

The Greenville News

Stoking the fires of learning

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Two specific incidents helped changed Sara Mansbach's perspective about reading and early literacy. She recalls asking a preschooler what color she was wearing and getting a blank look and no response. And she remembers a book party where children were so excited to receive a book because they'd never owned one of their own before.

"I realized I had had a very middle-class perspective," Mansbach said. "I finally realized that not all parents read to their children."

What was then a shock to Mansbach became a force that led her to spend more of her professional life studying and working in the areas of reading and literacy and eventually led to the creation of a non-profit organization called Lapsits for Early Literacy.

Begun just over a year ago, Lapsits targets newborns through 3-year-olds along with their parents. Mansbach said the organization's goal is to instill a joy of reading in both children and parents by providing workshops, activities and books for at-risk families, guardians and caregivers.

"At-risk children don't hear as many positive responses, and they hear far fewer words in general than do other children," Mansbach said. "Language is key to success in life: if children can read and speak well, they can choose their career."

As a family literacy specialist with the Greenville County School District, Mansbach sees the problems that come when children have reading difficulties. "If we can get to them earlier, there will be less need later," Mansbach said.

Mansbach's professional studies have focused on how literacy is transferred from one generation to another.

"Literacy is a family legacy, and it is the key out of the poverty cycle," Mansbach said. "Improved literacy can reduce the number of prisoners and the number on welfare and government assistance programs. It will have an economic impact and create a more vibrant workforce."



Dr. Sara Mansbach of the Lapsits program. Staff/Alan DeVorsey

More details

PROFILE Name: Dr. Sara Mansbach **Occupation:** School District of Greenville County Family Learning Team, Family Literacy Specialist **Hometown:** Towson, Md.; moved to Greenville in 1979 **Family:** Husband, Frank, employed with Fluor's Global Automation Team; a daughter, Alissa, 22; and a son, Andrew, 19 **Education:** Doctoral degree in education with a concentration in reading from Boston University. **Community involvement:** Leadership Greenville Board of Regents; member of the American Association of University Women, the Greenville Rotary Club and the Urban League **Church:** First Baptist of Greenville **Hobbies:** Reading, water aerobics

Mansbach said it's important to realize that volunteers with Lapsits are not just reading to children. They are also modeling the behavior for the parents, who may not have been read to as children themselves.

"We let parents see how we interact positively with their children through reading and books, and then we let them try it out themselves until it begins to feel comfortable."

Lapsits is collaborating with other community organizations, such as Early Head Start and Success by Six among others, and Mansbach is encouraged by the results. "We're definitely meeting some of our goals. Of course, the frustration comes when we lack the funding to do more workshops."

Mansbach is especially concerned about working with foster children since she has seen first hand how unready for kindergarten many foster children are. She hopes for a sustainable funding source so that Lapsits can serve as a catalyst for the community to make Greenville a city that recognizes the importance of early literacy. **LITERACY CHAMPION** Lapsits for Early Literacy is seeking nominations for recognizing an Early Childhood Literacy Champion, to be awarded on Family Literacy Day, Nov. 1, at a special reception at the Greenville Chamber of Commerce. Nominations are due on Oct. 15. Complete guidelines for the application may be downloaded at www.lapsits.org or obtained by calling Peggy Baxter at 292-1133. **WANT MORE?** For more information about Lapsits for Early Literacy, check the Web site, lapsits.org, call 288-7893 or e-mail at info@lapsits.org. Volunteers are needed as readers, literacy mentors for teenage mothers, helpers at special program events and as writers to work with the publicity committee and as grant writers.