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TOP STORY

Learning Perch seeks volunteer readers

JENNIFER MOODY Albany Democrat-Herald Updated Apr 26, 2016



David Patton, Democrat-Herald

Helen Richard, founder of Learning Perch, reads to second-graders Manny Palma, left, Colton Northern and Kandler Ba, Ridge Charter School. The program is seeking additional volunteer readers to serve more children.

LEBANON — On Tuesdays, three students at Sand Ridge Charter School spend an hour reading together with three Learning Perch volunteers.

On Thursdays, the volunteers come back to spend an hour with three more.

Six children are better than none, but Helen Richard, founder of Learning Perch, would love to read with as many children as are interested. Right now, however, the group has just the three tutors, so one-on-one reading work with more students isn't possible.

Richard is seeking adults who like children and like to encourage them in reading to join Learning Perch, a one-on-one volunteer project sponsored by St. Martin's Episcopal Church.

The program is similar to the statewide reading program known as Start Making a Reader Today, but developed independently — and just a little earlier.

Like SMART, Learning Perch pairs children with volunteer readers at least once a week. Also like SMART, children get to choose their own books to take home and keep — in this case, after they and a volunteer have read at least five books aloud together.

It was 1990, or maybe 1991, as Richard recalled. She had just retired from teaching elementary school, and St. Martin's rector — then the Rev. Steve Norcross, himself a former math teacher — both wanted to find a way to volunteer in schools.

"We dreamed up a reading-tutoring program for primary students," Richard recalled. "We presented this to Queen Anne School, just a long block from church. As I had worked in the schools and was known and trusted, they were delighted to get the help."

Richard put a cutout of a large oak tree on the school's bulletin board and pinned participants' nametags to the branches. That's what prompted the name "Learning Perch."

"We provided a snack since it was after school. Kids washed their hands and ate their snack while I 'modeled' reading aloud a story that I was sure would capture their interest," she said. "From the first I showed no pictures to encourage using their imagination — even back then they had fewer and fewer opportunities to do this."

Richard designed a personalized bookmark system, which she continues to use today. Once a book has been read to a tutor, the child writes the name of the book on a line of the bookmark. When they have read five books to their tutor, they choose the sixth from a collection of take-home books.

"They read this book to their tutor, give a short book review to the group, and the book is theirs to take home and keep," she said. "This is very motivating."

When Queen Anne closed in 2002, Learning Perch moved to Riverview. When that school cut funding for after-school programs in 2010, Learning Perch began casting about for new schools to serve. Sand Ridge Charter School invited the tutors to come two afternoons a week, during the school day.

"The charter school is a great place to work," Richard said. "The teachers are so supportive and complimentary about how much the students we have are improving and enjoying reading more."

Teachers often ask if Learning Perch could take on more students, Richard said. "But since it is a one-on-one program, that would mean more tutors."

Tutors must be able to give one hour a week, from 2 to 3 p.m. on either Tuesday or Thursday, and must pass a school background check, which comes with a fee Richard said she is willing to cover if someone needs help.

Interested volunteers are asked to contact her via email at helenrichard@comcast.net or by phone at 541-258-3488.

And while Richard became an ordained Episcopal deacon in 1987 and the program is considered a ministry of St. Martin's, it's not faith-based and volunteers don't need to be church members to apply.

The main thing is to find more people willing to introduce children to the fun of reading and give them one-on-one time to practice it, Richard said.

"Do you know, not much has changed through the years," she said. "Why fix it if it isn't broken?"

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