

Ex-Cop Tackles Literacy Decline

A police-officer-turned-librarian targets a community's early-learning deficit

BY TANYA SERRÓN MISSELT

Don't laugh when I tell you that 11 years of law enforcement experience in Appleton, WI, made me a better public librarian. When the director of the Appleton Public Library (APL) asked me to help reverse declining third grade reading scores in our community, I drew on my skill set as a cop: investigative and problem-solving chops, cultural sensitivity, and dogged determination.

Our target group was identified as Hmong and Hispanic families with children from birth to age five. In 2011, a study showed that reading proficiency in our region had declined annually since 2006–2007. A breakdown of Appleton Area School District third grade reading scores revealed that English Language Learners of Asian (primarily Hmong) and Hispanic descent were far more likely to score below proficiency. Our solution, Appleton Ready to Read (ARTR), is a collaborative program with several partners.

Ready to Read, a Columbus (OH) Metropolitan Library (CML) initiative, was our model. Sarah Mackey, manager, Ready to Read Corps at CML, had developed the home visitation program to address declining third grade reading scores in economically disadvantaged communities. Each family, representing 20,758 children, received 12–18 home visits and literacy kits promoting Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR; everychildreadytoread.org) practices and skills.

Our problem was that Hmong and Hispanic populations weren't coming to our library, despite our programming and collection development efforts. Also, we didn't have bilingual staff.

Then we had a request from Yee Lee Vue, a Hmong woman and MLIS student who was seeking a summer internship.

She started bringing ECRR concepts to the homes of Hmong families with children from birth to age five and created library-based programs. Word spread, and soon, our staffers were in the homes of strangers who spoke a different language, and often lived in a very different socioeconomic situation than their own. We had reached our elusive library “non-users.”



Above: Hmong OS Pa Ja Yang (right) with patrons; left: Toys don't have to be expensive



We secured our first Hmong family outreach specialist position (Hmong OS) with an LSTA grant; the city funds the job now. A grant from a community foundation underwrote our Hispanic OS position, which the city now funds as well. Our program has three components:

- 1) **Home visit.** The OS meets with a parent at home to share an overview of ECRR and highlight the importance of reading and writing with children. Kids get a free book, crayons, and a coloring book, supplied by Friends of the APL.
- 2) **Library visit.** A parent meets with the OS at the library to get a tour, learn to select age-appropriate material, re-

ceive a library card, and learn about programs. The OS highlights the importance of singing and talking, and gives out musical nursery rhyme CDs.

- 3) **Class visit.** Families attend an ongoing class, Play and Learn, where parents find out how important playing with their children is. We engage with all the ECRR practices and offer this class in English, Hmong, and Spanish.

We also link Hmong and Hispanic families to programs that help them prepare kids for kindergarten, along with a free service to help parents learn English.

While patron confidentiality is a pillar of library service, we wanted to be able to refer families to our community partners. The city attorney helped us draft a permission form that, signed by a parent or guardian, lets us communicate with partners about the family. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed by each organization involved.

“Hmong is traditionally an oral language and was not written until the 1950s, so most Hmong families do not know how to raise readers,” says current Hmong OS Pa Ja Yang. Transportation is also a big hurdle for these families, who often have one car, used by the working parent.

Since 2014, ARTR has served more than 400 individuals from more than 150 families. About 60 percent are Hispanic and 40 percent Hmong. Some 98 percent live 200 percent below the poverty line.

Like police officers, librarians need to go into communities and solve problems, armed with investigative and people skills, and a logical mind-set. Understand the issues, study the research, and have a grasp of library trends. Think outside the box, and you'll be able to personalize services in new ways.

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