

Soap, Suds, and Stories

Early Literacy at the Laundromat

ELIZABETH MCCHESENEY AND MARISA CONNER

“I love the literacy area and really appreciate the librarians’ patience and love. I think there are few places like this in our community. I think the literacy corner is very important for this community. We come here every other week, and now he has something to do. He asks me, “Mommy, can we go play at the laundromat?”—Parent

Bubbles whirl, swish, and spin in a long row of very large machines. Clothes spin round and round in huge, industrial dryers. With that as the backdrop, storytime is in full swing at laundromats across the country.

The children and families who participate in story hours at their laundromat are part of a growing trend in library service to children aimed at providing early literacy programming, high-quality play experiences, and parental asides in everyday settings. Through effective partnerships at a national and local level, more and more public libraries are serving high-needs families through this innovative outreach service that exemplifies all of ALSC’s core values: collaboration, excellence, inclusiveness, innovation, integrity, respect, leadership, and responsiveness.

In 2017, the LaundryCares Foundation (LFC) and Too Small To Fail Foundation (TSTF), the early childhood initiative of the Clinton Foundation, launched a multi-year partnership to promote children’s early literacy development among families who use laundromats on a regular basis. The mission of TSTF is to surround families with early language and learning opportunities and support parents with resources to help prepare young children for success in kindergarten and beyond. TSTF created a suite of Wash Time is Talk Time resources, including in-store posters, coloring/activity pages, a parent tip sheet, and social media messages.

The Coin Laundry Association (CLA), the parent organization of the LCF, promoted awareness about these resources



Children receive books as part of national Summer Learning in Your Laundromat at Blue Kangaroo Laundromat in Chicago.

through five thousand laundromats nationwide as well as through their various communication channels.

But this was just the beginning. Transforming spaces and accelerating learning inside them was on the mind of Jane Park, director of TSTF.

“A core strategy of Too Small to Fail has been to transform everyday places into playful, literacy-rich environments that would delight and captivate children, and provide support for their parents as well,” said Park. Families typically spend about two hours at their local laundromat.



Elizabeth McChesney is a thirty-three-year veteran children’s librarian who retired as Director of System Wide Children’s Services from the Chicago Public Library in 2019. She has won numerous national awards for her innovations and currently serves as the Early Childhood and Community Partnerships Consultant for the LaundryCares Foundation. She serves as a Senior Advisor to Urban Libraries Council and Consultant to National Summer Learning Association. She is the co-author of *Summer Matters: Making All Learning Count* and *Pairing STEAM with Stories*. Her first picture book, *Keke’s Double-Strong Super Hugs*, is forthcoming.



Marisa Conner has a combined forty years’ experience working in public education and public libraries, and retired as the Manager of Youth and Family Engagement from the Baltimore County (MD) Public Library in 2018. She is the Co-Chair of the Baltimore County Early Childhood Advisory Council and a consultant for Too Small To Fail. She is the co-author of *The Power of Play: Designing Early Learning Spaces*, (ALA Editions, 2015).

“Through our partnership between Too Small To Fail and the LaundryCares Foundation, we’ve been able to ‘upcycle’ these long ‘dwell times’ into fun, playful learning time for children and their caregivers,” adds Park.

Corporate Social Responsibility Mission Meets Early Literacy

LCF was formed in 2005 in response to Hurricane Katrina and the then-urgent need for people impacted by the hurricane to be able to clean their clothes. Their vision is to help build strong communities. Their next step was to partner with TSTF and Libraries Without Borders to offer critical and high-quality early literacy initiatives to young children and their families who need it most.

“Laundromats Connecting Communities is our motto, but it’s also our mission,” said Dan Naumann, executive vice president of LCF. “Serving communities has always been the mission of laundromat owners, and giving our customers access to high-quality early childhood outcomes is a win for our communities, a win for our businesses and, most importantly, it’s a huge gain for kids everywhere.”

Early Learning Spaces in Laundromats

Building on the success of the partners’ initial work and the recommendations from the first national convening—the LaundryCares Summit held in 2018—LCS and TSTF collaborated with children’s library leaders to create a prototype of an early learning play space to be tucked into the laundromat. These early childhood spaces are essentially a “kit of parts” that include furniture, books, and learning activities.

The kits were studied through the first formal evaluation ever conducted on the topic of early literacy promotion in laundromats. Using research about the efficacy of these nooks, the coalition leaders formalized the Family Read, Play & Learn kits. These early learning areas are purchased by laundromat owners and include child-sized bookshelves and comfortable seating for adults with children. Learning tools and toys include magnetic easels, flannel boards, preschool-sized tables and chairs, and high-quality writing implements, toys, letters, and puppets augment these spaces. The methodology is to bring best practices in early literacy to everyday spaces and accelerate learning for children and provide support for families.

This happens in partnership with Lakeshore Learning; the kits are customized for each laundromat. Lakeshore Learning President Kevin Carnes said, “All of us at Lakeshore have been so proud to participate in a project that meets families in their neighborhoods, provides such valuable resources and information and really honors parents as their children’s first teachers. We salute the coalition for having the vision and drive to make this all happen!”

Through a partnership with Scholastic Publishing, laundromats who purchase the nooks also receive a monthly shipment of new, bilingual picture books. Books routinely go home with kids to build a home library and foster book ownership for laundromat-going young children.

The Family Read, Play & Learn kits are sold to laundromats in three sizes to fit space availability. Some laundromats transform unused corners or television viewing areas into an early literacy space, and others have taken out machines to make room for children’s books and the kit. The kits have become so successful that other types of businesses are beginning to purchase them for installation as well.

Storytime in the Laundromat

What makes these spaces come alive, however, is the way they are activated with early literacy programming. Children’s librarians and other early childhood educators, including those from HeadStart Programs, community-based early literacy programs, the education departments of universities, and a growing core of retired teachers across the country, are joining the coalition and offering outreach programming to laundromat-going kids to reach families where they are and extend learning into every day venues.

Parental asides and tips from *Every Child Ready to Read 2* (ECRR2) are shared along the way. “We know that reading is fundamentally social; what we read is shaped by our relationships with others and the community contexts in which we live. Therefore, the laundromat, a place where community members congregate and spend time together, is a perfect place to nurture reading habits and interest,” said Dr. Kira Baker-Doyle, director of the Center for Literacy at the University of Illinois-Chicago College of Education and editor and chief of review of *Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*.

For libraries, this service offers a chance to reach community members who typically do not otherwise have access to, or use, the library. We also learned from initial surveys of this work that parents of children who participate in laundromat literacy programming have an extremely high satisfaction rate with the programming and feel they don’t have other similar outlets to provide their children with essential early literacy activities. As a young child was serenaded by a ukulele-playing librarian, his mom said to the researchers, “We never get opportunities like this in our neighborhood for our kids; this is an amazing first for us.”

Effective national and local partnerships help sustain success in the laundromat literacy model. In Watertown, Wisconsin, for example, the community-wide Watertown Health Foundation is interested in improving outcomes for families and young children. Together the Foundation and the Watertown Public Library (WPL) have partnered with two local laundromat owners.

They formed a community-wide alliance to bring their early learning campaign into the laundromats and provide early literacy programming. WPL Children's Librarian Tina Peerenboom said, "This has provided us with a rich opportunity to serve the kids and families of our community in a new and different way. We are always looking for ways to reach children and families where they are. This partnership allows us to provide firsthand early literacy modeling for parents and caregivers in how to read and play with their kids with a focus on language and literacy. The laundromat is the perfect setting to show how to find teachable moments anywhere."⁵

Growth of the Movement

And so grows the coalition itself. According to informal findings from the Coin Laundry Association, there are about 30,000 laundromats in the US and the average laundromat sees about 954 families with children under five every year.

Approximately 250 laundromats across the country have committed to implementing Family Read, Play, & Learn spaces, and there is ample room for continued growth. Taking this on as a corporate social responsibility aspect of their industry, laundromat owners and industry leaders continue to learn deeply about early literacy, support partnerships which sustain this work and iterate new solutions for serving the early literacy needs of their communities. Developing partnerships with local children's librarians is core to the growth of the movement.

"I am moved by the deep and abiding commitment to serve our children, foster the joy of reading and learning, coupled with the vast expertise and talent of the many children's librarians we witness partnering with our businesses," said Jim Whitmore, president of the LCF board of directors. Whitmore himself partners with the Salem (MA) Public Library.

As the coalition grows, good ideas continue to expand from partners around the country. Children's librarians continue to innovate ways to bring experiential learning to laundry-based storytimes. Bubbles, errant socks left behind, and shapes and colors found in the environment all form the basis of rich early literacy programming.

Storytimes have been happening informally in laundromats for years, but the coalition provides strategic partnerships between business owners and early literacy providers, including public libraries. This helps amplify the results of libraries working with laundromats and can reduce the time involved in developing relationships with local business owners. The coalition also provides member assistance through access to resources and connecting to others who are doing similar programming. To support ongoing learning and to share best practices, we created an online learning cohort called The Innovation Circle. The Laundry Literacy Coalition helps strengthen local partnerships and builds national alliances, all while developing a framework for success across the country.

The annual summit brings together leaders in the laundry industry as well as leaders in early childhood and libraries. The convening features tracks specialized for various partners on this work and this year featured former President Bill Clinton and Wes Moore discussing equity in early childhood education, Cindy McCain, Ralph Smith, managing director of The Campaign for Grade Level Reading, and the Honorable Judge Ramona Gonzalez, president of the National Council of Family and Juvenile Court Judges who announced a national commitment to expand this service into family courts across the country. Author Mo Willems was interviewed by Chelsea Clinton, and author Andrea Davis Pinkney hosted a coffee chat courtesy of Scholastic Publishing. Participants took part in a "beloved communities" project as a learning reflection activity in commemoration of the late Congressman John Lewis.

National awards are disseminated annually at the Laundry Literacy Summit. These awards recognize unique contributions, effective partnerships, and best practices in reaching underrepresented children across the country. In 2020, Chelsea Clinton awarded the City of Milwaukee/Milwaukee Public Library and the Chicago Public Library amongst the honorees. The awards will continue to be given annually at the summit and will recognize exemplary partnerships, service to communities, and innovative practice.

The Evaluation Studies

Brian Wallace, president of the Coin Laundry Association, the parent organization of the LCF, often says that while he believes providing early literacy spaces and programming is a good and practical idea, he wants to make sure that this is also an effective strategy to reach families. His vision is to meet early literacy goals through deep and rigorous evaluation.

"I believe in doing good by being better," said Wallace, and so he drives an agenda of researching this work and its impact. As a result, testing and evaluation have been an essential since the beginning.

TSTF commissioned Dr. Susan Neuman, New York University professor of literacy and childhood education and a leading architect of ECRR2, to lead research evaluations on the Family Read, Play & Learn spaces. Neuman has supported the coalition's work from its inception, and along with her team of researchers has been studying the impact of early literacy in laundromats since 2018. The results of her work have been disseminated through the LaundryCares National Summit annually and are summarized here.

Phase 1: Changing the Environment

The first phase of the evaluation focused on what happens when the laundromat environment is transformed. With the addition of comfortable seating, child-level book shelving, and appropriate toys, laundromat space was transformed into the

prototype of an early learning space. Research with Neuman was conducted for three months in 2018. The research team examined changes in the environment to assess whether the prototype of the learning spaces increased parent/caregiver awareness about early brain and language development and prompted children to engage in more language-rich activities like talking, reading, singing, writing, and playing. The laundromats were refreshed every three weeks with new books, activity sheets, paper, crayons, and any materials that were missing from the sites. Laundromat employees were asked to keep the spaces neat and tidy between the refreshing visits.

The findings from Phase 1 were clear. The Family Read, Play & Learn kits significantly enhance children's access to print and time spent on activities that support school readiness and align with ECRR2. Children were observed engaging in thirty times more literacy activities in laundromats that include the prototype kit compared to laundromats without the kits. Across sites, children were most likely to read books (sixty-seven instances), followed by playing with magnetic letters (forty-two instances), and playing with blocks (thirty-seven instances). Also, 60 percent of parents reported that there were fewer than twenty children's books in their home. These findings demonstrate that the activities in the treatment sites may represent one of the few ways that children have access to books in these communities. Furthermore, laundromat customers reported high praise for literacy spaces and expressed greater loyalty to the laundromats that included the spaces.

Phase 2: Children's Librarian Engagement

Conducted between December 2018 and January 2019, this phase focused on the impact of children's librarians in the laundromat early learning space. This evaluation aimed to evaluate the potential added benefit of having librarians regularly visit laundromats to conduct outreach programming with children and model ECRR2 activities for parents during the laundromat's busiest hours of the week.

Researchers sought to understand how librarians' involvement might enhance parents' understanding of early literacy development, and their views of having these types of activities available in the laundromat. Phase 2 also documented the range of literacy-related activities that took place, children's engagement, and parent-child activities during the time period.

Among the findings from Phase 2, Neuman noted that children engaged in "substantial and sustained literacy activity" when a librarian was present in the laundromat. Librarians from New York Public Library spent an average of eighty-five minutes per visit each week in the laundromat. During these visits, children engaged in significantly more purposeful engagement in literacy activities compared to children in the control sites, as well as compared to the children's activities observed in the Phase 1 treatment sites.

On average, three children, between the ages of two and six, participated during the librarian's time at the laundromat. Neuman's team also studied the response of customers and business owners with the following results—customers overwhelmingly expressed their enthusiasm for the literacy space and the librarians' visits to the laundromat. They said they chose to come to that specific laundromat with their children because of the literacy area. Laundry owners and employees also expressed praise for the literacy areas, noting the parents' appreciation and children's excitement for the spaces.

Phase 3: Children's Librarians Accelerate Parental Engagement and Learning Outcomes

For the third phase of evaluation, the evaluation process moved to Chicago laundromats and the Chicago Public Library for robust and rigorous evaluation. The evaluation goal was to build the evidence base and test new strategies to engage parents in more literacy-rich activities with their children while in the laundromat. Phase 3 of Neumann's research focused on early literacy programming that has a family-based approach. Here the librarians worked to contextual learning throughout the laundromat and encouraged parents to participate, even while completing their laundry chores. When librarians have a strong and intentional focus on parent and family engagement, there are likely to be increases in parent-child interactions in the laundromat environment.

Librarians used the Family Read, Play & Learn space and the library staff spilled out into the overall laundromat environment to promote learning. This included creating a map of the laundromat that identified the typical "production cycle" of doing laundry and the opportune times to engage parents. The programmatic strategy included use of environmental signage and employing vocabulary, building songs, and games that could turn the laundromat setting into a gallery for learning.

Researchers observed librarians commonly walking around the laundromat to engage parents and encourage them to join the story time with their children. Chicago librarians used the laundromat as a learning space and incorporated the machines and the building into the programming. This included shape scavenger hunts and color walks through the rows of washers and dryers to drive contextualized learning. These strategies increase vocabulary and relatable learning for the participants. Meeting families where they are within the laundromat helps to break down barriers and engage families in early literacy.

The study shows there is a strong and significant difference in parent-child interactions between the treatment and control sites. When parents engage, the interactions consisted of mainly "brief bursts" with parents dipping in and out of the literacy space, which is to be expected given the nature of the task parents are in the laundromat to complete.

The Chicago librarians said this approach gave them renewed confidence in ECRR2 competencies. The librarians also reported that these strategies sparked new ideas for ways to reach families in other informal settings. Given that the Chicago librarians had already been engaged in laundromat outreach programs, it helped them extend their approach, recognizing that every environment where families are spending time can open up new opportunities for early literacy learning. Laundromat early literacy audiences are built, and these librarians watched as families changed their chore time to be in the laundromat during story hour. This change in behavior is a testament to the effectiveness of this outreach programming.

One of the most significant—but not surprising—research findings from New York and Chicago shows that librarians play a powerful role in both children and parents’ engagement in literacy-related activity. The average amount of time spent by children in the literacy space during librarian visits was forty-seven minutes, which is 62 percent more than the average time that children spent alone in the space.⁸

Maggie Jacobs, director of educational programs at The New York Public Library, said, “Formally evaluating the impact librarians make in conducting outreach to laundromats confirms what we know: children’s librarians can accelerate outcomes for young children and families with their specialized early childhood programming skills and with emphasis on working with caregivers to build literacy-supportive environments.”

Throughout the course of the seven-month study, children remained engaged in the literacy spaces. In fact, average length of reading time grew throughout Phase 1 of the study, increasing 31 percent. This indicates that these activities were self-sustaining.

An important takeaway from this finding, as well as the broader results of this evaluation, is that length of time exposed to the Family Read, Play & Learn space matters. Over time, parents and caregivers begin to observe children engaging with other families and children in the literacy spaces, which has an additive effect of beginning to build a literacy culture that slowly gathers strength over time.

In 2021, we plan to conduct an independent outcomes-based evaluation to learn more about parental attitudes towards reading aloud and book sharing and their perceptions about school-readiness. Based on our logic model and anticipated outcomes, this evaluation will survey parents in both urban and rural laundromat settings to measure a change in behavior and attitude towards reading and early literacy both during the laundry visit and at home, and to assess if parents feel more adequately prepared to read and talk and play with their young children. The study will compare the findings between settings. This work will help us sharpen our strategy and coaching mechanisms as well as inform future purchasing decisions for the Family Read, Play & Learn Kits.

Join the LLC—Be a Part of the Growing Movement

Members of the Laundry Literacy Coalition (LLC) receive many benefits, including specialized story hour in the laundromat guide created in partnership with the Chicago and New York Public Libraries, access to the Innovation Circle Network, ongoing professional development offerings, and continuing conversation with librarians across the country. The national Innovation Circle and the annual LaundryCares Literacy Summit provide access to nationally recognized speakers and professional development tracks for librarians. Joining the LLC can provide a national network to deepen your work and learn from your peers. Members learn how to provide outcomes-based evaluation and link this outreach to their specific strategic plan. To learn more about this no-cost membership, email Liz McChesney at liz@laundrycares.org.

Laundromat Literacy in the COVID-19 World

In Spring 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the country, laundromats and the Coin Laundry Association worked to serve communities as an essential business. Business pivots were necessary, and laundromat owners gamely worked to find solutions to help their communities.

Drop-off laundry service, wash and go, and limiting the number of customers in laundromats are all part of solutions used to assist communities during the crisis. Laundries offered free wash and dry time to first responders and helped hospitals with laundering nurses’ and doctors’ clothing.

But what about laundromat literacy? While in-person programming was temporarily suspended, early literacy practices did not stop. The changes made during this time included a take-home guide created for families called “Stuck at Home?” The guides, filled with ideas for extending early language acquisition and learning at home, were distributed in laundromats across the country. A preschool book club with a corresponding book giveaway was implemented in fall 2020. Digital storytimes, such as the bilingual series conducted by Miss Martha at the Elizabeth (NJ) Public Library, became a weekly highlight for laundromat customers waiting in their cars.

Programming is still happening in fresh and unique ways. Author Rhona Silverbush has created storytimes based on her Terrific Toddler series that are available on the LCF’s Facebook page. Silverbush combines these storytimes with tips and tricks for parents of tired toddlers to help them recognize what their toddlers experience.

Spotlight on Elizabeth Public Library

“Miss Martha” Cardenas, a bilingual children’s library assistant at the Elizabeth (NJ) Public Library, has been conducting digital storytimes that are streamed to Bubbles ‘R Us laundromat’s Facebook page. This has allowed the library to reach children and families otherwise unserved by preschools or other high-quality early childhood programming during the 2020 pandemic.

Her programs feature bilingual songs and rhymes for family involvement along with themed stories and ideas for playing together. Library Director Mary Faith Chmiel said, “She is the perfect person for these virtual storytimes, as exemplified by the number of hits her programs have gotten on social media. But, to be honest, Martha can’t wait until she is able to share her love of books and children in-person. And, of course, none of this would be possible without the support and enthusiasm of the laundromat owner.”

Laundromat Branch Manager Robert Barbanell added, “Due to the pandemic, Miss Martha had to quickly switch from planning in-person storytimes to recording virtual storytimes to post on the laundromat’s social media outlets. Her passion and vivaciousness truly bring each storytime to life in the most engaging of ways for the children of the community we serve in Elizabeth. And the end result has been views of Martha’s storytime on social media consistently in the one to two thousand range.”

Silverbush said, “LaundryCares has created a remarkably smart, simple and elegant model for fostering a lifelong love of books in our littlest ones. It’s thrilling to be able to be a part of something that can subtly but powerfully change the arc of so many children’s futures.”

Puppeteer Marilyn Price of Evanston, Illinois, has created a “soap opera” featuring a sock puppet dog and his laundry basket puppet stage. Her puppet shows are streamed through the LCF’s Facebook page.

New partnerships continue to form as well. The Idaho Commissioner for Libraries began a partnership in summer 2020 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Tammy Hawley-House, Idaho Commission for Libraries Deputy State Librarian, said, “We at the Idaho Commission for Libraries (ICfL) believe in bringing the power of early literacy to Idaho families where they are—including laundromats. The ICfL is excited to work with Idaho libraries and their laundromat partners as they take the first step to deliver early literacy resources to parents who routinely use their neighborhood

laundromats. Libraries can help families make use of the laundromat wait time by providing them with books, story times, library cards, and parental literacy material.

“This year, as we keep COVID-19 prevention in mind, the ICfL has shifted its focus to helping libraries establish relationships with their laundromat partners and getting their users connected to online story times and other virtual library services. When the COVID-19 danger subsides, we will again bring physical literacy centers and live storytimes to these partner laundromats and the families they serve.”

Summer Learning in the Laundromat

Recognizing that learning can’t stop even in a pandemic and certainly not in summer, we created and disseminated an early childhood Summer Learning piece. This summer piece was also created in partnership with Reach Out and Read, the early literacy arm of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). This bilingual piece was disseminated nationally as a way to help stop the summer slide for families of young children. National Summer Learning Association CEO Aaron Dworkin said, “The work of the Laundry Literacy Coalition to creatively target and reach underserved families where they are and to provide them with high quality summer learning tips, strategies, and books they can access is both inspiring and essential. It is an effective and collaborative strategy to utilize if we want to ensure all young children in America, not just some, are able to keep learning during these challenging times and expand their skills and horizons all year long.”

Additionally, Dr. Matthew Boulay, founder of the National Summer Learning Association, offered copies of his new book, *How To Keep Your Kids Learning When Schools Are Closed*. Free downloads were disseminated across the country to help parents of school-age children with summer learning in the time of COVID.

A Call To Action

As 2020 closes and we look to the many lessons this year has taught us as library professionals, we see all of ALSC’s core values reflected in this work. Three things stand clear as a call to action—first, equity and access remain our field’s imperative battle cry, and closing the opportunity gap in new and innovative ways for all children must be our collective priority.

Second, finding new—and safe—ways to serve our communities is essential for libraries in this shifted time. It’s a time for those of us serving children to be especially tenacious and persistent; it’s up to us to find new ways to serve our communities and to make changes to best respond to children’s needs. We must reach new segments of children and families who cannot access library services and provide them with our high-quality services, collections, and programming. This

includes finding fresh ways to collaborate so we can reach our nation's families who are most under-resourced.

Last, but certainly not least, it's more critical than ever to meet families where they are. We must work to break down the barriers and structures that keep people from using our physical space. This is imperative for providing good library service in our communities. We must be bigger than our buildings if we are going to serve the children and families who need us most. And all of this can happen when we provide early literacy opportunities at the laundromat—one load, one book at a time. &

Reference

1. Susan Neuman, "Meeting Families Where They Are: Transforming Laundromats into Early Learning Environments in Underserved Neighborhoods," evaluation report, March 2020.

Sample Learning Activities

- Go for a shape walk around the laundromat. Look for things that are circles, squares, triangles, etc.
- Talk about the sequence of doing laundry. Use words like, "first, next, then, and last."
- Practice math skills, such as measuring laundry detergent and counting out coins for the machines.
- Talk about how clothes feel and smell at different times during the laundry process. Use descriptive words such as "wet, dry, cold, warm, stinky, fresh."
- Make up a song about doing the laundry. "This is the way we sort our clothes, sort our clothes, sort our clothes on a (Tuesday morning)." Repeat with "wash, dry, and fold" verses.

Group Works to Enhance Literacy in Ethiopia

Open Hearts Big Dreams, an American nonprofit group based in Seattle, works to increase literacy rates in Ethiopia, which are currently estimated at 51.77 percent for ages 15 and up.

This fall, the group published the 100th children's book in their local language book project, Ready Set Go Books, which are distributed free of charge to schools and libraries throughout Ethiopia. The book, *Plow Nation* by Worku Mulat, illustrated by Daniel Getahun, will initially be available digitally and print-on-demand around the world. By the end of 2021, paperback copies will be donated to schools and libraries in Ethiopia so children can practice reading skills. In just three years, Open Hearts Big Dreams is halfway to its goal of publishing 200 uniquely Ethiopian stories for children.

Ready Set Go Books are bilingual, featuring English and one of three common Ethiopian languages: Amharic, Tigrinya, and Afaan Oromo. American children's book author Jane Kurtz, who grew up in Ethiopia, serves as volunteer creative director and editor of the books, many of which she has also written. To ensure cultural sensitivity and accuracy, Kurtz works with her sister Caroline, a for-

mer classroom teacher of Ethiopian children. The two rely on translators and other Ethiopian-American and Ethiopian supporters to vet each book for relevance and accuracy.



Jane Kurtz

According to the Migration Policy Institute, an estimated 251,000 Ethiopian immigrants and their children live in the US. These books help preserve language and culture for the diaspora from Ethiopia and Eritrea and are used to support Amharic and Tigrinya language and culture classes in the US and European Union.

Open Hearts Big Dreams partners with Ethiopia Reads and other NGOs in Ethiopia to get the books into children's hands. They expect to distribute another 100,000 books within the next year. "But we know this is a drop in the bucket of the 4 million first graders in Ethiopia who need more colorful, culturally appropriate books to learn to read," says Open Hearts Big Dreams Founder and Executive Director Ellenore Angelidis.

For more information, visit www.openheartbigdreams.org. &