

Employees read to 3,000 kids for Black History Month

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Harry Robinson, a co-founder of the Black History Month Read-In Program, read to 11 classrooms in six schools this year, including these children in Campbell-Savona Elementary School in Savona.

CORNING, N.Y. – The Read-In Program, where employees read books about black history to elementary school students during Black History Month, enjoyed a big jump in volunteers and number of classrooms served this year, thanks in part to Corning Museum of Glass employees who were invited to volunteer for the first time.

The program, in its fifth year, has almost doubled the number of classrooms served, from 115 in 2013 to 215 this year. Two schools added pilot programs this year, Diven Elementary School in Elmira and Campbell-Savona Elementary School in Savona. Volunteers read to more than 3,000 children this year.

The volunteer pool, which has about 50 employees with reading sessions most years, surged to over 80 this year with the addition of 10 museum volunteers and 13 new Corning volunteers, among others. The

program is sponsored by four Employee Resource Groups: Black Growth Council, Black Technology Network, Inclusion, and Society of Black Professionals.

"Word of mouth is our best advertisement in getting new volunteers," said Claire Warren Ginnan, a senior process engineer with CSM Gorilla® Glass Division Engineering and program co-chair with Harry Robinson and Millicent Owusu. "We have a mix of volunteers that seek us out and others that express interest after talking to one of our volunteers, who are very good about bringing in new volunteers. The addition of CMoG seems like a very natural next step for the program."

Harry, co-founder of the program with Millicent and Leon Washington, said reading to children is a very satisfying experience. He read to 11 classrooms in six schools this year. "The employees who volunteer have heard how good it feels to read to the children," said Harry, an Engineering Associate with MT&E/MCS. "It's important to educate the children about a subject that is mostly not taught in schools."



Stacey Esslinger, left, the wife of Corning employee Jason Frackenpohl, and Millicent Owusu, a co-founder of the Read-In Program, read "Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom" to children at the Chemung Valley Montessori School in Big Flats.

The program theme this year was the Underground Railroad and its local historical connections, Claire said, and three books were selected to be read in the classrooms. The schools decide which book will be

read in which classroom and teachers discuss the themes with students to provide background and vocabulary before the readers arrive. The books this year, and their local connections, were:

- "Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad," by Ellen Levine and Kadir Nelson, about a slave who mails himself to freedom. Lear Green was a slave who actually accomplished this feat, shipping herself in a sailor's chest, eventually settling in Elmira, N.Y.
- "Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom," by Carole Boston Weatherford and Kadir Nelson, about a runaway slave who became one of the most famous and courageous conductors on the Underground Railroad, similar to John W. Jones, a runaway slave who settled in Elmira. Jones' home was a stop on the Underground Railroad.
- "A Picture Book of Harriet Beecher Stowe," by David A. Adler and Colin Bootman. Stowe, the author of the classic "Uncle Tom's Cabin," had family connections in the Elmira area.

New CMOG volunteers

Astrid van Giffen, associate conservator at CMOG, volunteered after watching how enthusiastic her husband, Kevin Wasson, an Engineering Associate with MT&E, is as a Read-In volunteer. She read a different book, "Ruby Bridges Goes to School: My True Story," by Ruby Bridges, about the first African-American child to integrate a New Orleans school, to kindergartners and first-graders at Big Flats Elementary School.

"The children really picked up on the inequality and unfairness of segregation," she said. "One little girl asked, 'Why would they even start (segregation) in the first place?'"

Troy Smythe, education and interpretation supervisor, volunteered after learning about the program from Astrid. He read "Moses" to a class of third-graders at Severn Elementary School in Corning. "The children had a few questions, but mostly they speculated about what it must have been like to go through what Harriet Tubman did. Her courage to sleep on the ground without a tent and trust strangers to help her and not turn her in impressed them."



Teresa Havens reads "Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom" to second-graders at Winfield Elementary School in Corning.

New Corning volunteers

Corning employees said the children's questions and reactions to the different books made the experiences memorable.

Jeannette Clark, BUIT app developer/support senior analyst who is supporting Corning Specialty Materials, read "Henry's Freedom Box" for first-graders and "Moses" for second-graders, both at Calvin Smith Elementary School in Painted Post. "I think the first-graders were very interested because when I finished reading the book, they asked me to read it again, and then asked great questions," she said. "They were amazed at how a person could be packed in a small box. The second-graders were in awe of Tubman's courage and determination."

Tamora Long, integration technical leader with IT Service Delivery, read "Henry's Freedom Box" to kindergartners and first-graders at Diven Elementary School. "I could tell the teachers did a great job preparing the children for the lesson, because they were interested and engaged. They were also able to relate what they learn every day to some of the ideas in the book, such as showing kindness and citizenship."

Tevin Smith, a process engineer with MT&E, read "Henry's Freedom Box" to kindergartners and "Moses" to second-graders, both at Severn Elementary School. "I wanted to give back to a program that provides a

great opportunity to educate students about Black History Month. Slavery is a very important part of both stories, but we also discussed key themes as well, such as kindness and courage."

Kevin Morris, process operations manager for S&T at Sullivan Park, read "Henry's Freedom Box" to first-graders at Campbell-Savona Elementary School in Savona. "I was amazed at how engaged and excited the children were as I read the story. They asked a lot of questions."



Jeannette Clark reads "Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad" to first-graders at Calvin Smith Elementary School in Painted Post.

For Claire, it's important that employees make a connection with the students. "We hope that when the students see professionals from their community in their classroom, they see future career possibilities for themselves, too," she said.

In addition to the rewards of educating children about black history, the Read-In Program is also a learning experience for the teachers and volunteers, she said. "Every year that we do this, I learn so many new things, and most volunteers say the same thing. The history is fascinating, and the strength, resilience, and resolve of the people we read about is inspirational."

Feedback from the schools

The two new schools in a pilot program in this year's Black History Month Read-In Program are already looking forward to participating again in 2018.

"The program was very successful," said Principal Pam Davis-Webb of Diven Elementary School in Elmira, who said volunteers read to about 440 students in prekindergarten through second grade. "Our teachers valued the pre-visit work with students, which set the stage to maximize the visit with the Corning volunteers.

Cassie Seymour, a kindergarten teacher at Campbell-Savona Elementary School in Savona, said volunteers spoke to more than 200 students in 13 classrooms from prekindergarten through second grade. She said the students were shocked that African-Americans didn't have the same rights as whites at that time in our history. "They were excited and encouraged that there were people who stood up for what they felt was right even though it meant they could possibly put themselves in danger."

"This was a great experience and we look forward to participating again in 2018," said Campbell-Savona Elementary School Principal James Anderson.



Above: Kevin Morris reads "Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad" to first-graders at Campbell-Savona Elementary School in Savona. **Below:** Claire Warren Ginnan visits with prekindergarten students at Diven Elementary School in Elmira after reading the same book.

