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## **Creating a Vibrant Author Visit Partnership: *Giffen Memorial Elementary School & First Presbyterian Church of Albany, New York***

*by Alexis O'Neill*

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All it takes for a school-based author & illustrator program to begin is to have someone on board who is passionate about books, book creators and kids.

Recently, I found out about a partnership formed between the First Presbyterian Church of Albany, New York and Giffen Memorial Elementary School, a Title 1 school that is the largest in the city. Under the leadership of Debra Fagans, the church initiated Author/Illustrator Day for the students that is about to celebrate its fourth year.

The more Debbie and I talked, the more I realized that this Author/Illustrator program could be replicable in other communities. She offered details on how the program began that might prove useful to other organizations exploring this kind of community partnership.

### **SVE: How did Author/Illustrator Day come about?**

**DEBRA FAGANS, Chairperson, Author/Illustrator Day.** A group in our church (First Presbyterian Church of Albany) decided that it needed to be active in closing the gap between the rich and the poor. Giffen Memorial Elementary School, a Title 1 school (573 students, Pre-K to 6), was suggested because they were in a low income neighborhood and in corrective action by the state at that time. We began tutoring at the school and eventually many others from the congregation joined in.

When plans to celebrate the congregation's 250th anniversary were being made, I proposed an Author/Illustrator Day to the school for our "bodacious outreach" project for that year modeled after one I had seen in Redwood City, California. The school liked this idea. Work began in 2012 to plan for the 2013 anniversary year.

**SVE: What's the main objective of the Author/Illustrator program?**

**DF:** The main objectives are to promote literacy and the love of reading, and to put books into the hands of our students.

**SVE: Who acts as the primary liaison for the First Presbyterian Church? The school?**

**DF:** As the chairperson of our church's Outreach & Mission Committee and presently chair of the Author/Illustrator Team, I am the primary liaison from the church. Mrs. Jasmine Brown, the school principal, and Mr. Derek Johnson, the Volunteer Coordinator are the primary liaisons from the school.

**SVE: In addition to giving kids a chance to meet published authors and illustrators, what's another important feature of your program?**

**DE:** The children at Giffen Elementary do not have many books in their homes. For the Author/Illustrator program, students automatically receive one free book, and teachers created a reward system where students can "earn" up to two additional books. The books are funded by our congregation.

**SVE: What is the cost of the Author/Illustrator program?**

**DF:** The cost was approximately \$5,000 the first year and \$5,400 the second year. This included the purchase of books for each classroom and the library in the fall for the teachers to use, the purchase of books for the children to pick out on Author/Illustrator Day, refreshments, craft supplies, book bags, decorations, and programs. In the first year, local authors donated their time. In the second year, a local benefactor supplied honorariums for the authors which brought the entire budget up to about \$6,500.

**SVE: Do you have fundraising plans for the future?**

**DF:** We are working on a plan to raise money – maybe sell ads for our program, find grants, etc. The goal of the church is to help the school take over the entire project at some time. I also hope to find a co-chair from the school's staff to help move in that direction.

**SVE: How do you find authors for the program?**

**DF:** I work primarily with the children's book contact at our local bookstore, The Little Book House. She has been a great help and made suggestions from her knowledge of local authors. I have also attended the annual dinner of the Children's Literature Connection to meet and speak with authors. Authors also make suggestions of other authors to try. I contact them and explain the program.

**SVE: How are teachers involved in the program? What do they do on the**

### **planning team? How often do they meet?**

**DF:** In the first year there were 12 people on the planning team. Representatives from the school included the principal, the librarian, the school volunteer coordinator, plus a local public librarian who visits the school. In the second year, we had 18 on our team, including 5 teachers from the school. The whole team met about once a month, meeting more often as the day drew near.

The teachers were a great addition - a vital part of the planning process, they contributed ideas, and carried out any activities that went on in the school. For example, they suggested writing projects connected to each grade level, made the welcome poster for Author/Illustrator Day, made wrist bands for students to wear home to make sure parents knew of the date, and designed the system by which the students gained points to earn books. (Each student automatically receives 1 free book, but can earn up to two more.) This calculation was totally done by the teachers as part of their new Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies program that the school had adopted.

### **SVE: How many volunteers involved? What kind of tasks do they do?)**

**DF:** In the first year we had 49 volunteers from our congregation and about 5 from the school. The second year we had 44 from the church and 24 from the school. The event is held on a Saturday.

The Friday duties include:

- Pick up books, deliver to school, count & label books
- Decorate refreshment area, presentation rooms, bookselling/signing area, craft rooms
- Post student writing and artwork on walls

The Saturday duties include:

- Hosting authors
- Traffic control
- Assisting with refreshments, bookselling, and signing
- Doing clean-up (which includes a fresh group of volunteers)
- Cataloging, packing and returning of unsold books to bookstore.

### **SVE: What advice would you give to someone who might like to do the same or similar program?**

**DF:** It took a while before the school really understood what we were trying to do and get behind it completely. But when teachers got on board in the second year, we doubled our attendance. So keep at it. Don't give up. You need a lot of people to make it happen,

but know that the effort is worth it. The look of joy on the children's faces radiates for a long time.

**SVE: Do you think that this program could be replicated other schools across the country?**

**DF:** Why not?

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