

# Literacy program shares black history

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Judith Rowe, PEx champion and project manager for Corning Global Security, volunteers for the African-American Read-In at Big Flats (New York) Elementary School, part of a national Black History Month program established by the National Council of Teachers of English.

CORNING, N.Y. — While reading to different elementary school classes, Harry Robinson often tells children he was 8 years old during the civil rights-era events described in the book. Then their questions follow: How did you feel? What did you think?

For Harry, those are the moments of the African-American Read-in program that stand out the most—the moments when children stop hearing words from a book and begin understanding a historical reality.

"The kids relate back to us," said Harry, an engineering associate who helped bring the program to the Corning area in 2010 and has read to many of the same children every year since. "They are engaged, and they look forward to us coming every year. They not only remember what you said, but have a tendency to remember who you are."

With the program now in its seventh year in the area, the African-American Read-in's positive influence has begun to clearly emerge. The program, part of a [national reading initiative](#), brings Corning Incorporated volunteers to 11 elementary schools across three districts in February to read and discuss children's books about black history. Older children who have experienced the program multiple times are now able to build on themes from previous years, remember characters from other books, and connect concepts in the stories to current events, volunteers have observed.

"Discussions have been tremendous in terms of getting kids to know about different perspectives and hearing personal stories from Corning Incorporated employees," said Debra Joseph, director of pupil personnel services for the Corning-Painted Post School district. Debra coordinates the program for the district.

The program has been marching through American history by way of the books it selects, starting with slavery in its inaugural year and moving to the civil rights era in 2016. This year, the age-appropriate books "Freedom on the Menu" and "Granddaddy's Turn" highlighted the desegregation of restaurants and voting. A curriculum specialist from the district helped choose the books, write discussion guides, and provide lesson plans so children could understand the material.

"The themes for this year connect to the overall curriculum—talking about kindness and being a hero," Debra said.

Teachers and administrators also welcome the community involvement in the classroom.

"It's important for kids to know that their community cares," said John Whaley, principal of Severn Elementary School in Corning. "The reading program helps students appreciate some of the heroes of history through stories."

The African-American Read-in extends far beyond the Corning Valley. Since its establishment in 1990 by the Black Caucus of the National Council of Teachers of English, the Read-in has reached more than 5.5 million participants around the globe, with the goal of making literacy a significant part of Black History month, according to the council.

In addition, Corning Incorporated volunteers represent many departments and employee resource groups. Sponsors include Corning's Black Growth Council, Society of Black Professionals, Black Technology Network, and Team Formerly Known As. Corning employees organize the program and volunteer to read, and the company purchases books for each classroom's library.

Looking to the future, the Read-in program's leaders hope to involve volunteers from other parts of the community to bring the program to even more schools. The group piloted a reading at Fassett Elementary School in Elmira this year, offering potential to add another district.

"I envision even more community volunteers covering even more schools," Robinson said.

But for this year, there are still dozens of classroom visits to finish. Engineering Associate Kim Cobb Cain was volunteering for one of them. She finished reading the last pages of "Freedom on the Menu" to a class of second graders.

"Why is kindness important?" Kim asked.

"If you're not kind, no one will be kind to you because you are not kind to them," one student said.

"Kindness is important because of the Golden Rule," another said. "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

Kim described her work as an engineer, greeted by an excited exclamation of "I love science." Then the students expressed their appreciation with a chorus of "thank you."



Harry Robinson, engineering associate, reads the children's book "Granddaddy's Turn" to students at Big Flats Elementary School. Harry helped bring Read-in to the Corning Valley area.

### Join the Read-in effort

Corning's Read-in organizers are seeking volunteers for next year. The program is growing larger every year with more schools asking to be included. Volunteers from Corning are welcome, and contacts within other local companies could help increase the volunteer base as well. [Reach out to Harry Robinson](#) with any ideas.