

— SPECIAL NEIGHBORS —

Books to Dreams: A giant step to loving to read

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WILLIMANTIC — Almost seven years after its start in the basement of a Willimantic homeless shelter, a program to bring books and a love of reading to kids, started by a former Columbia schoolteacher, has branched out across the state, though its heart is still in downtown Willimantic.

The program, known as Books to Dreams, was begun in 1996 by Miriam Epstein, who was working as a teacher at the Horace W. Porter School in Columbia. Epstein, a lifelong book lover, said the program's title sums up its mission perfectly. Developing a love of reading can start children on the road to their dreams, Epstein said.

"Reading is my thing and I think it can change lives," said the former teacher, whose Manchester home has become a mini-warehouse where she stores and sorts through books, labels and reading buddies — the plush toys given out as part of the Books to Dreams program.

Under the program, donated books left at the Holy Family Shelter or any of almost a dozen shelters around the state are taken in and sorted. At Holy Family, Epstein and a core group of volunteers meet every few weeks to sort through the latest donations in a small corner of the second floor. A nearby room serves as a storage area for more books and buddies.

The buddies are a special innovation used by the program. Children receiving books and a buddy are asked to read to the stuffed toy the same way a parent might to a child. Like the books, the buddies are donated, though Epstein ensures that any item



Miriam Epstein

received by a child is in top form.

Giving children living in shelters obvious cast-offs sends the wrong message, Epstein said. By giving them books that are damaged, she said, the group would send the message that these children aren't worth as much.

The desire to make sure each book looks at least loved conflicts with her own instincts.

"I cannot bear to throw a book out," Epstein said, noting a large stack of books with broken spines and bent corners that sit on a shelf in the little second-floor storage room, waiting for Epstein or a volunteer to try and repair it.

A space is also provided in each book given out for the child's name, a small "to" and "from", penciled inside each front cover. By putting their names in the books, Epstein said, the book and, by extension, reading become a personal thing for the nascent reader.

While children can choose their own books, mothers can also pick books for their children from among some of the best books that come through the group's hands. Dubbed "Mom's Choice," the books are intended as both a bond between mother and child and as a way to further engrain books and reading in the chil-

dren's lives.

"The chances of her reading to her child have already gone up," said Epstein, noting that most people can answer quickly and definitively when asked what the first book their parents read to them was. By building the love of reading early, those involved in the program hope to instill a habit that will last a lifetime.

Despite the efforts of herself and the multitude of volunteers both at Holy Family and in the Books to Dreams program at large, Epstein gives much of the credit for the group's success to the community whose donations of books have allowed the group to branch out, creating libraries in the shelters they help, including Willimantic.

The group, which has distributed 112,571 books to Connecticut children since 1996, also sends books to soup kitchens, schools, libraries and through their Books to the Streets program, which is similar to Books to Dreams except it brings the books out into the community to distrib-

ute. Because of the large volume, Epstein said the group is able to locate almost any book requested by a child in its own collection.