THE NATIONAL JEWISH
COALITION FOR LITERACY
NEWSLETTER

WINTER

Litbits 2004

PRISONERS OF HOPE

by Leonard Fein

The optimist is the one who says, "This? This is the BEST of all possible worlds!" And the pessimist is the one who replies, "I'm afraid you're right."

No one can any longer sanely claim optimism. This is, in a staggering array of ways, not the best of all possible worlds. Yet we resist, even refuse to collapse into pessimism. A better world, we insist, is possible.

In these days of war and of terrorism, of earthquakes and mudslides, disease and dishonesty, teaching a child to read may seem a small, even a tiny, thing. The incremental improvement in the state of the world is microscopic, if that.

But of course, the incremental benefit to the child helped to become literate is immense; it is not merely life-enhancing, it is life-changing. One need not wonder how many Einsteins and Marian Andersons are lost every day, lost to us all and to generations yet to come, lost because of neglect, indifference, meanness, "more urgent priorities." All that is so, but long before we come to so inflated a question, there is simply this: How many lives that might have been lives of dignity and decency, of competence and kindness, dribble away because a child who might have been helped to read was not offered that help?

That is what we hope to repair, we of the National Jewish Coalition for Literacy and the (currently) 44 local and regional affiliates that are NJCL's component parts.



How fares the effort? It grows, albeit more slowly than we would like. The American Jewish community is these days preoccupied and sometimes downright obsessed with Israel's peril, with antisemitism near and far, with its own pressing agenda. Funds are not easy to come by, travel to schools is often a real hassle, prospective volunteers are often frightfully busy, and so on and so forth, dozens of impediments.

Yet here we are, growing in numbers, in visibility, in impact. There have been some happy surprises along the way since 1996, when the idea for a national Jewish effort to engage with the problem of illiteracy was

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AFFILIATES

THE NATIONAL JEWISH COALITION FOR LITERACY

Member Agencies

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Board of Directors

Hon. Abner Mikva & Marlene Post, Honorary Co-Chairs

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first translated into action. Back at the beginning, we had not developed a sense of who the volunteer tutors might be, from what groups they might most easily be recruited. It surely escaped our early attention that we were creating a program with special appeal to older people. Now we find that a dozen and more of our affillates count among their number tutors in their 80s and 90s, that folks in retirement find real meaning, life-sustaining meaning, in engaging with our 2nd and 3rd grade students.

So also we did not foresee the appeal of the program to day school students, typically from the 8th grade up. Many hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of such students, and Hillel activists, too, are attracted by the opportunity to lend their talents as tutors to the younger children we help teach. For many of these volunteers, this is their first close-up exposure to people and places they would otherwise never encounter. Who can say that this early engagement with "the Other" will not last a lifetime, one way or another?

While we take great pride in what we do, we cannot be satisfied with what we achieve. Our principal reward is in the impact of our work at the retail level, one child at a time.

That retail work must now be joined to a wholesale effort, to the kind of advocacy on behalf of public education that may make the needed difference not only for the thousands we reach one-on-one but for millions of their peers. Better schools, better and better-paid teachers, smaller classes – all these, and one more thing: our work as a model for other communities, other faith communities, other organizations.

More still, not just a model but a catalyst and even a sponsor of efforts that go beyond the boundaries of our own community. Early on, we feared we'd be seen as patronizing do-gooders from the suburbs come to rescue the kids of the inner city, affluent Jews salving their conscience by bringing enlightenment to the benighted. That hasn't happened, not anywhere. We are greeted with enthusiasm by teachers, parents and the kids themselves, everywhere. Early on, we thought problems of safety might inhibit our volunteers. That hasn't happened, not anywhere. The world we enter is not, after all, quite so forlorn. It is a place of desperate struggle - and also of genuine eagerness for the tools and the skills that give promise of a better life ahead.

So here is where we are: We are in the early months of a political season filled with sound and fury, with spin and invective. We live in a noisy celebrity culture in which Michael Jackson and Paris Hilton provide the diverting scandals du jour. We live in a world of fraud and of vulgarity that knows no end. We could easily, and with considerable justification, collapse into a culture of complaint.

But we do not. The reasons we do not reach back to the history of our people's stubborn insistence on hope and reach forward to our people's fervent faith in redemption. Once, we crossed the desert to a promised land. Today, we cross a different kind of desert, this one to a promised time. Like that first crossing, this one is accompanied by grumbling, by diversions, by wrong turns along the way.

But the dream we share is no idle dream. And the rock-hard confirmation that it is – not is on display every time one of our volunteer tutors sits with a child and helps that child make the even more urgent crossing through his or her desert. Each time that happens – and it happens literally thousands of times every week – we come one step closer to a time of milk and honey, of vines and fig trees, of plowshares and pruning hooks – or, more bluntly, to an America that delivers on its promise.



LEONARD FEIN IS THE FOUNDER OF NJCL

SENIOR spotlight

ELDERLY VOLUNTEERS ENERGIZE LITERACY EFFORTS NATIONWIDE

They come alone. They come in pairs. They come by the van-full. Seniors are on the move in the march toward literacy for all American children.

Most of NJCL's 44 affiliates include tutors aged 70 and older, while at least 7 boast volunteers in their nineties. "The mobilization of these seniors represents the wise utilization of a priceless national treasure," notes Lois Frank of ***Atlanta***, who chairs the NJCL Board of Directors. "Reaping the benefits of their experience and their availability, NJCL affiliates are adding win-win programs for seniors, students and the community at large."

Consider Ethel Saperstone, 92, of ***Rochester***. Every Tuesday morning from September through June, she drives her red Chevy Cavalier across town to School 36, where she parks in the school lot in a space reserved for her. Using a cane, Saperstone walks slowly down the school's long corridor, but when she reaches the classroom, there's no holding her back.

The delight works both ways. Dozens of first-grade students wave their arms in crazy arcs, vying to be the first to join Saperstone in a reading tryst. "I can't give the children all the individual attention they need," laments teacher Helen Ganotis, whose work and blossoming friendship with Saperstone now span several years. But when Saperstone takes her seat at a tiny table, she spends the next 2 1/2 hours reading with one child after another. By the end of a 3-week rotation, every pupil in the class benefits from that rapt, one-on-one attention.

"We laugh together," Saperstone. admits. "I ask them questions. 'What do you think about what the animals are saying?'" Still, she keeps those young eyes focussed on the basics. "I want to check something," Saperstone confides to Kayana, 7. They pause to zoom in on a word with tricky spelling.

Isobel G. Goldman coordinates volunteers like Saperstone in the Leap to Literacy Program through NJCL's affiliate in Rochester. And while Saperstone may be the most senior member of her city's nearly 200 volunteers, she has contemporaries throughout the coalition.

Tutors in their 90s hail from ***West Hartford*** and ***Milwaukee***, ***San Francisco*** and ***Seattle***. In ***Los Angeles***, Eva Ballo, 78, still remembers Kristallnacht.



RETIRED MICROBIOLOGIST DR. HERMAN SCHNEIDER IS AMONG THE READING COACHES WHO RESIDE AT AN ASSISTED LIVING FACILITY IN ALBANY



ETHEL SAPERSTONE, 92, SPENDS TUESDAY MORNINGS WITH FIRST GRADERS AT ROCHESTER'S SCHOOL 36



SENIORS ADD THEIR TALENTS AND ENERGY TO SAN FRANCISCO'S CADRE OF 600 VOLUNTEERS

Muriel Jackson, 79, joins her daughter, Francine Sanders, 60, in tutoring at Sanders' alma mater in Castle Heights.

Is There Room In the Van?

While individual efforts by seniors enhance literacy teams across the country, group participation is also on the rise. Affiliates in several cities have launched tutoring programs manned by seniors at assisted living facilities. Their participation is limited only by the number of seats in the van.

Thursday morning is pick-up time for senior tutors in the Meer Jewish Apartments in West Bloomfield, Michigan, reports Phyllis Jarvis of the ***Detroit*** JCL. Walkers and canes safely stashed, eager volunteers buckled up, the van wends its way to Maple Elementary School.

Fourteen elders make this weekly commitment to local youngsters who are struggling to master basic reading skills. These tutors (and the children) are the lucky ones. There's a waiting list of Meer residents lacking only transportation to participate in the mitzvah. There is, of course, no shortage of children needing help.

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Show & Kvell

Bold initiatives are launched, milestones are reached and achievements earn awards as NJCL affiliates across the country tackle the national literacy crisis. Here's a sampling of recent happenings:



FROM LEFT: CAROL HENKE, PROGRAM MANAGER, PUBLIC AFFAIRS, VERIZON; SANDY GAGE, CHAIR, JCRC; LAVERNE DAVIS, VICE PRESIDENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS, VERIZON; JULIE BRONSTEIN, DIRECTOR, PUBLIC POLICY & PROGRAMS, VERIZON; MARK SLAVKIN, CHAIR, KOREH L.A.

A unique partnership between ***Koreh L.A.*** and the Verizon Foundation heralds a new era in corporate support for literacy in our public schools. Verizon's $50,000 grant to our L.A. affiliate establishes a new corporate program designed to bring 15 local businesses and 300 new volunteers into L.A.'s tutoring fold of 1400+.

Program coordinator Sherry Marks explains that the breakthrough initiative "enables us to harness the human resources of companies that want to help in the campaign for literacy. We recruit the businesses and make presentations to their employees, who are encouraged by their supervisors to volunteer." Koreh L.A.'s substantial training resources, including reading experts and orientation manuals, are brought on site to get the volunteers up and running. It then builds on its extensive relationships with the city's public schools in matching the new recruits with appropriate schools. Ongoing management and support of the school partnership is also provided through the corporate program.

Marks notes that many companies are eager to "jump" on such a well-managed opportunity. "If you make it easy for them, they just say 'yes.'"

Whole Foods Markets was among the first companies to come on board. Other early participants include Playa Vista, a real estate development company, and two law firms: Fulbright & Jaworski, and Mitchell, Silberberg & Knupp.

In ***Southern New Jersey,*** the Jewish Community Relations Council and the Catholic Jewish Commission have partnered in creating the South Jersey Interfaith Coalition for Literacy. In one of their cutting-edge programs, in Camden, New Jersey, low-income teens with a B or better average have been recruited, trained and employed to serve as literacy mentors for 160 6-12 year-olds during the summer months at the Boys & Girls Club of Camden County. Designed as a pilot for a proposed year-round initiative, the BookMate Literacy Improvement Team receives high marks from participants.

Meanwhile, Southern New Jersey has also put local police officers on the literacy beat. These volunteers are currently reading during an after-school program in Camden.

And, in an interesting example of intra-coalition teamwork, the tutor-training manual, developed by Southern New Jersey's Judith Nadell, has been adopted for use by the ***Detroit*** JCL. A grant by The Starbucks Foundation enabled our Detroit affiliate to produce 500 copies of the comprehensive guide for use in training volunteers, staff and teachers. Detroit's nearly 400 literacy volunteers tutor children in grades K-3.

A recipient of the "Celebrate Reading Award" by the Contra Costa Division of the National Reading Association, the ***San Francisco*** JCL is working to increase involvement by tutors and community members in education advocacy issues. In a recent panel discussion created for this purpose, proposed cuts to the education budget were among the topics analyzed by school administrators, politicians and members of the School Board.

While most NJCL affiliates serve a number of schools in their locale, the ***Cleveland*** JCL has focused all its attention on the students of Buckeye-Woodland Elementary School. More than 25 percent of the student body in this K-8 school enjoy a one-to-one weekly relationship with a reading volunteer. Fran Pursell, who oversees the literacy program, reports that this intensive relationship with a single school is designed to "yield great results in terms of advanced reading levels, impact on the school's proficiency test scores, better attendance rates and valuable long-term relationships."



TEXAS TUTORS COACH 400 CHILDREN A WEEK THROUGH OUR SAN ANTONIO AFFILIATE



THIS DETROIT CLASSROOM IS ENRICHED BY WEEKLY SESSIONS WITH ONE OF THE CITY'S 400 NJCL TUTORS.

A COP WORKS THE LITERACY BEAT IN LOS ANGELES. OUR SOUTH JERSEY AFFILIATE ALSO TRAINS AND PLACES POLICE OFFICERS AS VOLUNTEERS.



Reaching out to other faith-based groups within their community, the *Richmond,* VA JCL helped create the Micah Initiative. Team leader Miriam Davidow notes that the program encourages a variety of Richmond organizations to get involved with literacy coaching, while matching willing faith partners with local public schools.

Rochester's Jewish Coalition for Literacy has found a hip, convenient way to incorporate high school students in the cause. Recognizing the rigors of the teens' own academic schedules, as well as their limited access to transportation, the new "Books on Tape" program bypasses the format of weekly one-on-one tutoring in favor of periodic recording sessions of children's books by high school volunteers. The resulting tapes bring literature to students who are learning English as a second language.

While 130 organizations were nominated, only The Anne & Sam Klein Jewish Coalition for Literacy of *Palm Beach County* earned the "Superintendent's Gold Award" in Palm Beach County, the largest school district in the nation. The affiliate, which serves more than 700 students in 35 public elementary schools, was cited for "Excellence in a Non-profit Business Partnership."

Boots Fox, who directs the effort, notes that dozens of languages and some 140 cultures are represented in the schools they target. To broaden and diversify the affiliate's group of tutors, a new focus on developing Black/Jewish and Hispanic/Jewish literacy teams is now under way. Fox notes that volunteers also participate in a summer program coaching 3rd and 4th graders who did not pass the state-mandated reading test.

While many Hillel chapters participate in NJCL tutoring nationwide, those of New England have organized into a formidable regional team. *The New England Hillel Literacy Corps,* formed as a partnership between the Hillel Council of New England and the *Greater Boston* Jewish Coalition for Literacy, last year trained some 125 college students attending 21 area campuses to coach public school children.

Hillel members from Brandeis, Harvard and many other local colleges benefit from the extensive experience and structure established by NJCL's flagship affiliate in Boston. At the same time, students in the Hillel Literacy Corps, who maintain their own dedicated web site (http://www.hillel-council.org/literacycorps), add their own creativity to mix. "Read by the River," for example, a Tufts Hillel intiative, has expanded from a one-day reading festival for local youth to an ongoing array of literacy activities, including book drives and advocacy work.

"The program draws students not previously connected to Jewish life on campus," observes Ailene Gerhardt, Director of Regional Student Services at the Hillel Council of New England. "Some volunteers even come from colleges lacking a Hillel presence altogether." The tutors are hungry for meaningful opportunities to serve, she points out. "They also relish the opportunity to meet one another."

NJCL AFFILIATES

COALITION HEADQUARTERS
617.423.0063
134 Beach Street, Boston, MA 02111
NJCL36@AOL.COM
WWW.NJCL.NET

ARIZONA
Phoenix Jewish Coalition for Literacy
Cathy Wolf, 480.634.4900 x1108
Jewish Community Relations Council
12701 N. Scottsdale, Suite 201
Scottsdale, AZ 85254
CWOLF@JEWISHPHOENIX.ORG
WWW.JEWISHPHOENIX.ORG

Tucson JCL: The Reading Seed
Marlyne Freedman, 520.577.9393 x103
JCRC of So. Arizona
3822 East River Road, #100 Tucson, AZ 85718
MFREEDMAN@JFSA.ORG

CALIFORNIA
Bay Area JCL
Roberta Rothman, 415.957.1551
RROTHMAN@JCRC.ORG
WWW.JCLREAD.ORG

East Bay JCL
Shirley Feldman, 510.839.2900
401 Grand Avenue, Suite 500
Oakland, CA 94610
SHIRLEY@JFED.ORG WWW.JCLREAD.ORG
WWW.JCLREAD.ORG

Peninsula JCL
Roberta Rothman, 650.940.1225
5150 El Camino Real Palo Alto, CA 94024
WWW.JCLREAD.ORG

San Francisco JCL
Julia Ellis 415.977.7414
121 Steuart Street, #301 San Francisco, CA 94105
JELLIS@JCRC.ORG
WWW.JCLREAD.ORG

Los Angeles JCL: Koreh L.A.
Elaine Albert, 323.761.8145
6505 Wilshire Blvd., #900 Los Angeles, CA 90048
EALBERT@JEWISHLA.ORG
WWW.KOREHLA.ORG

COLORADO
Denver JCL
Sandi Ogin, 303.355.7712
71 So. Fairfax St., Denver, CO 80246
SANDIOG@AOL.COM

Danbury JCL
Joan Weisman 203.740.1598
Greater Danbury Jewish Coalition for Literacy
25 Kellogg Street Brookfield, CT 06804
FRED_T_WEISMAN@SBCGLOBAL.NET ; INFO@JF.ORG
WWW.THEJF.ORG

CONNECTICUT
Eastern Connecticut JCL
Henry Savin, 860.442.8062
Jewish Federation of Eastern Connecticut
28 Channing Street New London, CT 06320
HSAVIN@JFEC.COM

Hartford JCL
Gale Shapiro, 860.236.READ (236.7323)
333 Bloomfield Avenue West Hartford, CT 06117
GSHAPIRO@JEWISHHARTFORD.ORG
HJCL@JEWISHHARTFORD.ORG
WWW.JEWISHHARTFORD.ORG

Greater Stamford JCL-Reading Partners
Dana Horowitz, 203.321.1373 x108
United Jewish Federation of Greater Stamford,
New Canaan and Darien
1036 Newfield Ave. Stamford, CT 06905
OFFICE@UJF.ORG

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Weinberg Tzedek Hillel
Michelle Lackie, 202.449.6595
Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life
800 Eighth Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001-3724
MLACKIE@HILLEL.ORG

FLORIDA
Pinellas County JCL
Kimberly Shansky, 727.530.3223 Coordinator
Jewish Federation of Pinellas County
13191 Starkey Road, Suite 8 Largo, FL 33773-1438
KSHANSKY@BSSFL.COM
WWW.JEWISHPINELLAS.ORG

South Palm Beach JCL
Anne Chernin, 561.852.6022
Jewish Federation of South Palm Beach County
South Palm Beach JCL
9901 Donna Klein Blvd., Boca Raton, FL 33428
ANNEC@BOCAFED.ORG



West Palm Beach JCL
Boots J. Fox, 561.622.4283
The Anne & Sam Klein Jewish Coalition for Literacy
JCRC/Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County
4601 Community Drive West Palm Beach, FL 33417
BOOTSF@JFEDPBCO.ORG
WWW.JEWISHPALMBEACH.ORG

GEORGIA
Atlanta JCL
Eileen Price 404.575.3762
1440 Spring Street, NW Atlanta, GA 30309
EPRICE@JFGA.ORG
WWW.SHALOMATLANTA.ORG

ILLINOIS
Chicago JCL
Tracy Klevens More 312.444.2810
TOV Literacy Project
Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation of
Metropolitan Chicago
One South Franklin St., Chicago, IL 60606
TRACYMORE@JUF.ORG
WWW.JUF.ORG/TOV

KENTUCKY
Louisville JCL
Sarah Wagner, 502.451.8840
Sandee Linker, 502.423.1441
Jewish Community Relations Council
3630 Dutchman Lane Louisville, Ky 40205
CRCLOUKY@AOL.COM
WWW.JEWISHLOUISVILLE.ORG

LOUISIANA
New Orleans JCL
Adam Bronstone, 508-780-5610
Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans
3747 W. Esplanade Aven. North Metairie, LA 70002
ADAM@JEWISHNOLA.COM

MARYLAND
Baltimore JCL
Erica Siegel, 410.542.4850
Baltimore Jewish Council
5750 Park Heights Avenue Baltimore, MD 21215
ESIEGEL@BALTJC.ORG

MASSACHUSETTS
Greater Boston JCL
Boston
Brockton
Cambridge
Framingham
Waltham

Tammy Alfred Steinman 617.457.8661
Jewish.Community Relations Council
126 High Street Boston, MA 02110-2700
TSTEINMAN@JCRCBOSTON.COM
WWW.JCRCBOSTON.ORG

The Merrimack Valley JCL
Andover
Haverill
North Andover

Sherry Comerchero 978-975-0006
114 Kara Drive, North Andover, MA 01845
SHERRYCOMERCHERO@YAHOO.COM
WWW.MVJF.ORG

North Shore JCL
Joyce Morgan Kennard, 781-631-4366
North Shore Jewish Coalition for Literacy
9 Hanover Court, Marblehead, MA 01945
WWW.JEWISHNORTHSHORE.ORG

MICHIGAN
Detroit JCL
Phyllis Jarvis 248.642.5393
6735 Telegraph Road, #100 Bloomfield Hills, MI 48301-3143
JARVIS@JFMD.ORG
WWW.JEWISHCOMMUNITYCOUNCIL.ORG/_PROJECTS/DJCL

delivering on the promise

MINNESOTA

Twin Cities JCL
Julie Gordon, 612.338.7816 x283
Avodah B'Yachad-Service Together
JCRC of MN and the Dakotas
12 North 12th Street, Suite 480,
Minneapolis, MN 55403-1331
DIRECTOR@ABY.ORG
WWW.ABY.ORG

NEW JERSEY

Bergen County JCL
Sharon Rifkind, 201.488.6800 x229
Bergen Reads
UJA Federation of Bergen County & North Hudson
111 Kinderkamack Road River Edge, NJ 07661
SHARONR@UJABERGEN.ORG
WWW.JEWISHBERGEN.ORG

Central New Jersey JCL
Union County
Warren
Watchung
Elaine Hochheiser, 908.889.4673
1260 Meadowlark Lane Scotch Plains, NJ 07076
ELAINEHOCHHEISER@WORLDNET.ATT.NET

Southern Jersey JCL
Selina Barnett, 856.751.9500 x143
South Jersey Interfaith Coalition for
Literacy-Book Mates
Jewish Community Relations Council
1301 Springdale Road, Suite 200 Cherry Hill, NJ 08003
SBARNETT@JFEDSNJ.ORG
WWW.JFEDSNJ.ORG

NEW YORK

Capital Region JCL ROAR Program
Shelly Shapiro, 518.783.7800 x235
SSHAPIRO@JEWISHFEDBY.ORG
Susie Sommer, 518.783.1557
NISKYMOM2@HOTMAIL.COM

CRC of United Jewish Federation of
Northeastern New York
800 New Loudon Road Latham, NY 12110

Albany
Karen Rosenkrantz
KARIRO23@AOL.COM

Schenectady
Linda Goodman
1206 Ruffner Rd. Schenectady, NY 12309

Troy
Leah Gales
LSG77@AOL.COM

Buffalo JCL
Ellen Goldstein, 716.886.7750
Dr. Jane Vogel Fischman
787 Delaware Avenue Buffalo, NY 14209
EGOLDSTEIN@JFEDBFLO.COM
JANE.FISCHMAN@EUDORAMAIL.COM
WWW.JFEDBFLO.COM

New York City JCL
BJ Reads
Carol Dikman, 212.787.7600x255
Congregation B'nai Jeshurun
100A West 89th Street New York, NY 10024
CDIKMAN@BJ.ORG

Partners for Literacy
Judy Gross, 646.505.4450
JCC in Manhattan
334 Amsterdam Avenue New York, NY 10023
JGROSS@JCCNYC.ORG
WWW.JCCNY.ORG

Rochester JCL
Isobel Goldman, 585.461.0490
Jewish Community Federation of Greater Rochester
441 East Avenue Rochester, NY 14607
IGOLDMAN@JEWISHROCHESTER.ORG
WWW.JEWISHROCHESTER.ORG

OHIO

Cleveland JCL
Fran Pursell, 216.566.9200 x263
Cleveland JCRC
Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland
Public Education Initiative
1750 Euclid Avenue Cleveland, OH 44115
CDAVIS@CLEVEGROWTH.COM

OREGON

Portland JCL
Emily Georges Gottfried, 503.295.6761
American Jewish Committee
Portland Oregon Chapter
1220 SW Morrison, Suite 828 Portland, OR 97205
GOTTFRIEDE@AJC.ORG

TEXAS

San Antonio Tu-To-R! JCL
Rivka Schechter, 210.302.6968
Jewish Federation of San Antonio
12500 NW Military Hwy. Suite 200
San Antonio, TX 78231
SCHECHTERR@JFSATX.ORG

VIRGINIA

Richmond JCL
Randi Genderson, 804.545.8629
Jewish Community Federation of Richmond
5403 Monument Avenue Richmond, VA 23226
RGENDERSON@JEWISHRICHMOND.COM

Norfolk JCL
Joan DeLarosa, 757.671.1600
BEAR (Be A Reader)
United Jewish Federation of Tidewater
5041 Corporate Woods Drive, Suite 150
Virginia Beach, VA 23462
BEAR@UJFT.ORG LOUBIRD1@COX.NET
WWW.JEWISHVA.ORG

WASHINGTON

Seattle JCL
Jennifer Mendelson, 206.774.2276
Study Buddy
2031 Third Avenue Seattle, WA 98121
JENNIFERM@JEWISHINSEATTLE.ORG

WISCONSIN

Milwaukee JCL
Kathy Heilbronner, 414.390-5736
Milwaukee Jewish Council for Community Relations
1360 N. Prospect Avenue, 2nd floor
Milwaukee, WI 53202
KHEILBR@AOL.COM
WWW.MJCCR.ORG

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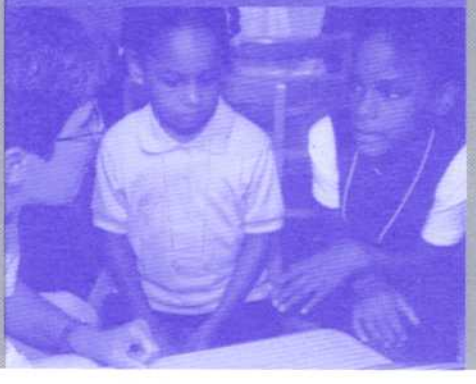

Meanwhile, in Albany, eight seniors pile into the van leaving the Massry Residence, an assisted living facility, for the boisterous classrooms of School 27. Susie Sommer, Chair of the Capital Region JCL, notes that the local Jewish community is small but determined, with more than 200 reading coaches, from 8th graders to senior citizens, volunteering in ***Troy, Schenectady*** and ***Albany*** public schools.

The retired teachers, scientists and other professionals who volunteer from Massry extend the affiliate's reach, both within the Jewish community and beyond.

"It's magical," adds Faye Silton, Program Director at the Massry Residence and a reading coach herself. Each school visit is a special occasion, with the tutors presenting their students with a new book every week. The students, in turn, design Chanukah cards and customized gifts for their partners.

"The teacher is effusive in her appreciation of the intergenerational learning that takes place and the richness these seniors add to the school as a whole," Sommer points out. The real proof, however, comes from the students themselves. "You should see the flashing eyes and wide grins when the children are actually reading with their partners."

The Albany program is designed to ensure maximum participation. Even those Massry seniors who aren't able to travel take part behind the scenes. They work together at the residence making flash cards and providing other support services for front-line volunteers.

Coordinating tutors from an assisted living facility requires care and creativity, according to those who have implemented such programs. Partner schools need willing teachers on the first floor level and seniors need back-up tutors in case of illness. Still, Detroit's Jarvis and Albany's Sommer, as also Joyce Kennard of the ***North Shore*** JCL (MA), concur that the rewards far outweigh any logistical concerns.

"Tapping into the abundant resource of retired Americans is a real no-brainer when it comes to marshalling troops in the battle against illiteracy," NJCL Chair Frank emphasizes. "Our affiliates are onto a good thing with these seniors. Now, let's get busy lining up some more vans."

LITBITS EDITOR MELANIE MARCUS CAN BE REACHED AT melamarcus@earthlink.net

National Jewish
Coalition for Literacy

Litbits
39 Willoughby Road
Milton, MA 02186

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