

Grantee Spotlight: Oklahoma County Juvenile Bureau's Literacy Initiative

By Candice Jones

Imagine for just a moment that you cannot read or write. At this very instant you would not be able to comprehend the words in this article. Think about how it would change your life, your opportunities for higher education, your career, your goals, your well-being, your sense of accomplishment and even your self-esteem!

For many juveniles across our country and in our state, illiteracy is a common problem. They go to school every day unable to read and the problem does not stop there. Illiteracy and crime are closely related. In fact, the Department of Justice reports, "The link expands past incarceration rates, finding that illiteracy contributes to academic failure, delinquency, violence, and overall crime."

At the Oklahoma County Juvenile Bureau (OCJB), Probation Officer Jason Thomas and Chief of Court Services J'me Overstreet said the organization began to see the link between illiteracy and the juveniles they work with. Officer Thomas, who was instrumental in getting the literacy program off the ground, said illiteracy is one of the main reasons these youth get in trouble at school. They act out in class to get suspended thus saving them the embarrassment of their peers realizing the truth.

"I have been in probation and parole for 10 years," said Officer Thomas. "I have seen the repercussions our youth face when they have a lack of an education. I felt we could do more for our youth by becoming a resource for their educational growth. This is a way for us to rebrand the way the community views the bureau. Instead of them seeing us as

According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, a survey conducted in 2003 by the National Center for Education Statistics found that 85 percent of youth who interface with the juvenile court system are functionally illiterate. This means they cannot read at more than a basic level. The survey also indicated that 14 percent of Americans age 16 or older



Volunteer tutors from UCO, from left, Rajiv Arumai Thurai, Juri Williams, Natalie Dura, Dr. Burle Steelman and Donna Powell

people who only incarcerate their kids or take their kids, it is my hope that there will be families who see us as the ones who gave their children the help they needed to become stronger readers and more confident students. The gift of reading can be given to generation after generation. One of my favorite quotes is from Fredrick Douglass, 'It is easier to raise strong children than to repair broken men.' To me that sums it all up. Let's do this on the front end rather than on the back!"

could not comprehend a newspaper article, read a prescription label or complete a job application.

The mission of the OCJB is to implement and maintain a seamless system that provides accountability and responsibility for its clients and their families while protecting the public. They launched the literacy initiative in July of 2016. At that time, it was determined that at least 68 percent of youth on probation were reading two or more reading levels below their current grade level.

OCJB began with a pilot program which consisted of a 10-week session, three students and two volunteer tutors. The results confirmed the hopes of the organization. One student increased his reading from a first-grade level to a fourth-grade level in 10 sessions held once a week with tutors. The second session began in October 2016 with sessions held twice a week. This group included 15 youth and seven volunteer tutors from the University of Central Oklahoma. All students in this group have made improvements in their reading, spelling and comprehension according to the OCJB's end-of-year literacy initiative results. The third session began in January.



Dr. Steelman tutoring a student

Ms. Overstreet said, the kids they work with have many problems and the bureau knew they couldn't address all the issues, so they sat down to discuss options and focused on providing the best solution to yield the best results. The gift of literacy was the most promising for future success.

"Literacy turns the light on in a dark room, and the youth can see hope for a future they never thought was possible for someone like themselves," said Ms. Overstreet. "Providing these youth an opportunity to read and write at a literate level is

the single most important thing we can do. It literally can change their life."

The Oklahoma Bar Foundation (OBF) funded the OCJB's grant request for \$3,000 in full last year. The funds pay for materials and workbooks the students use in tutored sessions. The OBF is excited to fund the literacy initiative as it is a much needed program to help our youth.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Tutor

OCJB needs volunteer tutors and has a partnership with the Opportunities Industrialization Center of Oklahoma County that provides the training for volunteer tutors. An online course for professionals wishing to volunteer their time is now available. Please contact Erin McConnell at 405-713-6423 for more information on tutoring.

Donate Clothes

Donate professional clothing to the OCJB. The goal of the Clothing Closet is to provide assistance to youth who face barriers because they lack clean and presentable attire. The Clothing Closet empowers these youth by teaching them acceptable ways to dress and enables them to go to school, interview for a job or attend a court hearing with confidence. The following items are accepted at the Clothing Closet:

For males: pants, slacks, belts, collared shirts, ties and dress shoes.

For females: pants, slacks, dresses, skirts, blouses and dress shoes.

Donate Ties

Donate a tie to the Charles Thomas Tie Project named in honor of Officer Jason Thomas' father, a well-known coach, mentor and community figure. When Mr. Thomas Sr. passed away, Officer Thomas made use of the ties he inherited from his dad by teaching a group of his clients how to tie them, speaking to them about professional image and gifting them with ties. The concept was so well received that even a few years later, Officer Thomas continues to conduct the program using donated ties.



Officer Thomas holds a donated tie

Donations

Drop off at the Oklahoma County Juvenile Bureau
5905 N. Classen Court
Monday – Friday
8 a.m. – 5 p.m.

To arrange a pick up,
call J'me Overstreet at
405-713-6400

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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