

Ready to read

December 12, 2004

Books challenge students to raise reading skill levels.

As manager of the Materials Department at the American Reading Company in King of Prussia, Trace C. Taylor was in charge of receiving the company's books, labeling and storing them properly, after they were printed.

But nowadays, she is as much involved in the pre-book conception and authorship as in the post-printing process.

Founded about six years ago by Jane Hileman, a former teacher and reading specialist, the American Reading Company operates the 100 Book Challenge program for youngsters in grades 1 through 3 in schools throughout the United States.

Explaining the evolution of the challenge, the founder's daughter, Gina Zorzi said her mother, who had taught in the Upper Darby schools, was distressed by the lack of reading skills in young people. She found that students required to read 100 hours during a school year can raise their reading ability one whole level. Those behind in their reading level need to read more to make more progress.

So, Hileman designed the 100 Book Challenge to provide books in the classroom that would raise reading skills, increase vocabulary and be of interest to the students.

"Each classroom gets 300 books in 10 baskets," explained Zorzi. "The baskets are color coded with, for instance 30 books in the yellow (or lowest reading level) basket. The levels go up to third grade.

"The baskets are pretty and the kids, along with their parents, get to know at what level they are in their reading. They know where they should be and where they need to be to pass their standardized test at the end of the year.

"The kids keep diaries of the time they read in school and at home. The libraries are rotated and the kids get rewarded for their efforts. One of the most important things is that everyone knows where they are and why."

According to Hileman, "The leveling system is key to helping teachers, parents and students learn what readers need to focus on to improve in each of the areas of reading acquisition, including phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency and reading comprehension. The leveling system is keyed to national standards and high-stakes tests, making it easier for educators to determine where students are in terms of their ability and what they need to work on next."

During a conversation with Hileman and Zorzi, Taylor learned that Hileman was having trouble finding books that met the requirements for vocabulary, structure and development in the challenge program's beginning levels.

"I said, 'I can write books for you,'" declared Taylor, "and Jane told me to go ahead and try it."

She laughed as she confessed that the only writing she had done previously was a few short stories.

"I had a short story published in an anthology a number of years back and I had a few poems published in anthologies. There was nothing else published. I'm working on a couple of novels - but then, isn't everybody?"

But as she began to plan reading books, Taylor recalled, "A lot of the ideas just popped into my head. I was always the kid swimming in the creek or river and wanting to read about bears and frogs, so it came pretty natural to me to write about those types of things."

Making sure that the topics and vocabulary were appropriate for beginning readers, who would be choosing books from yellow baskets assigned to the "Y" or "YY" level, she studied existing books in the company's collection and worked with Hileman.

Company documentation states that books appropriate for the "YY" category, for example, require that "one basic sentence pattern is maintained throughout the book, with only one word changing from page to page." The idea is that children will be aided in remembering the sentence while learning

new words and being able to “cross check the word with the picture on the page.”

To find illustrators interested in helping with her books, Taylor posted fliers at art schools and coffee houses. From the responses, she selected Pablo Culp, operator of an illustration and fine arts company called Soulcare in Philadelphia, and Jose Pombeiro, a recent 24-year-old graduate from the Maryland Institute College of Art who is a freelance artist.

Happy to be using his art in an effort to get children to read, Pombeiro said, “You kind of realize at one point or another that being an artist doesn’t always pay off monetarily, so you sometimes need a higher purpose to bring you that satisfaction. I believe in the American Reading Company’s cause.”

Pombeiro works in chalk, pen and pencil, crayon, watercolor and marker.

Culp, whose medium is watercolor, involves the students in pieces that are interactive. In one book about families, the artist suggested adding space for the children to draw sketches of members of their own families.

“One of the reasons I do enjoy doing these books is that I can have a say in what I feel is missing in the market,” he said.

Taylor noted that each book averages 10 pages, with some containing additional skills cards and research facts at the back. Subjects range from “Kimodo dragons to the rain forest, dinosaurs to space.”

Continuing, she added, “I picked a bear series to start and wrote eight books on the eight kinds of bears.

“Nature and multi-cultural are two of the themes of the company. We try to put lots and lots of these books in (the program) because kids like to read about themselves and will read more and learn more quickly if they have books about their own cultures.”

Declaring that the feedback has been “fabulous,” Taylor concluded, “Teachers have been ecstatic. They have fawned over (the books) and have said the word lists and skills cards at the back are so helpful.”