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HAPPILY EVER AFTER...KIDS AND VOLUNTEERS READING TOGETHER

by Tina Scully *Monday, Dec. 12, 2005 at 4:09 PM*

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Beginning with Books provides storybooks and volunteer readers; educates parents, daycare providers, pre-school/Kindergarten and elementary teachers about developing early literacy in children of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania's low-income families.

Corporate America take note: are you looking for an excellent way to build morale among your current personnel and improve your future workforce? If so, you should contact Beginning with Books, the local affiliate of the national Everybody Wins! program right away!

Everybody Wins! is a national literacy and mentoring non-profit organization devoted to increasing children's prospects for success in school and in life through one-to-one reading experiences. Founded in New York City by Arthur and Phyllis Tannenbaum in 1991, the program provides "reading mentors" for more than 6,800 elementary school children across the country.

In 2001 the Junior League of Pittsburgh voted to bring the power of Everybody Wins! to Pittsburgh and sought an affiliation with recognized early literacy experts at Beginning with Books. The League's current president, Lynne Chadwick, said that "the Junior League of Pittsburgh greatly benefited from particularly the expertise of Beginning with Books' Special Projects Coordinator Tess Riesmeyer; who was critical to the success of the project, from planning in 2001, to working with committee members to build the program from 2002-2005, to our hand-off of to Beginning with Books in July, 2005." This hand-off was accompanied by a two-year grant for \$75,000 from the Junior League of Pittsburgh – one of the largest grants in the history of that organization.

To ensure the continuation of the program into the future, many businesses, among them Equitable Gas Company, also choose to make the suggested donation of \$300 per employee per year to local affiliates such as Beginning with Books, to emphasize the message that the company or firm is proud to support the volunteer efforts of its own people. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania also stands behind these corporate gifts to approved organizations, including Beginning with Books, via its Educational Improvement Tax Credit program (see <http://www.newpa.com/programDetail.aspx?id=62>).

This is how it all fits together: businesses and firms encourage their employees to volunteer for the program via in-house newsletters, e-mail messages, break-room posters, etc. Interested employees contact their human resources office for more information. Beginning with Books then provides a one-hour training session at the employee's work site, usually during a lunch hour, then matches each volunteer with a child aged 5-8 at one of two currently participating elementary schools. The volunteer commits to travel to the school one day each week from October - May and meets the child during the school's lunch period when the two read together for forty minutes in designated Everybody Wins! reading rooms. In addition, Beginning with Books hosts workshops for parents at the beginning and end of each school year to ensure that family members understand that they also play a critical role in ensuring their child's success in school.

The first school to become involved with Everybody Wins! was the Pittsburgh Public School ("PPS") system's Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary on the North Side. We extend thanks to Cindy Goodman-Lieb, who coordinates the program, school social worker Sandie Gossman and Principal LaVerne Anthony. In March, 2005 a second PPS

joined the program: Weil Technical Institute on Centre Avenue in the Hill District. Coordinating the program for Weil is Brenda Dobson, who works closely with Reading Coach Leah Davidson and Principal Vivian Wilson.

Known for its effective combination of dedicated volunteers and funds to support and grow community service projects, the Junior League of Pittsburgh has backed this project with \$20,000 per year for the past three years. Even more importantly, League volunteers have worked tirelessly alongside Beginning with Books to ensure the success of the project: committee chairs Julie Rooney, Michelle Koehler and Marcella Reed; dedicated committee members Loretta Lobes, Kim Jackson and Jessica Lynch; Project Director Kelly Enders and Past President MaryAdele Krolkowski led the way in giving their time and expertise to the project.

Volunteers have come to Everybody Wins! from ALCOA, Inc., Equitable Gas Company, H.J. Heinz Company, the Northside Leadership Conference, PNC Bank, and the law firm Reed Smith. In-kind support in the form of meeting space has been provided by Allegheny General Hospital.

Keith G. Kondrich, Executive Director of Beginning with Books, wants to emphasize to business and professional firms that “no partner is too big or too small to encourage their employees to volunteer to read to a child. Whether you have fifty people or one individual ready to participate, each person involved makes an incredibly positive difference in the life of a child.” With enough interested volunteers, Everybody Wins! would be able to add more sites in schools around the Pittsburgh region.

For more information, please contact Tina Surman Scully at Beginning with Books at 412-361-8560, scullyt@mybwb.org or see <http://www.beginningwithbooks.org>.

www.beginningwithbooks.org

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