

# The Keller Magazine JUNE 26, 2015

## Community Storehouse continues its summer quest to reach reluctant readers



Tracey Hill directs the QUEST Summer Enrichment Program which serves 108 struggling readers in kindergarten through second grade from the Keller, Northwest and Carroll school districts. | **Joyce Marshall** - Star-Telegram

BY SANDRA ENGELLAND

For many youngsters, the prospect of devoting a big chunk of summer to academic pursuits is a tough sell, even when words like “camp” and “fun” are thrown into the mix. Organizers with Community Storehouse’s seven-year-old summer literacy program remain undeterred,

however, and each year, coax about 100 reluctant readers to join the QUEST Summer Enrichment Program at Westlake Academy – earning a fair share of converts and success stories along the way.

Scheduled July 9-31 this year, the special camp targets low-income students who have completed kindergarten, first and second grades in the Keller, Northwest and Carroll school districts.

“By the time children reach the third grade, they have to be able to comprehend what they read,” says Barbara Board, Community Storehouse executive director. “They are learning to read through the second grade. Starting in third, they’re reading to learn.”

Tracey Hill, QUEST program director, agrees. “We focus on early literacy because if they don’t get literacy skills early, they never catch up.”

Studies show that low-income students lose two to three months of reading growth over the summer. But, instead of losing ground when school is not in session, kids involved in QUEST can gain academic strength.

In addition to one-on-one and small group reading instruction, the program includes fitness, art and science activities. Many days also include special visitors such as firefighters from the Westlake Fire Department who show off a big fire truck, a pilot and crew from Bell Helicopter landing on-site in one of their helicopters, riders performing bicycle stunts and ranchers bringing in miniature horses “Itty” and “Bitty.”

All the guests talk about how reading applies to their jobs and hobbies, from manuals and rules to instructions for health and safety.

QUEST campers also get breakfast, lunch and snacks each day and are sent home on the weekends with a supply of kid-friendly foods. The purpose of this, organizers say, is to prevent hunger from being an obstacle to learning.

While fun and food are important parts of the daily agenda, the camp’s central focus is literacy and improving each child’s reading skills. For the first two days, teachers assess kids’ reading levels. After that, instruction begins with small-group and one-on-one reading, literacy games and more. Every day, each child gets to pick out a book to keep, with the understanding that a parent or family member will read the book aloud that evening.

“During the program, parents agree to read with them every day,” Hill explains. “That’s just enormous in helping them identify skills and gaps.”

## A Quiet Evolution

In the beginning, QUEST was known simply as the Summer Reading Program and was located in an old storefront in Roanoke that served a lot of functions for the Community Storehouse.

Hill says the Westlake mayor visited the literacy camp, saw a need for a better facility and invited the Community Storehouse to use Westlake Academy – a spacious campus with a gym, playground and practice fields that give campers plenty of room to spread out.

A few years ago, officials changed the name to QUEST Summer Enrichment Program because it goes beyond reading by offering other learning activities.

With a staff that includes 15 certified teachers and 30 volunteers, QUEST aims to serve 108 children each year. Every class gets one adult volunteer and one teen volunteer. Students are recommended to the program by their schools and the cost to parents is \$20 – with that fee refunded if the child attends most sessions.

Bus service is provided from Title 1 campuses (those where at least 40 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunches) in the Keller and Northwest districts. Meanwhile, teachers perform assessments at the end of the program and meet with parents to talk about how their children did and what they can do at home to continue the progress. They also pass along information to the child's school and next teacher.

"It's just a super program," Hill says. "There's not another one like it that I know of. We have good, research-based practices, the kids improve and they have fun."

Board says that kids often express reluctance about giving up summer leisure to attend camp, but by the time the session draws to a close, they don't want it to end.

## High Impact

Hill says all of her teachers from last year are returning this summer, and many of the volunteers come back year after year. She has been part of the program since it started, first as a teacher and later, as the director.

"I can't imagine not being involved in it," she says.

Like many of her students, Hill is no stranger to challenges.

Now in her 18th year as an educator, she became a teacher at age 38. She says she was a single mom working in the banking industry when she collected her stock options and severance pay – leaving her job to finish her college degree. The money ran out just as she landed her dream job: teaching first grade.

“I always wanted to be a teacher, and I wanted to be a good role model for my daughter,” she says.

A classroom teacher for nine years, then a reading specialist for eight, Hill serves as an instructional coach now, helping both teachers and students. And, not one to leave well enough alone, the 56-year-old is finishing a master’s degree at the University of Texas at Arlington in education curriculum and instruction, with an emphasis on – of course – literacy studies.

Beside its impact and popularity on both students and teachers, QUEST has a roster of volunteers who happily testify to its many rewards in their lives.

Seventeen-year-old Hannah Bumgarner, for instance, has volunteered every summer since she was 13. She enjoyed it so much that she got involved with the Community Storehouse as part of the charity’s Junior Board of Directors. Earlier this year, she was elected president.

“I love working with the kids and everything involved,” Bumgarner says. “I feel like I’m really making an impact. Some kids may think, ‘I’m just 17. What can I do?’ The answer is, ‘You can do a lot.’”

Now a student at Westlake Academy, she says the experience has helped her formulate her goals for the future. When she graduates next spring, she’d like to go to college to major in international studies and minor in linguistics. Bumgarner dreams of going to developing countries to help establish schools.

“Educating children will change so much,” she adds. “This experience kind of opened the door for me to see how I could be part of making education accessible for children all over the world.”

## Building Blocks and Bridges

Board says QUEST exemplifies the primary objective of Community Storehouse: helping children in need get the best possible education. This summer, the charity will pilot a similar program at Northwest's J.C. Thompson Elementary in Haslet — a summer book club designed to help students continue their interest and progress in reading.

But QUEST remains special in its focus on struggling students. For Board, reaching reluctant readers is personal. Her own son, now grown, had trouble learning to read, and she says his struggles — and hers — have given her great empathy for the challenges kids and their families face.

"In addition to the educational component, we're building self-esteem," she says. "We're getting the child excited about going back to school instead of dreading it."

Hill concurs, adding that QUEST provides a bridge of support for kids by improving children's attitudes and confidence levels about reading. "They feel more confident about reading aloud in class and confident about themselves. They can start the next school year more comfortable with reading."

## NOMINATE A HERO NEXT DOOR

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Have an interesting colleague, neighbor or friend who quietly specializes in making Keller a better place for others? Nominate them for our regular feature, "Hero Next Door." Send nominations to [sengelland@star-telegram.com](mailto:sengelland@star-telegram.com) with "Hero Next Door" in the subject line. Write a short description about why this special individual should be featured, and include a photo if you have one. Be sure to include the nominee's email, address and/or phone number as well as your own contact information.

## WANT TO HELP?

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Donate canned tuna, beans and soups or other kid-friendly nonperishables like Easy Mac and granola bars to the Community Storehouse Food Pantry, open 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 12073 Katy Road. Donate gently used or new children's books at the main office, 4460 Keller Hicks Road. Go online at [communitystorehouse.org](http://communitystorehouse.org) to find the most requested titles.

Got time? Volunteers for QUEST are needed to assist teachers, serve food, clean up and help with the drop off and pickup of children. For more information, call 817-431-3340.



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