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## GVSU Community: Story Time in the Heights

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# Story Time in the Heights

By Barbara Lubic, GVSU Faculty

*“Every week my kids are so excited to come to Story Time! They love the books and the ice cream, but what makes me the most excited is that they look forward to the books the most!”*

*“This program is the highlight of our summers! While summer reading loss is a real thing, books and ice cream helps maintain an enthusiasm and desire to read more often with new material. It also connects the community and demonstrates to our children the joy and support of literacy for all ages. This program builds our home library so books are an everyday part of living.”*

These are two of the over 300 comments that were written about our sixth summer of Story Time in the Heights reading program.

Story Time began in 2008 as a simple idea. My 4 year old daughter and I enjoyed going to our neighborhood ice cream shop, Sundaes in the Heights. During our many visits we got to know the owner, Barbara Bush, well. At that time, Barbara wanted to provide some fun promotional events at her shop. Being a lover of books and reading, I suggested the concept of story time and I offered to read one night a week.

That summer, many negative things began to happen in our community. Statewide unemployment was the highest in the country and our neighborhood was greatly impacted by this. Many families in our neighborhood were struggling financially. Crime was also increasing in our area and

the green grass the princess slept, and in her dreams she was

*“The Grand Rapids Public Schools enrollment was at a record low and the reported tests scores were bleak.”*

*“The first year we grew to over 250 kids per night.”*

breaking and entering and shootings were at an all-time high. The Grand Rapids Public Schools enrollment was at a record low and the reported tests scores were bleak. Reading scores were falling rather than increasing. Our community as a whole was suffering.

I approached Barbara and asked what she thought about hosting a family friendly literacy night: an event that would bring our neighborhood together to celebrate the positives within our community. This idea quickly turned

into a plan that included free ice cream and a free book for any child age 0-12. Included in the evening would be readers to engage children in a variety of family friendly stories. The goal was to provide a way for families who were struggling to attend a fun event together. Our hope was that bringing people together from the various areas of

our neighborhood would help the crime in our vicinity to decrease. In addition, getting books in children's hands would help promote family reading, encourage kids to read and work to prevent the summer slide of reading abilities in school aged kids. Having readers for the kids would increase their interest in reading and encourage families to read together at home.

To turn this plan into a reality, I approached Dean Collins, the Grand Valley State University College of Education Dean at the time. I inquired whether the College of Education might be interested in sponsoring this community event. Dean Collins agreed and I put together a budget for the summer. It was decided that we would host this event every Tuesday in June, July and August. When creating the initial budget, I aimed high to make sure we could cover our expenses. In that budget, I planned on 50 kids per night.

***“Results overwhelmingly indicate that we have created a family tradition in the Alger Heights neighborhood that has promoted the joy of reading and increased community connections through the years!”***

On our first night, June 3, 2009 we had 32 families for a total of 51 kids. We continued to grow every week! The first year we grew to over 250 kids per night. By our 5th year, the summer of 2014, we averaged 400 kids per night! Since that first night we have given away just under 27,000 books in our 6 years of story time. Although the ice cream shop has changed ownership four times in six years, this summer we had 37 families who participated for the sixth straight year.

At the beginning of each summer we have every family register. We ask them to complete a survey at summer's end. Results overwhelmingly indicate that we have created a family tradition in the Alger Heights neighborhood that has promoted the joy of reading and increased community connections through the years!

The goal is to continue Story Time in the Heights for many years to come. As is typical for many neighborhood projects, funding is the largest challenge. We are always working on means to fund this event.

*“Our children look forward to this all week and were super excited at the beginning of the summer to be able to do this again, my nine-year-old has had difficulty with focusing on reading and this has kept him interested while school was out. He has read over 100 books! Our four-year-old has now moved from singing her ABC's to recognizing letters and some words this is all thanks to you and Story Time in the Heights. Thank you!”*

*“What a wonderful way to bring people in the community together! Kids interact with each other and are always excited to get a new book and be read to. We love supporting local businesses and enjoy meeting new people in our community.”*

If you are interested in participating as a volunteer or donating to Story Time in the Heights, visit the College of Education website at [www.gvsu.edu/coe](http://www.gvsu.edu/coe) for more information.