

Beyond the Book: An Initiative in Literacy

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Wilkinson Family Servant Scholars Program

Foreword

The Wilkinson Family Servant Scholars Program prepares the next generation of servant-leaders by linking the college's brightest students with community leaders and mentors so that they can study local needs—and decide how to best meet them. While living as part of a community, each student is engaged in active learning and service through individual internships at local agencies. The Servant Scholars' senior year involves a collaborative capstone project addressing a need that the group identifies from their junior-year service. The capstone project culminates in a Servant Scholars Colloquium presented to the campus and community near the end of the program's second year. The report below is evidence of their work during the 2019-2020 academic year.

Abstract

Around the world, countries are investing in the reality that a good education system leads to increased economic activity and social values. As a foundational base for the education system, literacy skills are incredibly important for youths to develop, as being literate is the first step to gain more knowledge independently. For many years, Troup County, Georgia has worked in various ways to improve the literacy of adults and children. As an organization of service-minded college students, we decided to use our Servant Scholar senior project to support the Troup County School System (TCSS). Our main literacy initiative, named the Beyond the Book Initiative, worked in cooperation with the TCSS, community organizations, and the local government to provide literary resources for the citizens of Troup County. We improved the landscape of Troup County by implementing literary tools on sidewalks, helping parents teach their children about colors, numbers, and shapes in an engaging and interactive way. We entered classrooms in key schools with the lowest childhood literacy rates and served as resources to the students to read and engage with their curiosity and will to learn. We created literacy programs within the public library that engaged young children of the community and improved upon their will to learn and need to interact with education. We also put books in the hands of educators, students, and adults who wanted to help children with no books in their homes. Instead of handing out books to everyone for free, we sold books at extremely discounted rates of 5 cents per book. We followed the principles explained by Robert Lupton (2012) in his book, *Toxic Charity*, that those in need must be allowed the ownership and dignity that comes with assuming responsibility for their own development. We partnered with preexisting literacy programs, helping with smaller projects such as dictionary distribution and little free libraries. Finally, we finished the Beyond the Book project during the COVID-19 epidemic, sponsoring an online reading program. These measures impacted Troup County on a micro and macro level, encouraging a proactive approach towards fostering literacy in the LaGrange and Troup County area.

Introduction

With the motto of "Create Dangerously," the Wilkinson Family Servant Scholars Program believes that the LaGrange community could benefit from combining forces with LaGrange College to promote service through servant leadership. Using the philosophy of servant leadership,

developed by Robert Greenleaf in his book *The Servant as Leader*, encourages Scholars to function while valuing assisting individuals more than the power associated with leading.

In order to "create dangerously," each Cohort finds a passion and a need within the community of LaGrange and builds relationships to facilitate change. As the Cohort of 2020,

we were able to find a need and passion for working with the next generation. As we sat down to discuss the community's needs, we brought in community leaders to express their concerns, what they believed would benefit the community the most, and methods to foster development. After listening to a few key speakers and hearing the low statistics for reading on grade level at the elementary school level, our Cohort of 2020 decided upon childhood literacy as our target.

One initiative that had already taken off within LaGrange was Groundwork, a campaign built to fight low literacy rates within Troup County. The community did this by bringing public awareness to the strikingly low percentages of children who could read on grade level. According to the Georgia Milestones Assessment Test, only 35% of Troup County third grade students are on grade level in English Language Arts (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). After hearing of the need, we researched why students in Troup County were struggling to read on grade level and the socioeconomics behind that statistic.

One of the leading books on literacy, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*, cites that there is a 30-million-word deficit between children of poverty and those of affluence (Hart & Risley, 1995). This implies that children in poverty are specifically at an educational disadvantage, having been raised while hearing fewer words, into the millions, as opposed to children raised in a higher socio-economic class. Local non-profit leader Sherri Brown reported this about children in poverty in Troup County:

There are 33% of children in Troup County that live at or below the federal poverty level. There are a lot more that live in what we would consider low income homes that aren't making it. This affects how a child may come to school or why a parent can't make the parent-teacher conference. (The LaGrange Daily News, 2018)

According to Groundwork, 11% of elementary students in Troup County missed at least 15 days of school last year (Bearden & Tilley, 2019). Missing class also interferes with children who are already disadvantaged. We determined that in order to target a poverty-stricken area, assisting them towards reading on grade level, we had to reach them on their own terms. As a cohort, we decided on multiple initiatives to focus on throughout the year. One project was a mobile bookstore, selling books for five cents in areas and neighborhoods where we believed children would most benefit from the store.

According to research, teacher quality is the most important school-related factor influencing student achievement (Rice, 2003). Based on this, we also decided to enter into the school system to assist teachers with their students, helping to read with one-on-one attention. Because the Troup County school system was too large to tackle every elementary school, we decided to focus on the two elementary

Table 1

Georgia Milestones 2018-2019 Statewide Scores: Grade 3 English Language Arts Assessment

School Name	English Language Arts						
	# Tested	% BL	% DL	% PL	% DGL	% DL & Above	% PL & Above
West Point Elementary School	48	27.1	37.5	31.3	4.2	72.9	35.4
Long Cane Elementary School	67	32.8	26.9	32.8	7.5	67.2	40.3
Hollis Hand Elementary School	104	18.3	26.9	36.5	18.3	81.7	54.8
Franklin Forest Elementary	110	40.0	26.4	25.5	8.2	60.0	33.6
Hogansville Elementary School	65	44.6	27.7	23.1	4.6	55.4	27.7
Ethel W. Kight Elementary School	100	42.0	35.0	22.0	1.0	58.0	23.0
Clearview Elementary School	107	60.7	24.3	12.1	2.8	39.3	15.0
Hillcrest Elementary School	56	7.1	21.4	39.3	32.1	92.9	71.4
Rosemont Elementary School	72	15.3	29.2	31.9	23.6	84.7	55.6
Berta Weathersbee Elementary School	40	70.0	25.0	5.0	0.0	30.0	5.0

Note. BL = Beginning Learner, DL = Developing Learner, PL = Proficient Learner, DGL = Distinguished Learner.

Adapted from "Spring 2019 Georgia Milestones End-of-Grade Assessment - Grade 3 - School Level - July 26, 2019" by The Georgia Department of Education, 2019.

schools with the lowest reading levels, targeting the third-grade level. A detailed list of the elementary school literacy rates can be found in Table 1.

The third grade is a critical point in a child's educational process, as children learn to read until the third grade, whereas afterward, the system prioritizes reading to learn (Feister, 2010). Without knowing how to read properly at grade level efficiency, children will falter during the remainder of their education. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, children who cannot read on grade level by the third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers are (Feister, 2010).

In moving forward with our initiative, we chose to assist Ethel Kight Elementary School and Berta Weathersbee Elementary School. According to the 2019 Georgia Milestones Test scores: English Language Arts, these two schools had the lowest percent of 3rd graders who could read on grade level in Troup County (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). Berta Weathersbee had 5% of 3rd graders reading on grade level, and Ethel Kight had 23% (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). These staggering statistics were the driving force behind our initiative and passion for influencing the next generation, as we felt a strong desire to enhance their learning through education, literacy, in order to impact their overall future in the Troup County school system.

Review of the Literature

Childhood literacy is a priority to Troup County. Education is a societal backbone that translates to several economic and social schemes (Al-Shuaibi, 2014). It is

important to teach children to read and write early because by the end of first grade, children begin to experiment with letters and the alphabet, demonstrating phonemic awareness, recognizing phonics and sounds, and spelling words by sound and sight (Gentry, 1997).

The Reading Strategies Book by Jennifer Serravallo helps individuals find methods to teach students how to read. Each strategy is supported by research and contains added suggestions for adaptation dependent on each reader. As the Cohort of 2020, we were faced with finding methods to encourage literacy with a diverse population of students, often simultaneously. Our weekly readings at the LaGrange Memorial Library relate to Serravallo's book, as Serravallo gives much insight on how to excel in that circumstance. According to Serravallo, "Engage your mind by asking questions as you read. In fiction, you might ask, 'What comes next? Why did the character do that?' In nonfiction, you might ask questions about the topic. Read on to answer your questions." (Serravallo, 2015, p. 59). These strategies have become a great asset for us while reading to children, supplying methods to keep the children engaged during readings. Serravallo's book is organized by goals. These goals are engagement, print work, fluency, and comprehension. From comprehension, the goals break down into learning the narrative of each story, along with main ideas, vocabulary, and themes. Each goal also contributes to specific reading strategies.

Concerning this connection, Diane McGuinness's book *Growing a Reader from Birth* explores each part of a child's development, as early as a baby's prenatal period, or six to nine months of gestation, and as mature as five years old. McGuinness states that understanding language is critical in the progression of literacy. *Growing a Reader from Birth* provides effective learning methods and conceptualizes a child's developmental stages. McGuinness explains the neurological background of a child's development, something that we lacked an educational background in. We did preemptively understand that some children process language differently than the majority do; therefore, we realized the need to focus on children who lacked vocabulary development, based upon the quantity of the words they heard in everyday life.

The guidelines in the previous book were similar to those presented in *Early Literacy Storytimes @ Your Library* by Pamela Martin-Díaz and Saroj Ghoting. The library's role in helping children learn key literacy skills cannot be overstated. This book is a guide on partnering with local libraries, teaching the importance of teaching, and paving the way for informative lesson plans. The book is divided into three parts: Learning It, Doing It, and Keeping It Going. The first part, Learning It, establishes the goal of the book and explains the research behind early-learning literacy. The second part, Doing It, consists of sample story times for all different age groups. The third part, Keeping It Going, embarks

on the process of assessing story times for effectiveness and details other steps to promoting early literacy activities in local libraries. The following passage explains more:

"The early literacy perspective asserts that reading readiness starts at birth, when the parent or caregiver begins talking with the baby. Adherents now believe that experiences throughout the early years affect the development of literacy. Failing to give children literacy experiences until they are school age can severely limit the reading and writing levels they ultimately attain." (Ghoting and Martin-Díaz, 2005, pg. 6)

As the Cohort of 2020, we encouraged parents to read to their children, as that plays a critical role of inestimable importance in laying the foundation for learning to read. Parents should informally teach preschool children about reading and writing by reading aloud to them, discussing stories and events, encouraging them to learn letters and words, and teaching them about the world around them. These practices help prepare children for success in reading.

In the works of *Scribble Scrabble*, Daniel Meier describes moments of literacy teaching that reveal important intersections among development, literacy, and diversity (Meier, 2000). Meier offers methods to unite developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive literacy practices. The book presents detailed portraits of children learning to make sense of literacy during their childhood years. Included are conversations with children, parents, and teachers about how they view literacy. The conversations highlight the important role that these beliefs and values play in literacy learning (Meier, 2000).

The first section of the book provides background on the teacher's role as developing appropriate and culturally responsive literacy practices. *Scribble Scrabble* especially gave us potent information on how to create strategic educational plans for Ethel Kight and Berta Weathersbee. Since we were not certified as teachers, we were able to reference plans from the book. The second section describes how to teach children, connecting development and diversity in their literacy learning with artwork, writing, and other creative measures. The last section describes and discusses the widening circles of literacy teaching and learning. This includes ways to strengthen existing school literacy practices by including family voices and perspectives within their children's education. The book ended with reflections on the continuing search for common ground between developmentally appropriate practice and culturally responsive teaching.

Similar to the previous book, Susan B. Neuman's, Carol Copple's, and Sue Bredekamp's book *Learning to Read and Write* illustrates the importance of learning to read and write in adolescence. It consists of three sections, the first being "The Position." This section specifies background research

performed during the book and different methods proven to increase reading in young children. A key component of this section is that a child's development with reading and writing must be estimated and built upon, noting that no teaching method or approach will be the same for all individuals (pg. 8-10). The second section is "Readers and Writers in the Making," and it speaks upon the power and pleasure of literacy, the environment a child is in, the importance of language development, building knowledge and comprehension, knowledge of print, phonological awareness, and letters and words. One technique expressed in this section is instituting a mailbox within the home or classroom for a child to interact with (pg.44). Writing letters to other people and communicating with them in this way increases a child's pleasure for reading and writing, as well as encourages them to keep doing so. The third section, named "Ensuring Children's Reading and Writing Success," takes a look at what the reader could personally do to promote literacy. This section notes that readers should perform assessments to monitor a child's literacy learning, periodically changing assessment measures (pg. 104).

In the next book, Robert Flesch details how he was inspired to write *Why Johnny Can't Read* while tutoring a middle school child named Johnny. In this, Flesch explains that the best way to teach a child how to read is through teaching phonics, since learning the sounds of letter combinations allows children to sound out unfamiliar words. Though this is an older resource, we appreciated the book's approach to phonics. A similar approach to phonics is also supported in *The Next Step Forward in Word Study and Phonics*, a book published in 2019 by Jan Richardson and Michèle Dufresne.

Beyond the Book Initiative

Our Daily Bread Soup Kitchen

Our Daily Bread is not one of the initiatives started by the Cohort of 2020; however, it is an important part of the Servant Scholar learning experience. The first Servant Scholar Cohort noticed an important need within the LaGrange, a need met by every cohort has carried on since its start. The project, called Our Daily Bread, began in February of 2013, when the original Scholars noticed that LaGrange had accessible soup kitchens for every weekday, except for Fridays. This inspired them to open their own soup kitchen, running on Fridays from 11a.m. to 1p.m. Our Daily Bread is operated out of the LaGrange's Broad Street Church of Christ, which is located at 408 Broad St, LaGrange, GA 30240. As current Scholars, we used the church's kitchen and supply the food, plates, and drinks for the soup kitchen. To maintain the kitchen, we shopped at local discount food markets and Walmart, as well as collected food donations from the local community and LaGrange College. Our Daily Bread is unique from other food-based missions because after Scholars finish cooking the meal, they eat with the people they're serving. This allows for ample

fellowship, helping us, as Scholars, to build community and foster relationships.

During COVID-19, Our Daily Bread was able to adapt to its climate. Due to social distancing policies, we made packages for guests to safely retrieve. Each package, having multiple sandwiches, was set individually on a clean table so that the guests could easily collect their food and follow safe COVID-19 protocol.

Before COVID-19 was present in the Troup County community, we started instituting the help of the visitors in setting up and cleaning after eating. We also implemented book giveaways during the Beyond the Book project, to combine our 2019-2020 project with the longstanding successes of Our Daily Bread. The Our Daily Bread project has been the longest-running project in the Wilkinson Family Servant Scholar Program's history and has continued to leave a lasting impact on the city of LaGrange. Our Daily Bread was not one of the specific ideas created by this Servant Scholar class but is and will be continued by all Servant Scholars who pass through the program.

Library Reading Program

In attempts to cater to the Hillside community's literacy rates, we began a reading program at the LaGrange Memorial Library. This allowed us to gather data, foster literacy growth, and form meaningful relationships. We also knew that the LaGrange Memorial Library was constantly populated with many children who fit their target audience. To begin formulating the reading program, we visited similar programs that the Library already offered. We used these pre-existing programs to help develop their ideas and decide what we wanted to do during our program. Kate Chambers, the Youth Services Coordinator at LaGrange Memorial Library, was very helpful while we were in their initial phases of this project. We met with her at the library, talked with her about what times might be best for their program, and collaborated on providing craft supplies to use during their program. She was a vital piece of the puzzle, and her support helped us turn our program into a success.

When the library reading program began, there were fewer children in attendance than we had predicted. After a few weeks of determining the programming, we decided to change the time of the readings, moving it later by thirty minutes. This vastly improved the number of children in attendance, as it allowed for students to arrive at the library without having to rush.

The library reading program eventually began at 3:30 p.m. on Mondays, usually lasting an hour. The program was split into two parts: reading and crafts. The readings consisted of three different books that were relevant to current events and topics, such as seasonal books or positive topics. The crafts also mimicked the same topic that the books covered.

As the Cohort of 2020, we used many resources to guide the structure of the library reading program, one of which

was *Early Literacy Storytimes @ Your Library: Partnering with Caregivers for Success*. We used many methods listed in this book to help plan programs. The following paragraph informed us on specific learning styles to cater to:

The traditional storytime already touches a few learning styles. The musical learner enjoys the songs and finger plays, the linguistic learner is thriving with the word sounds in picture books, the kinesthetic learner is on the edge of his rug waiting for the movement song or activity, and the spatial learner has her crayons sharpened in anticipation of the craft activity. The naturalist learner thrives on the many stories that include animals and the outdoors. (Ghoting and Martin-Díaz, 2004, pg. 42)

Using this knowledge, we involved examples of each type of learning in many of our programs. Nine out of the 18 programs included naturalist stories, all of the programs included crafts suitable for both kinesthetic and spatial learners, and each book reading included stimulating questions aimed at linguistic learners. However, due to the quieter nature of the library, we sang fewer songs than other similar learning programs used.

In terms of attendance data, we had two different average attendance rates. Overall, we saw 88 children in 18 weeks of library programming. Before switching to the 3:30 p.m. time slot, we had 7 weeks of programming with a total of 12 students in attendance, leading to an average of fewer than 2 students per program. After changing to the 3:30 p.m. time slot, we had 76 students attend the remaining 11 programs, yielding an average of almost 7 students per program. We are aware that the increase in attendance was also related to better advertising and program consistency, but the time change was

influential enough to demand two separate estimates, as grouping all library sessions in the same estimate would yield a total estimate of fewer than 5 students per program, which seemed unrepresentative of the program. A detailed attendance chart can be found in Table 2.

As Scholars, we had many fond experiences while conducting the library reading program. The children were enthusiastic about learning and often came ready to socialize. One of the Scholars had a remarkable experience with a 3rd-grade student, registering her for a library card and helping her check out her first library book. The 3rd-grade student teared up by experiencing this newfound freedom and spent the rest of her time at the library picking books with us. Another positive moment came during a simple craft activity, where one student wrote a detailed thank-you card for us, thanking us for teaching him how to read. Afterwards, the student avidly attended each library reading program for the rest of the semester.

Elementary School Readings

When we began our research on literacy in Troup County, we began to realize that the numbers were staggeringly low for students who could read on a 3rd-grade level. The 2019 Georgia Milestones Test scores: English Language Arts recorded that Ethel Kight Elementary and Berta Weathersbee Elementary had the lowest percentiles, with Berta Weathersbee at 5% and Ethel Kight at 23% (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). We had also previously learned that children learn to read up until the third grade, and after the third grade, they are reading to learn (Feister, 2010). Between both this acquired knowledge and statistical evidence, our initiative to read to these students was created.

We began this program by contacting the counselors and principals of both Berta Weathersbee and Ethel Kight Elementary Schools. These interactions were mostly made through email, with a few in-person meetings, but included the communication of our desire to assist the schools during the day, interacting in a positive manner with the students. Each school replied with excitement, and we began to plan times that would work best to go to each school.

As Scholars, we faced a large setback during the planning of this phase. Securing background checks took over two months of our time. With 12 Senior Scholars, securing this opportunity required immense planning, allowing the group to figure out the best time to attend each school. For Berta, we would attend the same class every Monday mid-morning, while attending Ethel Kight on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday afternoons to help with their ACE programs. Ethel Kight also agreed for Scholars, who could not attend in the afternoon, to individually assist classrooms during a time that worked for them in the school day.

During the planning process, we deliberated on the best approach for assisting at both schools. By the end of planning, we reached an agreement, where we would interact

Table 2

Attendance at the LaGrange Memorial Library Reading Program

Date	# of Scholars	# of Students	Returning Students	Topic
Sept. 19	6	5	-	Weather
Sept. 23	5	1	-	Trees
Sept. 30	5	2	-	The Ocean
Oct. 7	4	1	-	Space
Oct. 14	4	0	-	Dinosaurs
Oct. 21	7	3	-	Dr. Seuss
Oct. 28	7	8	2	Halloween
Nov. 18	7	10	5	Thanksgiving
Dec. 2	5	5	1	Imaginary Friends
Dec. 9	4	7	2	Family
Dec. 16	2	6	5	Snow
Jan. 6	2	6	2	Sharing and Giving
Jan. 13	4	6	2	Community Helpers
Feb. 3	7	8	5	Groundhog/Winter
Feb. 10	2	7	3	Valentine's
Feb. 24	5	4	1	Presidents
Mar. 2	3	5	1	Safari Animals
Mar. 9	2	4	3	Pets
Total attendees:		88		

with the students through conversation, designated reading times, and playing games to help with the students' understanding of literary elements. Through these interactions, it was our hope not only to spark interest and hope for these generations but also to strengthen their literacy background for the future.

Each Scholar subsequently participated with the schools on an individual basis. Many attended Ethel Kight's ACE program, playing literacy games with students. Ethel Kight students specifically loved playing literacy bingo: a matching game with sight words. Cumulatively, we spent a substantial amount of time within Ethel Kight and Berta, influencing the children by example: learning with them by playing, rather than directly teaching.

Bookmarks

For the next portion of our literacy initiative, we needed to install a sustainable aspect of our project. In doing this, we reflected on a class during our first year in the program when the president of United Way of West Georgia visited to discuss potential service opportunities where the community could benefit from our impact. Patty Youngblood presented the idea of interactive reading trails. Interactive sidewalks, formally known as Born Learning Trails, are created to stimulate areas of a child's brain to associate movements with colors, words, and numbers. Born Learning Trails are strategically placed with the most adolescent foot traffic in mind (United Way, 2020). The designs are painted on the sidewalks and used by children accompanied by their parents or guardians. Signs are placed at Born Learning Trails that have instructions for games and activities children and families can do together. These ideas led us to adopt a similar program.

Being mindful of the set budget, we created our own version of Born Learning Trails, referring to ours as "Bookmarks." Bookmarks became the sustainable piece of the literary puzzle and was funded through a grant from the Junior Service League of LaGrange. Members of the 2020 Cohort met with members of United Way, the City of LaGrange, and several communities within Troup County for support and approval of Bookmarks. The placement of Bookmarks was a thoughtful decision, as we finally settled on placements by Berta Weathersbee, the Calumet Village, and the Park at Shuford Fields. As of 2018, Berta Weathersbee had the highest percentage of students reading below grade level. Calumet Village housed families and individuals living at or below the poverty level, and the Park at Shuford Fields served as an area for children of all socioeconomic backgrounds have access to.

The first Bookmark was painted March 7th on the playground of the George Harris Baseball Complex, a spot with lots of weekend foot traffic. We met several children and excited adults who were looking forward to the completion of the project throughout Troup County. Due to complications with COVID-19, the remaining three Bookmarks were unable to be completed. Pictures taken during the creation of the

Figure 1. Bookmark Installation



George Harris Baseball Complex Bookmark can be found in Figures 1 and 2.

The Panther Bookstore

During the Fall Semester of 2018-2019, we were encouraged to participate in a group project for our Junior year. This group project was to be beneficial to the Cohort, helping us to learn to work together with a common goal before conducting our Senior project. We decided, as a cohort, on a project called the Panther Toy Store.

In previous years, the Panther Toy Store has been traditionally hosted by LaGrange College Spiritual Life. It had not been active in several years, but because it had already been done before, it was an easy principle for us to follow. The concept behind the Toy Store was this: that we would collect

Figure 2. Bookmark Installation



new toys and host an event to sell them at extremely discounted rates. Rather than simply giving away toys during this holiday season, we sold them for pennies.

“It is important that giving be truly free. It must never degenerate into charity, in the pejorative sense. Almsgiving is Mammon’s perversion of giving. It affirms the superiority of the giver, who thus gains a point on the recipient, binds him, demands gratitude, humiliates him and reduces him to a lower state than he had before.” (Lupton, 2012)

Using this model was beneficial to those participating in the event because the guests were able to keep their dignity; parents still felt as though they were buying their children Christmas presents, instead of receiving handouts.

The event was invitation-only, as each of us reached out to counselors at multiple Troup County elementary schools. Each school counselor would then look for families who they believed would benefit from the Panther Toy Store, due to families lacking resources or funds. Each counselor responded to us by recommending five families for the toy store. After receiving the names, we sent formal invitations to those families through the counselors.

At the same time, we were also looking for sponsors and donors. These donors would help supply the toys that we would sell. First Presbyterian Church of LaGrange and the various sororities of LaGrange College were the primary donors for this event.

On the day of the event, we had several different rooms set up: one room was for shopping, one room for gift wrapping, and another room for playing with the families’ children. Some of us Scholars were assigned to play with the children while the parents were Christmas shopping, while other Scholars worked at the actual toy store. We received a significant

amount of donations and had over 30 families come to the event. Noting these results, we believed that our Panther Toy Store was very successful.

For our Senior year, we continued to follow this model. Rather than selling toys, though, we sold books. As a Cohort, we renamed this new project the Panther Book Store. We then worked over the summer months, collecting books. We were asking for children’s books from family, friends, and acquaintances. Collectively, we gathered 2,752 books.

Books were then sold at \$0.05 each, thus easily allowing families and individuals to buy 20 books for \$1. During the book sales, if a family did not have the means to purchase a book, we would find ways for them to earn books. We decided that the bookstores should include games. These games -- sometimes cornhole, bean bag toss, or frisbee -- allowed the winners to earn tickets. Tickets would then be redeemed for books. Individuals were allowed to play the game as much as possible so that they could earn tickets and purchase books. We used these efforts to actively empower families by allowing them to work to earn their tickets. “Little affirms human dignity more than honest work. One of the surest ways to destroy self-worth is subsidizing the idleness of able-bodied people. Work is a gift, a calling, a human responsibility” (Lupton, 2012). Books were sold at this price so that individuals purchasing the books kept their dignity.

Our goal was to host a Panther Bookstore, in various locations, every month, totaling 9 bookstores during the duration of the project. We partnered with various communities to host bookstores at multiple locations, such as the LaGrange Housing Authority, Mona Lane, Callaway Auditorium, Griggs Center, and in the Calumet community. Over the course of the Beyond the Book Initiative, we sold 1,128 books. In addition to this, we had a total of 127 visitors,

Table 3

Panther Bookstore Data

Date	Location	Student Visitors	Adult Visitors	Books sold
Sept. 28	Callaway Auditorium	0	3	30
Oct. 26	Griggs Center	3	10	250
Nov. 16	Housing Authority	30	35	495
Dec. 16	Mona Lane	15	4	75
Jan. 18	Griggs Center	1	2	29
Jan. 25	ARK Refugee Center	3	6	165
Feb. 21	Our Daily Bread	-	10	50
Feb. 28	Our Daily Bread	-	6	34
Totals:		52	76	1,128

families, individuals, and children, at our Panther Bookstore events. A more detailed report can be found in Table 3.

Throughout the sales, we were able to foster many relationships with the guests. We were able to see children either earn their books through winning games or pick out and purchase books with their own money. This was an encouraging experience for us, as we were able to personally interact with and encourage every student who attended the Panther Bookstore.

The Jungle Bus

During our research on literacy in Troup County, we found other preexisting initiatives that aimed to boost literacy rates. As a cohort, we decided to unite with Literacy Volunteers of Troup County, the Jungle Bus, Get Troup Reading, and Troup County Certified Literate Community Program (CLCP). Through our work, we experienced one-on-one interactions with community members, learning more about the needs of Troup County.

When we initially decided to develop our project surrounding literacy rates, we developed a plan to partner with the Jungle Bus. Serving as a mobile library, the Jungle Bus delivers free books to students in Troup County. The Jungle Bus is an initiative that stems from the original work of Debbie Burdette and her aim to improve literacy as Mamma Jamma: The Story Telling Mamma. Ms. Burdette chose to continue her work with Lagrange’s Certified Literate Community Program and left the management of the Jungle Bus to Nicole Kennedy, Troup County Parent and Family Engagement Coordinator, and Gail Gordon, United Way West Georgia’s Success by Six’s coordinator. Both ladies have taken on personas who are known to be descendants of Mamma Jamma. Kennedy takes on the role of Jungle Jamma, and Gordon portrays a character named Reading Ranger. These personas keep children engaged, supporting the Jungle Bus’s theme and encouraging students to believe that reading can be fun.

Through Kennedy’s and Gordon’s leadership, the themed automobile has delivered over 3,000 books to children in Troup County (Troup County School System, 2019). We were able to hand-deliver books to children through this initiative, partnering with the Jungle Bus for the city’s annual

Chili Cook-Off. The cook-off was located in LaGrange’s downtown square, and through this centralized location, we made connections with many community members. We attended many other local events that the Jungle Bus participated in, including Law Enforcement’s National Night Out, the Community Trunk or Treat, and Family Day for the City. This helped the project fulfill the Wilkinson Family Servant Scholar Program’s overall mission, as it helped bridge the gap between the college campus and the LaGrange community.

The Jungle Bus is known across Troup County for being a fun and adventurous outlet for children to use and gain a positive experience in literacy. Our Beyond the Book goal targeted improving literacy in Troup County, from birth to third grade, but after learning about opportunities such as the Jungle Bus, we soon learned that other ages needed assistance as well. This did not sway us from our original goal but rather allowed us to expand appropriately. When third graders are unable to read on grade level, it complicates further education into fourth and fifth grade. To help those who have passed the third grade, the Jungle Bus invites all ages to participate, hoping to spark a passion for reading even in older students. This allows for reading at all levels to improve.

Little Free Libraries

Get Troup Reading, a local initiative descending from the Get Georgia Reading program, was developed by Chamber of Commerce members with the intent to focus solely on the Troup County School System. Get Georgia Reading was an initiative started statewide, due to two-thirds of Georgia’s third graders not reading on grade level (Get Georgia Reading, 2016). We made a partnership with this program after being introduced to Kathy Tilley. As a member of the Chamber of Commerce and Get Troup Reading, Tilley understands the importance of early literacy learning initiatives. Tilley asked us to construct Little Free Libraries and strategically place them around LaGrange. The Cohort unanimously agreed to take the project on, constructing wooden structures that resembled large birdhouses. The Little Free Libraries boasted sliding transparent doors, as the books were kept inside the structures. They were made so that children could take books or leave books with no exchange rate. The libraries were meant to be installed in the Calumet community, among others. Due to the unexpected effects of COVID-19, we were unable to install the structures at the end of the semester, as previously planned.

Success by 6

Success by 6, a United Way of West Georgia reading readiness program, focuses on children aged 3-5. In the 2019-2020 school year, the program ran every Tuesday morning, located on the bottom floor of the Bank of America building in downtown LaGrange. Operated by Gail Gordon, the Success by 6 Coordinator, the curriculum included art, language, and phonics. The sessions were free and in a centralized location,

allowing parents of all socioeconomic classes to attend with their children. We volunteered at this initiative, assisting in any way needed. We prepped the activities and helped assist children when parents were unable to. Success by 6 continuously sponsors varieties of school readiness activities aimed at providing developmentally appropriate activities and experiences for children aged 3-5. Because Success by 6's mission and age demographic matched our initiative, we decided to include this program in our Beyond the Book Initiative.

Certified Literate Community Program

We also partnered with the Certified Literate Community Program (CLCP). The CLCP promotes community-wide literacy by enhancing the quality of literacy in accordance with the guidelines set by the State of Georgia. CLCP annually gives dictionaries to local third-grade classrooms. We helped the organization achieve its mission by placing stickers on over 1,000 dictionaries, as well as attending program meetings. Because of our dedication and aid, the CLCP recognized our Cohort with an award at their annual Literary Bee, an event hosted to thank all organizations that invest and support the CLCP. The award is given annually to an organization that exemplifies hard work towards improving literacy rates in Troup County. We then attended the Literary Bee and were recognized for our focus on literacy in the community within the past year.

Effects of COVID-19

COVID-19 was a time of panic caused by a virus that led to a worldwide pandemic. Due to COVID-19, all colleges in the United States of America were forced to close, as well as move all remaining students out of campus dorms. This affected the student body of LaGrange College, as well as the Wilkinson Family Servant Scholars' Class of 2020 Senior Project. We had been working diligently on our Beyond the Book Initiative since the second semester of our Junior year. We had certain projects divided into different semesters, with some specific to the spring, including Bookmarks and work at local schools. COVID-19 put a halt to the Spring Semester, leading to an abrupt completion of the Beyond the Book Initiative.

However, we were not discouraged by this. Instead, we began working remotely to continue the improvement of literacy. As the world fled online, we followed suit, hoping to reach local students through the internet. Each of us chose two children's books, filming ourselves reading it for the internet. Then, a few of us edited the videos and uploaded them to the Senior Cohort's YouTube page. Finally, we released them in a timely manner to the Beyond the Book Facebook page. This page was created for children who were no longer able to attend school in person. We thought that some children may not have books in their homes and could be struggling to read on their own. We also considered parents who might have been

working from home, having to teach their children with time constraints.

We also continued to work on our colloquium. Though it would not be held on campus, as it had been for other cohorts, we saw the importance of continuing to educate others on our project's mission and our efforts. COVID-19 affected members of many cultures and backgrounds, forcing many to learn new skills and take new paths. With this in mind, we decided to make a virtual colloquium that embodied the Beyond the Book project and exemplified the standards of the Wilkinson Family Servant Scholar Program.

Conclusion

As the Wilkinson Family Servant Scholars Cohort of 2020, we conducted work within the field of literacy with our 2019-2020 Senior project: Beyond the Book. In doing so, we completed over 1,200 hours of community service, working with multiple organizations in LaGrange, GA and Troup County. Through our efforts, we were able to disseminate 1,128 books to the community, fostering relationships with those who attended our Panther Bookstores. We also completed 18 programs at the LaGrange Memorial Library, having had a total of 88 students in attendance. We were also able to assist two local schools, helping students, encouraging them in their studies, reading to them, and playing learning games at Berta Weathersbee and Ethel Kight. We were able to participate alongside others in the literacy field of LaGrange, including giving out books with the Jungle Bus, assisting the CLCP, helping with the Success by 6 program, and building Little Free Libraries with the Get Troup Reading program. Finally, we were able to install a Bookmark at the George Harris Baseball Complex, seeing the impact that it had on local children even as they were painting it.

When first beginning as Wilkinson Family Servant Scholars, we heard a classic story about starfish. The program's director, Professor Jeff Lukken, noted the importance of little events with the following illustration:

"Sometimes, we get caught up in saving the world, when really, we are saving the world by helping one person at a time. This young girl is walking on the beach early in the morning, and she sees an older guy bending down and throwing something into the ocean. As she gets closer, she sees that he's throwing back starfish. She approached him, and she asked, 'What are you doing?' and the man said, 'Well, the sun's coming up, and there are thousands of these starfish that are all going to dry up if they don't get back into the ocean.' The girl said, 'Yeah, but there are thousands -- millions of them. You'll never make a difference.' As the man continued throwing each starfish back into the water, he replied with hesitation, 'It makes a difference for this one... and it makes a difference for this one... and it makes a difference for

this one...’ Any act of kindness can make a difference in someone’s world.” (J. Lukken, personal communication, April 20, 2020)

Many of the actions taken by our Cohort of 2020 may seem small in comparison to national projects. However, our Beyond the Book Initiative was a collection of many full-fledged programs that reached many individuals. These were all personal actions that were either sustainable or personal, in a meaningful way. Through Beyond the Book, we were able to distribute books to hundreds of students, via the Panther Bookstore and the Jungle Bus. Those books are now in the children’s hands, and that is sustainable in itself.

With projects like these, it is often hard to conclude with concrete findings or evidence, especially as there are no accurate literacy rates for the 2019-2020 year, due to the effects of COVID-19. However, we are extremely aware that we impacted individual lives, knowing that we inspired students by turning reading into an adventure. We also know that we impacted local students, having distributed 1,138 books into the community, and having had hundreds of personal conversations with local students. More than that, each effort has converted into a memory for each student involved in these programs -- memories that will continue to inspire them for much longer than the Beyond the Book initiative. In the same way, as Beyond the Book comes to a close, we will never forget our involvement with the LaGrange community, knowing that every book distributed, every student taught, and every child motivated helped us to toss another starfish back into the sea.

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