

Editorial: Creating a city of readers

For the third year, Norwalk residents will have the chance to participate in Norwalk Public Library's Big Read program and we couldn't be happier.

The Big read is a nationwide initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts designed to restore reading to the center of American public culture. The Big Read Norwalk 2009 kicks off this Saturday with the book "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer."

These days it's easy to spend too much time on checking and updating Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace, and not enough time reading books. But events like The Big Read remind us there's nothing like turning off all the electronics and curling up with a good book -- it's like going on an adventure or vacation without ever leaving the couch, and with the economy suffering, let's face it, vacations are being put on the back burner.

This year's book promises a riveting trip. In the book's intro, H. Daniel Peck describes "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" as a "tale of boyhood adventure overflowing with comedy, warmth and slapstick energy. It brings to life an array of irresistible characters-the awesomely self-confident Tom, his best buddy Huck Finn, indulgent Aunt Polly, and the lovely, beguiling Becky- as well as such unforgettable incidents as whitewashing a fence, swearing an oath in blood, and getting lost in a dark and labyrinthine cave Tom Sawyer remains Twain's joyful ode to the endless possibilities of childhood."

"Our first two books-"To Kill a Mockingbird," and "Fahrenheit 451"-appeared to be of more interest to an older audience-high school through adults and seniors," said Stanley Siegel, president of the Norwalk Library's Board of Trustees.

"I thought, this year, we might be able to bring in a younger audience given the theme and the characters in Mark Twain's 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer.'

The activities planned for Saturday are also designed to bring in audiences of all ages. They begin at 10 a.m. at the Norwalk Inn and Conference Center. Norwalk Mayor Richard A. Moccia will proclaim April 4 as "The Big Read Norwalk - 2009" Day and will introduce the featured speaker Samuel Clemens - more familiarly known as Mark Twain, impersonated by John Pogson. Pogson began educating himself about the legendary humorist after several people commented on his remarkable resemblance to Mark Twain. As he studied, he realized he not only looked like Twain, but he also shared many of the author's interests, hobbies and opinions. These shared characteristics reinforce his commitment to portraying Twain as authentically as possible.

The Norwalk Public Library's participation in the Big Read will continue through June 30. Other collaborative events include: book clubs and discussion of the book's themes, an open to the public all-day reading, media involvement, presentations, lectures, children's programs, dramatizations, and other "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" and Mark Twain-related specials. Details of upcoming happenings can be found at www.thebigreadnorwalk2009.org.



Rosa Sanchez reads "The Bad Beginning" to Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.) certified therapy dog, Brasil, during the East Norwalk Public Library's, D2R2, Dogs to Read to program Saturday.

"There are a number of events planned to stimulate excitement around 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,' and we hope when people get a better taste for literature they'll want to come back for more," Siegel said in a release.

Sadly, a recent study by the National Endowment for the Arts cited as many as one in four Americans not reading on a regular basis. This data has caused concern amongst literary circles. Siegel said that he hopes the continued efforts of projects like the Big Read will help to alleviate the problem and generate interest throughout the country.

"We're looking to not only keep people who read engaged, but to draw in new readers as well. That's what this is all about. We want to keep reading groups like some of the ones we have in Norwalk alive with discussion," Siegel added.

To draw in young readers is also the goal of a new program being offered across the city at the East Norwalk Library. Beginning later this month, small groups of children will have the chance to take turns reading to specially trained dogs in the "D2R2 / Dogs to Read to" program. A similar program is offered at the Rowayton Library.

The concept itself is not new. Many of the children chosen for this program have difficulties reading and as a result have developed self-esteem issues. They are often self-conscious when reading aloud in front of other classmates. The dogs who listen to the young readers are accompanied by their trained handlers to help children improve their reading skills by providing a relaxed atmosphere. With the help of the dogs, reading programs of this kind have shown to be effective in building children's confidence in their own reading ability and help them learn to love reading.

The East Norwalk Library "D2R2" comes as a result of an inquiry made by Don Smith, whose dog, a Whippet named Brasil, has been engaging patients at Stamford Hospital as a R.E.A.D. (Reading Education Assistance Dogs) Delta Certified, Animal Assisted Activity Dog, offering companionship to help relieve stress and bring joy to the shut-ins. Smith reached out to Teri Klein, program director of Retired Senior and Senior Volunteer program of Southwestern Connecticut.

"I was impressed by the idea - to use Brasil, and other dogs to help children read, and have an enriching experience," explained Klein in a statement, and I suggested that Nancy Pratt, outreach coordinator, look for a venue to mount such a program.

Siegel, who is also the East Norwalk Library executive director, was approached by Pratt and immediately agreed that not only was the library a perfect place, "but the timing couldn't be better."

"We had just completed inaugurating our children's library - the Terry Rooney Room - and are now ready to offer special programs for children," Siegel explained in a statement.

The program will initially enable Saturday morning "sessions" with either one-on-one, or small groups of children gathered to read to Brasil.

Librarian Maureen Tovish has already compiled a list of more than a dozen parents eager to have their children participate in the program. The program is free but pre-registration will be necessary due to the need to limit the group's size in order to give each child a chance to read to a dog. Each child will receive an "D2R2 Certificate of Accomplishment" and a copy of "Olive Love" - a picture book about a local dog whose personality has enriched the hearts of all who met her. The proceeds of the book will be contributed to the ASPCA by its author, Dori Imsdahl.

It is expected that the first "D2R2" session will be on Saturday, April 11 from 10 a.m. to noon. To register, visit the library at 51 Van Zant St., call 838-0498 ext. 100 or e-mail mail@eastnorwalklibrary.org.

Thank you to everyone involved in making the Big Read and "D2R2" happen. You are inspiring residents to pick up a good book, and creating a new generation of readers.