

Salvation Army program gives gift of literacy

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Photo by MARIE P.

GRADYLizzie McCoy, 8, reads a book during a summer reading program for children at the Greater Springfield Salvation Army on Pearl Street in Springfield. She has made great gains in reading comprehension since she started the program three years ago.

By MARIE P. GRADY

Lizzie McCoy isn't shy when asked to assess her reading skills since entering a summer reading program at the Greater Springfield Salvation Army.

"I'm doing much, much, much, much better," says the 8-year-old. "I came here for like four years, and my Mom wants me to keep going here."



Marie P. Grady

Some day, when Lizzie has finished college, she may remember those who helped her along the way. They include readers of The Republican, whose donations to the Salvation Army's Toy for Joy fund help to fund counselors for this literacy program.

Long after the last Christmas present has been unwrapped, little readers in this program are opening the lasting gift of learning.

Major Linda Jo Perks, a former first-grade teacher, said about 30 children in the program last summer read over 860 books. If that number seems mind boggling, consider this.

When asked how many books she planned to read this day, Lizzie McCoy says, matter of factly, 2 ½.

The summer reading program is offered Monday through Friday, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., from June 30 to Aug. 1 for a price of \$2 a day, thanks to a number of sponsors. It is among several literacy programs offered by the Greater Springfield Salvation Army. Those programs include a volunteer tutoring program to help kids with homework from September to May and monthly family literacy nights for parents during the school year.

Perks, whose husband Thomas Perks is the commanding officer of the Greater Springfield Salvation Army, displays a commanding knowledge of her students. By day two of the program, she knows not only every one of their names, but also the names of their extended families.

The mother of three, including a kindergarten teacher, Perks states the obvious. "This is my passion, so I'll do whatever it takes."

There are small and big gains. Three weeks into this program, she recalls, two 5-year-olds had learned how to read. "You can see the light bulb going off."

Every child in the program is pre- and post-tested and all show great learning gains, she says. The program includes a computer instruction element, in which children listen to books online at www.razkids.com, before reading the book and being quizzed on it. Each child also gets a book to take home each day through the First Book program in which publishers offer books for free.

The office of Major Linda Jo Perks is a treasure trove of these books, taking up much of the available space. But they don't stay there long.

Students like Joy Smith, 10, don't stop reading when the class is over.

"I read when I get home all the time. I'm doing much better in my reading. I'm going to get all As," Smith says. Their parents also are invested in the 3-year-old program, making sure their children get there every day and often participating in family literacy nights during the school year.

The program is among the services offered by the Salvation Army to some 17,000 families a year, including 5,400 through the Toy for Joy program. While the Army still relies largely on its kettle campaign for funding, other private donors include Verizon, the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts, Hasbro, Target, Hampden Bank and Berkshire Bank, according to Commanding Officer Thomas Perks.

For little readers like Ardazan Dennis, 10, the literacy program has sparked a love of learning. On this day, Ardazan is reading "Faces in Far Away Places."

"I learned people live in different places and they have different cultures and different faces," he says.

It will be one of three books he reads that day. Ardazan says his father tells him when to read, but he doesn't have to. "I just like to do it," he says.

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