

## INTRODUCTION

### How the library connects with kids

**A**mong Oak Park citizens' aspirations are those to live in a community with the resources and opportunities for all to be educated and to learn. The Oak Park Public Library is committed to fulfilling those aspirations. That work begins with our youngest citizens and the importance of promoting literacy and reading. To achieve these objectives, the library shares much more than books.

For babies to kids entering kindergarten, the library's age-specific programs, digital resources, and in-person opportunities help to build strong foundations for learning how to read and for learning how to learn. Library literacy experts promote individual discovery and skill building for grade school, middle school, and high school students every day, all year long. Meeting kids where they are — at our three library locations, at daycares, preschools, parks, and before, during, and after school — fosters an excitement and a love for learning.

Learn more about how we empower our community's youth at [oppl.org/news](http://oppl.org/news).



**David Seleb**  
Executive Director  
Oak Park Public Library



ALEXA ROGALS/Staff Photographer

**HUNT FOR WISDOM:** The Holt family gathered at the library Aug. 18 to take part in Zingela Ulwazi, a new program pairing men of color with young boys of color to foster a reading culture. Left to right: David Holt, Grayson, Ethan and Akaya Holt.

# Urging more boys of color into a world of reading

## Male mentors encourage a "hunt for wisdom"

By **CASSANDRA WEST**  
Contributing Reporter

**A**s a library board member, Christian Harris champions reading and readers. He especially wants to see more young boys experience the kinds of pleasure and discoveries he finds in books.

Reading wasn't always easy for him, though. His early experiences were frustrating. "Reading initially was pretty difficult for me," he admits. Around the time he was in the second or third grade, he was struggling with comprehension.

Luckily, his family found a reading specialist "who sat down with me and made sure I understood everything,"

says Harris, 27, an Oak Park and River Forest High School grad and local business owner. Once words on the page began to click for him, he began devouring the Harry Potter series. That turned into a competition with his friends over who could read a Potter book the fastest.

"It was important that I got that comprehension down because in

school you have to read so much," Harris says.

"It's easy to get frustrated and think you're dumb" when you have reading challenges, he adds. And, in a lot of cases, children give up on reading and miss all of its benefits.

That seems more true for boys,

See **READING** on **page 4**

In partnership with



OAK PARK-RIVER FOREST COMMUNITY FOUNDATION



OAK PARK-RIVER FOREST  
Community Foundation

Sponsored by



Making our communities a better place — one child at a time!

# Flurry of library programs grab kids by their interests

From storytime to Quidditch, graphic novels to W.E.B. DuBois

By **CASSANDRA WEST**  
Contributing Reporter

**T**he Oak Park Public Library understands what it takes to get kids to read: engage their interests.

Judging by the number of elementary and middle schoolers who show up every day, whether with parents, school groups or by themselves, the library is developing a community of young readers. From the summer reading program to storytimes and maker labs, OPPL aims to create a well-rounded literacy experience for all young people.

Librarians aren't there to merely help young patrons find a book. They are constantly trying out ways to make the world of books a source of wonder and surprise for young readers. And fun, too.

"We're always trying to find ways to make reading fun and part of a community," says Jose Cruz, middle school services librarian, during an interview in the first-floor children's department.

"You have to have an entry point" to engage their minds.

Cruz sees the library's role as "trying to develop critical thinkers." He, other librarians and community members put in a lot of effort developing programs around that mission.

One such program, for students grades 6-12, is The Living History Project. Local activist Billy Che Brooks leads the program, which started in May, and meets twice a week. Brooks assigns readings on topics like human or civil rights that have included, for example, W.E.B. DuBois' historic petition to the United States. Readings and discussions are designed to help participants cultivate social and critical thinking skills, develop research skills while they read and learn about social movements in the U.S. and gain public speaking experience.

During a recent wide ranging discussion, Brooks told the students, "Listening is the most critical social skill one can have." An elementary school student, attending for the first time, of-



**HARRY SENT ME:** Henry Wright, 9, left, attempts to shoot the ball through the ring against Loyola University student Jessica Anger last Saturday, during a practice game of Quidditch at Scoville Park in Oak Park. (ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

fered up a confession. "I'm a very slow learner when it comes to reading," she said. The comment was met with respect and nods of understanding.

The Living History Project mostly attracts kids who come to the library after school and are hungry for something to do, Cruz says. About a dozen pre-teens and teens are regular participants.

Cruz thinks the just-released "America to Me" documentary film at OPRF could be another entry point "to reading further about certain topics, because [it's about] what kids are experiencing every day. You've got to have an entry point," to draw kids, particularly those who are less inclined toward reading, says Cruz.

When Cruz heard about a 16-year-old Austin student, Kamarion Miller, who had written and self-published his own book, he invited Miller to do a reading and signing at the library. In addition to growing as readers, "it's important for kids to write their own books," he says. And for young people to read works by people their own age.

In the high school services department, librarian Racheal Bild likes to see her job as developing programs that encourage civic engagement. And to that point there are a "lot of things happening in this library," she says. She helped put on an afternoon-long Harry Potter-themed event, "Wizard Rock the Vote," on Aug. 4. In conjunc-

tion with the League of Women Voters, the event included voter registration, Quidditch playing and a Wizard band.

Bild thinks the explosion in comics and graphic novels gives today's visually oriented young readers new opportunities "to construct meaning from images, and they are a super important tool for visual literacy."

"From picture books and easy readers that make use of conventions like speech bubbles and panels (like Elephant and Piggie and Toon Books), readers are discovering comics early and reading straight through the kids section, the tween section, into the teen section and hopefully, eventually, the adult section," Bild says.

Bild and Cruz believe early literacy programs build a strong foundation for a lifetime of reading. Parents, caregivers, teachers each play a role in developing readers, whether it's sharing books, songs or stories as early as possible. When young children hear new words and know how stories are told, the transition to reading books won't be so overwhelming when they start school.

Parents use the library to give their kids that start.

As Karen Stoner, a library assistant, observed, in that last week before the start of the new school year, parents were "coming in like crazy to get library cards for their kindergartners and first-graders."



**ROCK THE VOTE:** The Quidditch event was a partnership of the library and the League of Women Voters to help boost voter registration. (ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)



# Never stop reading to your kids

A lot of science and some magic turns kids into readers

By **CASSANDRA WEST**  
Contributing Reporter

Parents, more often than not, are their child's first reading teacher. All those enjoyable moments reading bedtime stories and paging through picture books make up the first reading lessons as a child takes in new words and phrases and the magic of reading begins to happen.

"Human beings were never born to read," Maryanne Wolf, cognitive neuroscientist and child development expert, writes in her book "Proust and the Squid:

The Story and Science of the Reading Brain." Reading is a human invention that reflects how the brain re-arranges itself to learn something new.

Another cognitive scientist Mark Seidenberg, author of "Language at the Speed of Light" who studies the science of reading, says that how reading is taught places many children at risk of failure, discriminates against poorer kids, and discourages even those who could have become more successful readers.

Those early reading teachers, like one local parent Kate O'Keefe, know that every child comes to reading in

her or his own way. Neither of her two children knew how to read before they started school, but her daughter, 9, picked it up rather easily, she says. Her son, who is 7 and still learning how to read, not as much.

"What I've learned from that, and I think it has very little to do with the fact that he's a boy, but I just have to have a different approach with different kids when it comes to reading."

While O'Keefe didn't have to work on sight words or practicing sounds with her daughter, those exercises have benefited her son. She found that making the reading experience fun and choosing books that "he's into" worked better for him.

O'Keefe, who also is a teacher, has some tips for parents who are introducing their children to books: "Let them read what they want to read," she says. "Follow their interests.

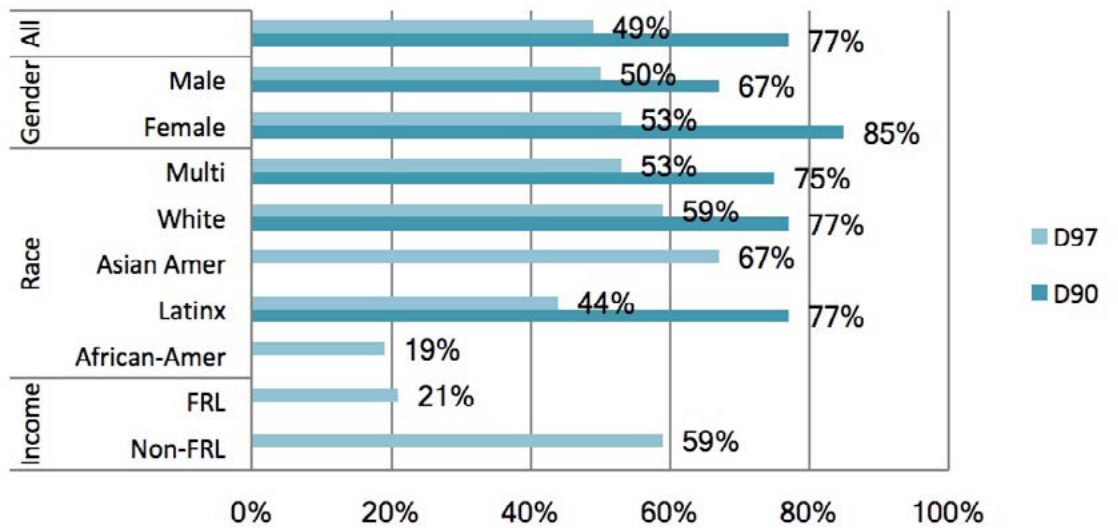
"Sometimes parents quit reading to their children once their children learn how to read," O'Keefe says. "I think it's good to continue reading out loud to your kid. That's how they know their vocabulary. They hear [new] words and more sophisticated language than in books they would pick up themselves."

## Five Stages of Reading Development

- **Emerging pre-reader**  
(typically between 6 months to 6 years old)
- **Novice reader** (typically between 6 to 7 years old)
- **Decoding reader** (typically between 7 - 9 years old)
- **Fluent, comprehending reader**  
(typically between 9 - 15 years old)
- **Expert reader** (typically from 16 years and older).

SOURCE: "PROUST AND THE SQUID: THE STORY AND SCIENCE OF THE READING BRAIN" BY MARYANNE WOLF. HARPER PERENNIAL, 2008.

## Reading - 3rd Grade PARCC 2017



Scores are down from the previous year for both districts and across all demographics.

Given the challenges with the PARCC assessment and the unreliability of the data due to families opting out, NWEA MAP scores will be used by SAY to measure progress going forward.

The PARCC score gaps remain consistent.

Note: Data is not listed for populations of 10 or less students

## Like slime? Here's a book about it

E-Team, library partner to tease out reading interests

By **CASSANDRA WEST**  
Contributing Reporter

After District 97's summer school session ended, 55 students attended another four-week academic program run by the E-Team, an education equity initiative based at the Oak Park Public Library.

"E-Team and D97 bring in the best teachers, all reading specialists to make learning fun and engaging for kids so it's more inquiry based," says Francis Kraft, who runs the program.

Called the Power of Partnerships, the program for second to eighth graders allows students to work in small groups guided by an individual instructor. Students practice language, writing, math problem solving under a personalized plan of instruction. Reading specialists coordinate instruction

and assess progress.

The E-Team worked closely with D97 to target kids in the zero to 25 percentile achievement range, says Kraft.

Carmelita Brown, a Chicago Public School teacher, was one of the Partnership reading specialists. She speaks of an Oak Park fourth grader who "came in with such a negative attitude about reading. She didn't like to read, didn't want anything to do with reading."

After Brown surveyed all of the students and learned this student was interested in fashion, emojis and drama, she introduced the girl to books and other passages related to topics that held her interest. Eventually, the girl told Brown, "I think I'm starting to like reading." Brown told the girl, "You can literally read about anything. Reading isn't only for academics. You read so-



cially. You can read to learn how to make slime," another of the girl's interests.

Ivonne Machuca, who recently completed the reading specialist program at Dominican University and worked in the E-Team programs, says that once you know a child's interest, "find a real-world application to it. Explain how reading can be applied. A lot of kids might not understand why they have to read. That it's not just something they have to do at school."

**READING***continued from page 1*

as indicated by gender disparities in school reading scores. In both Districts 90 and 97, boys significantly lag girls in reading by the time they reach third grade.

Nationwide, research shows that students who do not read proficiently by the end of 3rd grade are four times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school. That fact alone when combined with other research on the importance of early literacy skills has intensified the focus on improving 3rd-grade reading proficiency, according to an Education Commission of the States report.

Disparity in reading scores is also pretty well divided by race, Harris says. For him, that's a concern and a cause he has taken up. He and several other African American adult males in June launched a monthly mentoring event built around reading and exploration aimed at boys in grades kindergarten through 12, though anyone is welcome.

The events take place at the Oak Park Library's main branch on the third Saturday each month. Organizers named it Zingela Ulwazi, a Zulu phrase that means "hunt for wisdom."

"We wanted to have a series of events where minority men show up and youth of color can see men are interested in reading and interested in investing in them as well," Harris says.

The program has the support of Success of All Youth (SAY) and its executive director Linda Francis. "As I looked at challenges we had around literacy, particularly with respect to boys and even more particularly with respect to boys



**WELCOME TO WAKANDA:** Professor Anthony Jackson guided kids in fun experiments to learn about the properties of electricity. He was one of the special guests at Zingela Ulwazi's Black Panther themed electricity workshop. (JENNIFER STIX)

of color, one of the things it was important to address was the need for them to see other men of color promoting this [effort]," Francis says.

Both Francis and Harris want the still-evolving Zingela Ulwazi to be a

sustainable and community-based approach to encouraging reading. "Not just reading for the sake of raising test scores," Francis says. "But reading for community and cultural basis—the hunt for wisdom."

About 20 or so mostly elementary school-age boys (some girls and parents, too) have been showing up. Francis says the mentors decided to go with the popular Black Panther comic book series and movie as a theme for the summer events. The program will be retooled for fall, she says.

At the July meeting, Mark Willis, an OPRF alum who plays a warrior in the blockbuster "Black Panther" movie, did a dramatic reading then talked with the group about the importance of reading. Other activities get folded in to broaden the experience around four categories: arts & culture, social justice, geography & language, and science & technology, Harris says. Participants have designed letters from the Wakandan alphabet and done some 3D printing.

Another Zingela Ulwazi mentor is Doug Dixon, a community leader who works with local groups on bridging social/cultural divides. He hopes that over time the young wisdom hunters come away with a deeper love of reading and a love of learning. "It's

a good thing to put an image in the minds of young men in the community that black men are engaged in social justice, technology and education issues and it's not necessarily uncool to think and read," he says.

As for library board member Harris, he wants to see more black youth checking out more books. He thinks that because of tablet and smartphones, kids today are probably already reading a lot of words. It shouldn't be that hard to get them engaged with literature that will benefit and stimulate them intellectually, he says.

"If we can just shift that and get them to read books, it would good for the community" and their social and civic development as well.

*Distribution of information by a community group in accordance with District 97 policy does not imply, directly or indirectly, that the group's program(s), event(s) and/or service(s) is sanctioned, sponsored or endorsed by the district, the Board of Education or the superintendent.*



Left to right: Members of Zingela Ulwazi are Christian Harris, Doug Dixon, Dr. Orson Morrison, Kamau "Maui" Jones, Daryl Thompson. Not pictured: Jose Cruz, Kellen Love