

CONNECTICUT LIBRARIES

A Publication of
the Connecticut
Library
Association

Living the Dream

by David Kapp

The house looks like any other comfortable residence on this quiet, suburban street. But the tranquil exterior is misleading; this is headquarters for Books to Dreams, Miriam Epstein's crusade to share the joy of reading with homeless children.

Inside this house, the garage can still accommodate the family cars, just barely; but its primary function is to serve as a warehouse for the thousands of books awaiting distribution to children and their parents who are living in shelters. Shelves line the walls, and every shelf is filled with cartons of books that have been sorted by reading level or designated for special purposes. Nearby, UConn professor Howard Epstein's office has become a printing plant where the program's forms, labels, book-marks and other printed materials are computer generated.

Upstairs, a former bedroom holds still more books along with the props Miriam uses when she goes out to read at shelters for the homeless. Across the hall, in what used to be another bedroom, is command central. A closet has been turned into a bookcase. The walls are lined with pictures of homeless kids and their moms. Another wall is covered with awards and commendations. The drawers are packed with forms

and labels. The desk is piled with correspondence and reminders of things to do. Here, every morning around eight, Miriam renews her self-imposed mission to bring the pleasures and values of reading to children living on the edge.

On the morning that I visit her, Miriam is juggling several tasks. Linda Clark, a volunteer from Enfield, has just delivered a boxful of "reading buddies." Linda and her mother Evelyn collect used stuffed toys, wash and refurbish them, and supply them to the program. Last year, they provided more than 3000 reading buddies for Books to Dreams. Somewhere in another part of the house, a second volunteer, Lynn Lukach of Manchester,



Miriam Epstein began her crusade to bring books to homeless children with just a single canvas book bag. Last year, through Books to Dreams, she delivered 20,400 books to children, parents, shelters, and soup kitchens.

is placing tags on the reading buddies that are used in the program. No book or reading buddy is ever given away without a careful label bearing a message about the importance of reading. There are letters to attend to, thank you notes to volunteers and donors to be written, calls to make, statistics to be compiled, and any number of other "administrative" tasks to handle.

The growing success of Books to Dreams, since its inception in 1996, has led recently to its incorporation as a non-profit organiza-

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LIVING THE DREAM

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tion. As the program has evolved, it has become more complex and has attracted growing support from donors, volunteers, and the state. Last year, Books to Dreams reached an audience of 431 children and their parents at 135 sessions in eleven shelters in Hartford, Willimantic, Danielson, Rockville, New London, Norwich, and East Hartford. Nearly 20,400 books were distributed to children, parents, shelters and soup kitchens. Cash donations for books this year will exceed \$18,000, and thousands of used books will be collected. The Connecticut Department of Social Services contributes \$30,000 annually to help cover some of the program's costs.

It was not always thus. The story goes back a long way. Miriam Epstein credits her father, Joseph Stannard of Glastonbury, for instilling in her a love for books and reading. She grew up in modest circumstances, but, she says, there were always books and always time for reading with her father. She showed me her first book, a tiny, well-loved copy of Mother Goose stories given to her in 1948 by her grandmother. Miriam became an educator, teaching pre-school through eighth grades over the course of her 25-year career, the last ten years of which were spent teaching third and fourth grades in the Columbia public schools. But a trip to New York City at Christmas 1988 changed her life. She observed the homeless people sheltering in the splendor of Grand Central Station and returned home wondering what she could do to help.

One way of helping was to volunteer in the soup kitchen at the Covenant Soup Kitchen in Willimantic. Over the course of several years as a volunteer at Covenant, and especially later at the Shepherd's Place Soup Kitchen in Manchester, Miriam noted the

increasing number of children in the soup kitchens. "As I served the food, she said, I was looking into the eyes of many, many children. That was what made me say, 'I can't look away anymore—I need to do something.'"

As a certified teacher, the most natural thing for her to do was to teach. So, in 1993, with the support of her husband Howard, she applied for an unpaid leave of absence in order to begin a preschool program—The Key—in Willimantic's Holy Family Home and Shelter. The pro-

gram, the first of its kind in Connecticut, involved reading, homework tutoring, training parents to work with their children, working with all of the public schools, and organizing students from UConn and ECSU to tutor the older children. Supported by the Connecticut Department of Social Services, the program continues today—one of the many "miracles" with which Miriam says her life is filled.

Calling upon her friends and volunteers, she established a library in the shelter. With support and donations from the Theta Chapter of Delta Kappa Gamma Society, she initiated another program—Coming Home to Books—in which children were read to and where they got to keep their own, inscribed, favorite books. A McKinney Grant for the Education of Homeless Children and another from Reading is Fundamental provided further resources for the program.

Responding to the joy of children in owning their own books, Miriam moved beyond the walls of the shelter with Books to the Streets. Once a week, she would fill the trunk of her car with boxes of used and donated children's books and drive to one of the public housing neighborhoods in Willimantic or Danielson. After arranging the books on a folding table, she would inscribe them as gifts to the children and parents who had assembled in anticipation of her arrival. By 1997, more than 6000 books had been distributed to children through the Books to the Streets program.

Following her leave of absence, Miriam returned to full-time teaching for two and a half years while she continued to oversee the teaching programs in the Holy Family Shelter and to distribute books via Books to the Streets. But, she says, she was compelled by the need to work with the homeless and felt that all of her training and experience was leading her to a new mission in her life. In 1996, she left the Columbia school system and launched Books to Dreams.

The rationale for Books to Dreams is straightforward. The program aims to promote literacy through the distribution of children's books, story telling, and reading on a regular basis to children of all ages in homeless shelters in Connecticut. Books are given to every child upon each visit, and a small library is maintained at each shelter so that children may select books between visits. Children are also encouraged to write and draw for "On the Wing," a periodic Books to Dreams publication; and for their own pre-school books, which they create with their mothers. The bottom line is to encourage children to begin to form collections of their own and to develop the habit of reading, thereby increasing their chances for success in school—and in life.

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Linda Clark, of Enfield, holds an armful of "Reading Buddies" for Books to Dreams children. She and her mother Evelyn collect used stuffed toys and refurbish them for the program.

The program is designed to enrich, enhance and entertain the children through books. In the process, it is hoped that they will be encouraged to believe in themselves and to dream of a positive future. A butterfly is the symbol of Books to Dreams, chosen for its miraculous powers to change. "Every homeless child needs to hear," says Miriam, "that even though they may feel like a caterpillar, a cocoon or a chrysalis, they have a butterfly within them."

Miriam spends her mornings in her office managing and promoting the program, or, as a self-described "garage troll," sorting and organizing the flood of books in the garage. After lunch, on those days when she is to read at one of the twelve shelters she visits, she will practice her presentation. Her program in the shelter begins at 3:30 PM, as the children return from school, and concludes around 5:00 PM, when dinner is served. After she returns home, she spends her evenings recording the day's events, following up on special requests and ordering books. Her work day usually concludes around ten o'clock.

Wanting to see the program in action, I accompanied Miriam on a visit to the Salvation Army Marshall House in Hartford. She packed the trunk and backseat of her car with boxes of carefully sorted books, bags of reading buddies, and assorted other props she uses in her presentation. The living room at the Marshall House has a television, public telephone, a bookcase, a big pile of toys, and an assortment of well-worn furniture. Miriam sets the scene with posters and a large piece of cloth covered with butterflies. The books are unpacked and arranged by reading level; and, since this is October, special Halloween books are also displayed. By 3:30, she has an audience of six children, ranging in age from four months to 14 years, and two moms. This is a fluid situation, other moms and their children arrive during the presentation; some decide to stay and others wander off.

She warms up her audience with some group singing, then proceeds to read a story, in this case, a Halloween pop-up book that fully engages the children. After the story, all the kids get to choose their own books—two regular and one Halloween—from the display. Moms get to pick books from a special bag of children's books—"the biggest and the best because moms are important." Miriam is particular about the books she distributes, knowing that her audience has had more than its fair share of castoffs. These books are colorful and clean, in good condition, and for the most part, new. Every book is inscribed for the new owners. Next, everyone gets to

choose a "reading buddy." As with the books, these stuffed animals are clean and attractive, and every one is labeled with a message of encouragement.

Once everyone has new books and reading buddies, Miriam is ready to take special requests. She will try to locate any children's book (excluding titles that feature violence or inappropriate subjects) requested by a child or parent. Last year, 5586 special request children's books were delivered to children and parents. This extraordinary service is now facilitated by Borders of

Manchester, which has assigned a staff member, Bobbi Miller, to search for these books on a weekly basis; and also by various publishers, who support the program with exceptional discounts. The program concludes with a chat in which Miriam works with the mothers to help their pre-school children create their own books. All are interested.

Finally, it's time for dinner and the audience drifts away. But the work is not done. There are more posters to mount on the walls. Damaged and irrelevant books need to be weeded from the permanent children's library; new titles need to be added. There are scores of left-over books, dozens of reading buddies, and lots of props that need to be repacked. And the furniture must be returned to its original positions.

It's 6:30 and we're about to depart. Dinner is over, and the residents of the shelter are returning to the living room to watch television, where MTV is now delivering its message with all of the mind-numbing noise and sexy flash that millions of dollars can buy. Pretty heavy competition for the quiet message that reading can change one's life, I think. But then I recall a statement that Miriam likes to quote: When Malcolm X's daughter was told by a reporter that she was too young to remember her father, she replied, "Never underestimate the recollection of a child." It is this belief—that children will remember—that energizes Miriam and Books to Dreams.

If You Want to Help There many ways for individuals and libraries to support Books to Dreams. If you would like to know more or would like to help, send a note to bookstodreams@erols.com. Miriam Epstein will be a featured speaker at the CLA Annual Conference in April 2001. You won't want to miss it.



Martha-Rea Nelson of the Hartford Public Library, a program volunteer, inscribes a new book for a child at a Books to Dreams reading.

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