

Champion of Early Literacy

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Susan Sponaas may never know the full measure of her impact on the world. She has seen glimpses of it in smiling, upturned faces that find delight in a story, in tiny hands that carefully turn pages, and in parents who see a spark ignite in their children.

Sponaas, a Mauldin resident and the former head of youth services for the Greenville County Library, was honored recently by Lapsits for Early Literacy as its 2004 Very Early Childhood Literacy Champion.



Susan Sponaas is a volunteer at Greenville County Library. GWINN DAVIS/Staff

Lapsits director Sara Mansbach said Sponaas has devoted much of her life to showing very young children the power of books. Sponaas' work is in keeping with Lapsits' mission to promote positive reading practices to parents and caregivers of young children, from newborn to age 3.

"She has always been such an open and supportive person in bringing the community together to support early literacy," Mansbach said.

Mansbach noted Sponaas' service on the Caldecott Committee of the American Library Society as one factor in her selection.

"It's a real honor to be asked to be on that committee," Mansbach said. "Everything in her personal and professional life was so positive and enriching of children."

Sponaas said her service with the Greenville County Library, which she continues as a volunteer, had one goal. "We tried to get books into the hands of young children," she said.

Sponaas credits programs such as the library's story van, which reaches inner city areas, and Bouncing Babies, for babies ages 6 weeks to 12 months, with reaching many future and emerging readers.

"(Bouncing Babies) is really for the parents demonstrating what to do with the babies, getting them interested in books," Sponaas said. "We're trying to get parents to understand that there are a lot of steps before a child actually reads."

One of the simplest steps, according to Sponaas, comes when children associate reading a book with positive time spent with the people they love.

"A child isn't pre-wired to enjoy reading, but they are pre-wired to enjoy being with their mother or caregiver," she said. "It's like wiring their little minds to know that books equal fun."

Sponaas' love of books began very early. A native of Florida, she and her husband Richard moved to Greenville County in 1986. Sponaas instilled in their two daughters a passion for

reading. One daughter is now a library assistant, and the other is seeking a master's degree in library science, a degree Sponaas holds from Florida State University.

"My father was the reader in our house," Sponaas said. "He read us nursery rhymes and fairy tales. I found that I was good at writing and reading."

Sponaas said those nursery rhymes teach children much more than "happily ever after."

"We're teaching them the classic English language, the sound and the rhythm," she said.

As Sponaas volunteered with her daughters' classes and at Sunday school, she soon saw first hand that not every child had exposure to books. That realization began her quest to promote early literacy and to encourage parents even those who have trouble reading to show their children the world that exists in the pages of books. Sponaas encourages parents with reading difficulties, including those who learned English as a second language and have trouble with written English, to explore the library's collection of books on tape or CD.

"We try to tell parents that children care that they are in your lap," she said. "Sit with them and turn the pages and let the CD or tape read. Then, stop and talk about it. Even though you might not be comfortable reading to your child, that doesn't mean you can't share a book."

Fortunately for the children of Greenville County, Sponaas' official retirement has not meant an end to her mission to teach even the youngest children that reading is the key to immeasurable joy.

"It's like sowing seeds on a fertile field," Sponaas said. "They absorb so much. All these things that are important, loving books, loving libraries, if they're lucky, they learn that even before they go to kindergarten."

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