

## American Reading Company Employee Promotes Summer Reading in Southwest Philadelphia

By Greg Johnson, Tribune Staff Writer

Sylvester Ricks is tired. He is 42-years-old, he has a 12-year-old son, and he is tired of all the violence that is plaguing his Southwest Philadelphia community.

He's tired, but not beaten. He's trying to make a change. Speaker of the Pennsylvania House John Perzel wants to hire more than 1,300 new police officers to make Philadelphia safer, but Ricks and his employer are trying a different approach - reading.

Ricks works in the receiving department of the American Reading Company, a King of Prussia-based business behind the national 100 Book Challenge campaign. In an effort to prevent a child's loss of reading and math skills over the summer due to the lack of educational activities, described by some as the "summer slide," Jane Hileman, the company's founder and CEO, issued a challenge to her employees: find a young person to read with over the summer and log the time he or she spends reading. For every 25 hours the child reads, the employee receives a half-day of paid time off.

A number of employees jumped at this opportunity but Ricks pursued it full-throttle. He began working with eight children in his neighborhood. Some of these youngsters included: Zikirah Washington, 10, a fifth grader Morton Elementary School, her sister Zalika Washington, 12, a seventh grader at Tilden Middle School, Christopher McNair, 6, a first grader at Our Mother of Sorrows, Nasheem Carter, 5, who recently entered kindergarten, Darren Watson, 9, a home-schooled fourth grader, and Nyier Ricks, 12, a seventh grader at Our Mother of Sorrows and Ricks' son.

At first, Ricks said he chose to work with so many children to get time off from work but it grew into him wanting to get the children the tools they need to succeed in life. Reading, he said, is how you pick up knowledge, wisdom. He told the children to read anything, a dictionary, the newspaper, books.

Every Monday and Saturday, Ricks would pass out books. He had a reading chart to check each child's reading level. If a child wasn't reading on his or her grade level, he said he usually started them two grades behind and then watched their progress in order to place them in the correct reading level.

Ricks is against what the Department of Education calls social promotion, allowing students to continue to pass through school with their peers without satisfying academic

requirements or meeting performance indicators at key grades. "President Bush talks about No Child Left Behind but I'm not saying leave a child behind but don't advance him if he's not ready for it," he said. "Don't put a child in eighth grade (who's) on a third grade reading level, he's destined to fail."

Working with so many children is something Ricks did not expect, but he said their parents were very supportive because they know there's nothing to do in the neighborhood. "You go to Villanova, I go to King of Prussia, you got the swimming pools, you got the tennis courts, you got the reading clubs, you got the YMCA with the computers in it," he said. "All we have here is a park with glass in it, a (Police Athletic League) with no computers in it, and all we hear is gunshots."

Southwest Philadelphia, he said, is dangerous. "I've been in this neighborhood seven years and I've seen from where it has been to where it is now," he said. "Reading is the most important thing."

"Reading opens up doors to you," he said. "That's how important reading is, to get you up out of these situations."

Ricks has worked with children most of his adult life and said it bothers him when children are taken advantage of. "One way children get taken advantage of is not teaching (them)," he said. "We just have to take time out for these children."



Nayier Ricks and Evan Thai celebrate their commitment to summer reading at ARC headquarters in King of Prussia on August 31st, 2006.