

INNOVATIONS: TECHNOLOGY FOR TUTORING

Internet allows time-pressed adults to mentor young reader

By Ann Therese Palmer
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Because Bengi Selcukoglu works 50 hours a week, primarily out of town, the Chicago electrical engineer had trouble finding volunteer work when she moved here four years ago.

Then, 18 months ago, she received an e-mail that solved her problem.

Her employer, the Chicago office of Canadian information technology company CGI-AMS, was soliciting volunteer pen pals for In2Books, an Internet-based reading and writing mentoring program for pupils in 2nd to 5th grade. It's the brainchild of Nina Zolt, a Skokie native and non-practicing lawyer in Washington, D.C.

In2Books matches pupils, including 400 in the Chicago Public Schools, with adult pen pals, primarily recruited by their employers and non-profit organizations.

During the school year, pupils and their pen pals correspond about five books, selected by a committee of children's literature experts, that the pupils and pen pals read and pupils keep.

The adults e-mail their letters to In2Books' Internet portal, where their letters are screened by staffers.

Then the letters are printed and sent to teachers for distribution to the pupils, who respond with hand-written letters, similarly screened, scanned and e-mailed to the adults.

"This is so great," said Selcukoglu, who volunteered immediately. "I'm a big fan of reading. I e-mail my letters late at night, while I'm on the road. The whole package appeals to me."

Selcukoglu is one of about 3,000 volunteer pen pals nationwide who participate in the 6-year-old program, managed by Zolt's Washington-based foundation.

More than 6,000 pupils are enrolled in the program, co-funded by participating school districts, corporations and community grants.

Companies benefit too.

Twenty percent of employees at Lurie Management LLC, a real estate management firm in Chicago, are pen pals, says Gary Wood, vice president of operations.

Employee participation has positively affected Lurie's workplace, Wood says.

"They talk about their pen pals and how good they feel about doing this," he said. "When employees feel good about themselves, they're going to be more productive, more positively engaged. Positive attitude makes for a better work environment."

At America Online, 350 employees are pen-pal volunteers, says Rich D'Amato, community investment vice president at the company's Dulles, Va., headquarters.

"We've got everyone from employees in our call centers to senior executives participating," D'Amato said. "The beauty of this program is it doesn't matter where you are in the hierarchy or geographically. Anyone can participate."

Zolt worked closely with experts in designing the program.

"Research is clear that to have a successful life, you've got to have strong reading, writing and thinking skills, and have caring adults in your life," she said.

Recognizing there weren't enough adults available to volunteer in person, she incorporated an Internet-based solution to enable communication between pupils and mentors.

It allows "even the busiest adult to make a difference in the life of a child," Zolt said.

Pupils enjoy interaction

Local teachers and parents report significant improvements in the reading and writing skills of In2Books pupils.

Two years ago Cynthia Hammond, a Chicago nurse, bought a copy of J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone," a 309-page, age-appropriate chapter book for her son, Reggie, then 9, but he refused to read it.

"He said it was too thick, didn't have any pictures and that he'd already seen the movie," she said.

Recently when Hammond returned from work, she was surprised to find Reggie not only had finished the book in three days, but liked it.

"There was a lot in it that wasn't in the movie," Reggie, a Pirie Elementary School 5th grader, said of the first book in the Harry Potter series.

Hammond credits In2Books for Reggie's change of heart.

"Before, he wouldn't read a book that didn't have cartoons or illustrations," she said. "Now he's very interested in chapter books. And he's constantly talking about his pen pal, a Caucasian woman, who likes mystery books and has interested him in them."

"I really like that he's interacting with someone from a different race and a different culture," Hammond said.

"Reggie goes to a predominantly black school in a predominantly black neighborhood. We live in a diverse world. You can't be successful unless you know how to get along with people from all types of races," Hammond said.

The biggest difference, according to Jennifer Orlandini, Reggie's teacher, is "the way the pupils think about reading books."

"One of our goals is to have pupils connect, using writing, what they've read to their lives," Orlandini said. "At the beginning, I was really pulling them to do this. Now they do it easily."