacher. The volunteers receive training on how to use the strategies employed in the schools to help the children improve their reading skills. Then, they begin meeting with their assigned student each week.

Making It Happen

To build their volunteer base, Cathy and Donna went to the Max Muravnick Senior Center, the AARP, and other groups. Volunteers also began recruiting their friends. Each year they increased their volunteer base and added schools. “We had nothing and we went with it,” remembers Cathy. “The schools were great. They let us use their copiers and paper. The The Meriden Record-Journal journalists wrote articles and played a major role in increasing our visibility and helping us to recruit new volunteers.”



I found there’s something in life besides getting old. I found it rewarding and there’s a need for a grandparent [role model].

—Senior Buddy Reader Volunteer

Now, eight years later, the Senior Buddy Reader’s Program is operating in five of Meriden’s public elementary schools. More than 75 senior volunteers work with 200 first- and second-grade children. Thanks to their relationship with Meriden Children First, the program has forged alliances with Meriden Health and Human Services, the Board of Education, Friends of the Library, the United Way of Meriden and Wallingford and a numerous other local civic groups. The United Way has helped with recruiting efforts and funds were raised through local business sponsorships and foundation grants. With this support, they were able to design a new logo last year to increase recognition of the program. Meriden Children First is proud of their involvement with the Senior Buddy Readers program. Executive Director David Radcliffe says of the program,

To learn more about the Senior Buddy Readers program, visit the Meriden Children First website at www.meridenchildrenfirst.org.

“Buddy Readers is a win-win-win: for the children, for the senior buddies, and for our schools. It’s an amazing program, and the sort of investment in early learning that helps kids have a successful school experience.”

Overcoming Obstacles

This amazing success did not come without obstacles. Cathy and Donna had to work with the volunteers to help them overcome their concerns about coming into the schools and their negative views of children in the Meriden schools due to stereotyping. Cathy and Donna learned to take their young children with them when presenting to potential volunteers which helped them to see an example of the kind of children they would be helping. Once they were involved with the program, volunteers no longer needed to be convinced. As one volunteer commented, “These kids are great! They are polite, enthusiastic... I just had fun and gained a better appreciation of the quality of Meriden schools.”

Scheduling was also a challenge. Many of the senior volunteers go to Florida in the winter and teachers initially felt that the program might take away from important class time. Therefore, Cathy and Donna worked with the school principals and teachers when scheduling the program in each school so that it would fit into the schedule.

Additionally, there is the tremendous effort involved in administering the program in five schools. Cathy greets volunteers at the schools every week and provide identification tags, stickers for the students and “Buddy Bags” with books. They make sure volunteers have a space to meet with their student and observe while the volunteers work with the children to ensure that all goes well.

When the program started, volunteers were told to encourage the children to practice at home. It was discovered that many of the children did not have books at home, so Cathy and Donna started a “Books on Wheels” mobile lending library program that utilizes new and donated books. The students also receive a new book to take home three times during the year; at the beginning of the program, at holiday-time and at the end of the program.



I think the Senior Buddy Readers program is a wonderful opportunity for the children to read to adults, especially if they aren’t given that opportunity at home. The children are choosing more challenging books to read. They want to impress their senior buddy with their abilities.

—Meriden Public Schools 2nd grade teacher

Next Steps and How You Can Help

A couple of senior volunteers have begun taking on some of the coordination, helping to support Cathy Lewis, who now serves as a paid, part-time coordinator for the program.

If you would like to help the program by sponsoring a child, by contributing gently-used books or by becoming a volunteer Buddy, please contact David Radcliffe (dwradcliffe@juno.com) at Meriden Children First (203-630-3566) or visit www.meridenchildrenfirst.org. ■

The William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund works collaboratively to improve education for Connecticut’s children by supporting school change, informing the public debate on educational issues, and strengthening the involvement of parents and the community in education.

