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**FAMILY LITERACY
EDITION**

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AMERIWORD

Renewing New Orleans through Literacy and Learning

What Is Family Literacy?

by Kevin Planchet

A solid family unit can be beneficial in many ways to children when it comes to emotional and financial support. However, family literacy is another component necessary to the well being of a family. Family literacy describes parents and children learning together. The concept of a parent being his or her child's first teacher is the basis of the family literacy movement.

According to statistics provided by the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL), 34 million adults function at or below basic literacy levels, making it hard to fill out even the simplest forms or read a prescription label. Many of these adults are parents, and if the parents are struggling in this manner, it's very likely that their children are poor performers in school.

In a family literacy center, parents and children learn side by side. Parents take classes in

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Editor-in-Chief

Jan Jugran

AmeriWord Staff

Kathy L. Bailey

Jonathan Fratella

Jan Jugran

Laura Klein

Kevin Planchet

Photography

Esther Alexis

Chris Benz

Janie Planchet

Urban League of
Greater New Orleans

AmeriWord Mission Statement

AmeriWord, the newsletter for Literacy*AmeriCorps New Orleans (LACNOLA), seeks to inform our readers about the struggles and accomplishments of the AmeriCorps members who serve the community by educating persons with low levels of literacy. LACNOLA members serve as teachers and tutors at service sites throughout Greater New Orleans, improving the lives of those in need through the power of the written word.

Literacy has the power to improve lives intellectually, financially, emotionally, and even spiritually. LACNOLA, which began in New Orleans the year after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city, has significantly aided in the recovery both through its educational services and through its monthly community service projects.

Now in its fourth year, LACNOLA continues its work in teaching, and *AmeriWord* continues bringing the good news of education, the liberation of minds, and hope for a more enlightened and productive New Orleans.

Math Shouldn't Be a Dirty Word

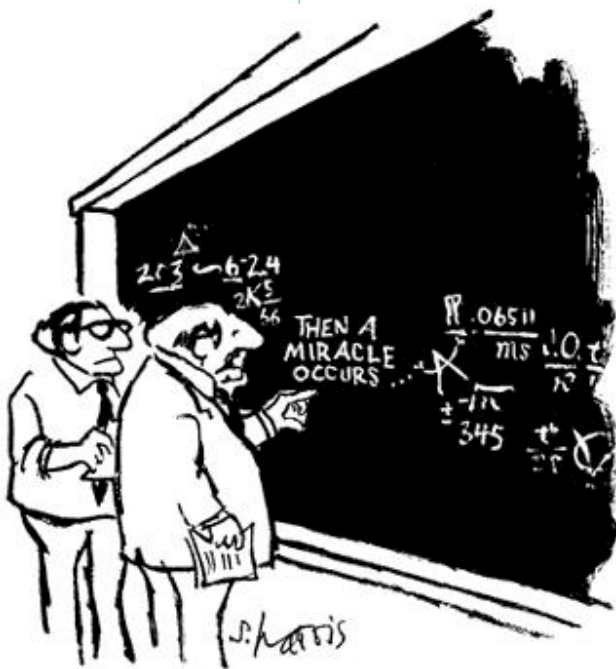
by Kathy L. Bailey

“How do you find the area of this triangle?” your child asks you...and suddenly that old feeling of dread comes flooding back. You thought you had put math away forever, but somehow you’re back in it with your child.

While parents have long been encouraged to read with their children, math doesn't get the same attention. Even at most family literacy programs, the emphasis is on reading words, not numbers. This leaves many parents struggling to help their children in a subject they fear themselves—or even worse, recoiling at the idea of even attempting to help.

We ignore math at our peril, however. While math is the subject with the lowest scores and highest failure rate on the GED test, math skills are increasingly needed for better jobs in this technological world. According to numeracy expert Myrna Manly, “Numeracy is the one skill revealed to be highly associated with employability. In the United States, individuals with numeracy skills below level 3 are 2.6 times more likely to be unemployed than those whose skills are above that level.”

The levels she refers to come from dual national studies that categorized the number skills of adults into five levels. Scores were determined not by rows of math problems but by completing tasks that would be familiar in their everyday lives. Scoring in the top three levels was considered functional, but 59% of the general United States population



“I think you should be more explicit here in step two.”

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What Is Family Literacy?

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adult basic education, GED instruction, and parenting while their children are getting early childhood instruction. The parents and children then come together for Parent and Child Time (PACT), a half hour during which parents are taught how to be their child's first teacher by participating in directed and non-directed literacy activities. Family literacy centers also address the issue of childcare for those parents who would like to go back to school.

The NCFL provides statistics that clarify the need for family literacy by looking at the impact of low literacy levels in the United States:

- Each year, more than one million students drop out of high school.
- Low literacy levels cost the U.S. more than \$73 million a year in health care costs for those who cannot advocate for their own health.
- Forty-three percent of the nation's inmates do not have a high school diploma while 56% have low literacy skills.
- The U.S. now has only 14% of the world's population of college students whereas thirty years ago it had 30%.

The result of statistics like these is a tremendous impact on the quality of our workforce and its ability to manage its own affairs.

Family literacy programs look to educate parents on how to educate their children because early literacy is the first line of defense for counteracting statistics like the ones above. Exposure to literacy is essential for children who will be entering preschool. According to the Department of Education, "A kindergarten student who has not been read to could enter school with less than 60 hours of literacy nutrition. No teacher, no matter how talented, can make up for those lost hours of mental nourishment."



Students at the Westbank Even Start Family Literacy Center take part in a sewing unit to put numeracy and literacy skills into action

Family Literacy Outcomes

Adults stay enrolled in family literacy programs longer than in most adult-only programs, and their attendance rate is higher.

Children participating in family literacy programs in 15 cities made gains at least three times greater than would have been expected based on their pre-enrollment rate of development.

Adults significantly improve their self-confidence, confidence in their parenting abilities, and in their employment status (29 percent increase).

Children showed an 80 percent increase in reading books and made twice as many trips to the library.

Long-term National Center for Family Literacy follow-up studies found the following:

- 51% of adults participating in family literacy programs earned their GED or the equivalent.
- 43% became employed, compared with 14% before enrolling.
- 13% enrolled in higher education or training programs and another 11% continued in GED programs.
- 23% of those who were on public assistance when they enrolled are now self-sufficient.

Source: Oklahoma Literacy Resource Office

Service Site Spotlight: Westbank Even Start

Entering its nineteenth year, the Westbank Even Start Family Literacy Center continues to help strengthen the families of Southeast Louisiana through an integrated, comprehensive family literacy approach.

Even Start family literacy services are those services provided to participants that are of sufficient intensity in terms of hours and duration to make sustainable changes in a family. The following four components are integrated within a site-based as well as a home-based setting:

- Adult education instruction/English language acquisition
- On-site early childhood education
- Parenting education
- Parent and Child Interactive Literacy Activities (ILA/PACT)



An early childhood education activity at the Westbank Even Start

Even Start services families with children between six weeks and seven years of age with a parent or parents in need of academic upgrade such as obtaining a General Education Development (GED) diploma, obtaining English language skills, gaining employability skills, obtaining post-secondary educational skills, etc.

There are only two requirements to enter the program: (1) You must be an adult (aged sixteen years or older) who is in need of academic upgrade, and (2) you must have a child or children within the six week to seven year age range.

There is no cost to attend the program. All testing, instruction, family instructional trips, and on-site school lunch are free of charge. Because the program encompasses the whole family unit, family literacy centers are limited to an enrollment of a maximum of twenty-four families at any given time. There is a waiting list if no immediate space is available. For more information, visit <http://www.bayouconsortium.org> or call (504) 349-0709.



Member Spotlight: Kevin Planchet

by Jonathan Fratella

It isn't hard to pick out a New Orleans native. It's not that they smell bad, look funny, or have distinguishing features—it's how they carry themselves. Kevin Planchet is no exception.

Planchet lived in the Ninth Ward until the age of twelve, at which point her family decided to move to the city of Marrero, on the Westbank, where Planchet and her sister first had the luxury of having their own bedrooms. Unlike the Ninth Ward, the Westbank wasn't the heart and soul of New Orleans; it was, however, a great environment to raise and provide for a family, and Planchet still lives

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Planchet, *continued*

there to this day, doing just that with her husband, Tom, and their three daughters.

Planchet is currently serving her second year with Literacy*AmeriCorps by working at the Westbank Even Start Family Literacy Center. Every day, she deals with situations she never encountered during her first year of service, such as domestic abuse issues and other family difficulties. However, given her life experience and AmeriCorps training, she faces each day head on allowing nothing to keep her from her AmeriCorps pledge to “get things done.”

Prior to her life as an AmeriCorps member, Planchet earned her B.A. in journalism at Louisiana State University and went on to work as a news reporter in Mississippi. Eventually, she opted out of the profession and became a stay-at-home mom, during which time she began a successful home sewing business that reaches an almost fever pitch in the weeks leading up to Mardi Gras.

In addition to her current business, family, and AmeriCorps demands, Planchet manages to complete coursework in a master’s program at Our Lady of Holy Cross College, where she is studying to become a marriage and family counselor and hopefully open her own practice in the future. “Indulge a dream,” Planchet says of the drive that, with all her other obligations, still pushes her to work toward the goal of becoming a published children’s book author. “There’s too much dream busting going on, and if you can’t dream, what’s the point of living?”

Math, *continued from page 2*

and 92% of adult learners scored in the bottom two levels.

These sobering facts have implications beyond finding high-tech jobs. Just as it is now understood that literacy is more than reading words, numeracy means more than just doing math. Numeracy is about being comfortable with numbers and using them effectively in daily life. It means being able to estimate the cost of filling your gas tank, interpret food nutrition labels, calculate a tip, read a thermometer, understand medicine doses, and figure out if that tempting rent-to-own offer is really in your best interest.

Parents’ attitudes toward math influence their children’s attitudes. If children do not see their parents do this type of math in the context of everyday life, they are less likely to be comfortable themselves with these ordinary tasks. Perhaps the way math has been approached in the past—as a series of mind-numbing formulas and rules—has produced too many parents with math anxiety, which is easily transferred to their children.

One way to break this cycle is to find ways to make math relevant—for parents as well as children. Teaching in context has always been a tenet of adult education, which is what makes family literacy programs a good place to reacquaint parents with math. They offer a natural starting place, where learning is already occurring outside of the traditional classroom in a less intimidating atmosphere.

The U.S. Department of Education publishes a series of activities for parents to work math into daily activities with their children, such as using car trips to learn about distance, estimating, and averages, using grocery shopping to work with weights and percentages, and using coins to learn patterns and probability.

Math is embedded in our daily activities as much as reading is. If family literacy centers can teach math in fun and relevant ways, they can reduce its mystique and bring it back into the realm of daily life. Then, when your child asks for help with averages, you can pull out the sports page together and look up the Saints’ average passing yards per game. Maybe then it will feel less like math and more like fun.

Service Site Spotlight: Urban League Early Head Start

The Urban League of Greater New Orleans Early Head Start (EHS), which has served the Greater New Orleans community since 1998, is a federally funded community-based program for low-income families with infants and toddlers and for pregnant women. While plans are being made to build a new and larger facility, the program is currently co-housed with Covenant House at 611 North Rampart Street.

The mission of EHS is simple: to promote healthy prenatal outcomes for pregnant women, to enhance the development of very young children, and to promote healthy family functioning. EHS evolved out of Head Start's long history of providing services to infants and toddlers through Parent Child Centers.

The program helps children develop physically, emotionally, intellectually, and socially. It provides parent education and services such as home visits, comprehensive health services, nutrition, and peer support groups for parents. EHS projects coordinate with local Head Start programs so that children have a continuity of services as they grow older.

Early Head Start takes a comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of young children. There are four major components:

- Education: Providing a variety of learning experiences to help children grow intellectually, socially, and emotionally.

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KaBOOM! Play Day

by Esther Alexis

On September 23, 2009, the Urban League Early Head Start (EHS) program along with KaBOOM!, a non-profit program dedicated to bringing play back into the lives of children, wed their ideals of physical fitness, healthy living, and literacy in an inaugural KaBOOM! Play Day event.

The itinerary included bouncing in an inflatable castle, eating delicious fruits and pastries, competing in a blissful bicycle race, face painting, and some storytelling courtesy of local author Ellen McKnight. As an added bonus, EHS students took home goodie bags that consisted of a book, a bookmark, a magazine, and some tasty treats.

Through effective modeling, demonstrated regularly in the center and during the storytelling portion of the event, EHS parents, armed with the momentum from the day and their eager children, were able to follow up by reading at home on a daily basis.

Events like this are held periodically to enrich the learning and life experience of students and to provide an avenue for members of the community to share their time and creativity. The next "play day" will be held on May 28 and will feature Literacy*AmeriCorps members distributing books to the students.

Member Spotlight: Esther Alexis

by Laura Klein, Kevin Planchet, and Jan Jugran

In her 27 years, Esther Alexis has had a variety of jobs. Among others, she has worked as a barista at a coffee shop, a front desk service coordinator, an ice cream scooper, a program director, an ethics and history teacher, and a volleyball and cheerleading coach. Throughout all of these jobs, Alexis always had AmeriCorps in the back of her mind. “As a first generation American citizen who has been blessed and fortunate to experience facets of the American dream,” Alexis deemed it both a duty and an honor “to facilitate similar experiences for others.” Last summer, all the pieces finally fell into place, and the honor of serving with Literacy* AmeriCorps was bestowed upon her.

Alexis is currently serving at the Urban League Early Head Start center as the Literacy Coordinator. She loves working with native New Orleanians, learning about the city, and learning about the early developmental phases of young children. In fact, she loves it so much that she plans on staying in New Orleans next year to work as an elementary school teacher. “Having the opportunity to promote the importance of literacy in a city that has provided so graciously to the rest of the country is significant,” says Alexis, a native New Yorker who revels in the abundance of culture, sincerity, and rich history provided to her by her new home.

During her time here, Alexis says that she hopes to embrace a life of simplicity and uphold goals of remaining centered, balanced, and humbled. But don’t let this austere commentary nor Alexis’s occasionally stern manner fool you into believing her a somber person. When she tells you that she’s still exploring what she wants to be when she “grows up,” don’t be so quick to believe that she really has plans to do so. The truth, which lies in that perpetually mischievous twinkle in her eye, is that deep down, Esther Alexis will always—happily—be a total kid at heart.



Urban League Early Head Start, *continued*

- **Health:** Providing health services such as immunizations, dental, medical, and mental health, nutritional services, and early identification of health problems.
- **Parent Involvement:** Involving parents in the planning and implementation of activities. Parents serve on policy councils and committees that make administrative decisions, participate in classes and workshops on child development, and volunteer in the program.
- **Social Services:** Providing outreach to families to determine what services they need.

All Head Start services are free to qualified families, but parents are encouraged to volunteer at least 50 hours per school year. The Urban League of Greater New Orleans EHS program is currently serving twenty families with children from infancy to three years of age, and in recognition of the value and worth of all children, EHS requires that at least ten percent of the total number of enrollment opportunities be made available to children with disabilities. There is currently a waiting list for prospective EHS families. Those interested should visit www.urbanleagueneuorleans.org or contact Ms. Belencia Lawrence at (504) 525-2911 for more information.