

The Greenville News

Reading is both a pleasure and a keystone for society
*A literate community is important for Greenville's population
and development.*

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By Judith S. Prince

During the first session to prepare to become a tutor for the Greenville Literacy Association, I was asked to imagine how it feels not to be able to read. It is hard to imagine such a tragedy, primarily because I "read to live."

For me, the pleasure of reading began early, and it has never subsided. I can remember running barefoot downhill to the bookmobile that stopped at Grassy Mountain Farm in North Georgia. The bookmobile was the only source of books for my sisters and me. Our world was Grassy Mountain Farm, but the entire universe was in those books.

Reading has always energized me. Reading led to three college degrees and a career in making education accessible to others. Reading biographies about leaders created a desire to lead. I read to learn. I read to rise above the daily struggle with life. It is a uniquely human pleasure to read!

In "Your Well-Read Life," Steven Leevan says, "A single right book at the right time can change our views dramatically, give a quantum boost to our knowledge, and help us to construct a whole new outlook on the world and our life."

Reading is the vehicle for success in school. Because we know that 90 percent of the brain's growth occurs from birth to 5 years of age, language development for all children must be a priority. Susan Shi, Laura Rovin and the staff of United Way's Success by Six, and Doris Ballard and the staff at the Child Development Centers of Greenville County Schools, are to be praised for successful initiatives that help assure Greenville's children are ready to begin school.

Sara Mansbach, a Rotarian, created Read to Me and Lapsits for Early Literacy, programs in which volunteers read to children in order to counter the "poverty of words" which characterize some homes. There are homes without books, magazines or newspapers. There are homes in which parents are working two jobs, and there is no time to read to children. Indeed, a nationwide study reported that 40 percent of fathers never read to their children.

Randy Bell, president of the Greenville Rotary Club, and other Rotary leaders are to be applauded for recognizing that reading to children can change a child's life. The Rotary Club supports a Read to Me Program in which 35 volunteers are reading to children in child development centers. Rotary Readers are focusing on pre-reading skills, such as increasing a child's vocabulary, listening skills and attention span. Most of all, Rotary Readers are modeling that reading is fun!

For adults, the question is no longer just about being able to read. Survival in today's economy is about more complex skills, including the "ability to understand and use information in daily activities and work," "the ability to carry out mathematical operations," and the "ability to adapt

and learn quickly." The cornerstone of economic success in the 21st century is a workforce that is literate, articulate and numerate.

The National Institute for Literacy reports that 20 percent of the adults in Greenville County function at 5th grade level or below in reading and math. Twenty percent of adults 25 years and older do not have a high school diploma.

If 20 percent of Greenville's adults lack the literacy skills to participate in a global economy, Greenville may not realize the outcomes of Vision 2025, including "a strong, diverse, and sophisticated economy," "a high quality of life," and "a healthy community." In addition to economic success, high-level literacy skills are linked to better health, longer life expectancy and civic participation. Much more troubling is that adults who lack the tools to meet everyday demands of life or to hold a job will remain on the periphery of Greenville's prosperity.

Jane Thomas, executive director of the Greenville Literacy Association, and her staff are advancing adult literacy. We must support their work with contributions of time and money and deep gratitude. As we celebrate National Family Literacy Month, we need to honor all who are devoted to assuring that learning is a family legacy.

Only by working at both ends of the pipeline -- with children from birth and with adults, including senior citizens -- will Greenville prepare its citizens for living well and working well in the 21st century. The effort to assure that all Greenville citizens achieve the highest level of education will be great, but we do not have a choice given the profound challenges of Vision 2025. As stated in the Spirit of Innovation, "Vision 2025 dares to imagine a community whose growth is fueled by creativity, ignited by the power of ideas, and fired by the goal of excellence for all of those who live and work here."