

PRIME TIME

FAMILY READING TIME

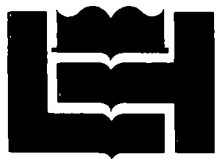
A Project of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities

1999 Overview



LOUISIANA
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE
HUMANITIES

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE
HUMANITIES



LOUISIANA
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225 Baronne Street
Suite 1114
New Orleans, Louisiana
70112-1782

504.525.4352

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Prime Time Family Reading Time - 1999 Overview

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PRIME TIME

FAMILY READING TIME

PRIME TIME FAMILY READING TIME

An Approach to the Issue of Inter-Generational Literacy

LOUISIANA
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FOR THE
HUMANITIES

Michael Sartisky, Ph.D.
Executive Director/President

Kathryn Mettelka, Ph.D.
Deputy Director

Shonda J. Miller
Associate Director

725 Baronne Street
Suite 1414
New Orleans, LA 70112
(504) 523-4352
(800) 909-7990 toll-free in LA
sh@leh.org

Hanne Brady
Project Director

107 Bountiful Way
Oak Ridge, LA 71264
(318) 728-0026
bountifulW@aol.com

PRIME TIME FAMILY READING TIME - an inter-generational family literacy program - is a unique six- or eight-week program of reading, discussion and storytelling held in public libraries, community centers and other public venues. The program features award-winning, illustrated children's books which introduce participants to fairy tales and folk tales from around the world, stories about problems children encounter, and tales from history told for children. PRIME TIME is targeted to assist parents whose literacy skills are low build confidence in helping their children, ages 6 to 10, learn to read.

"PRIME TIME emphasizes the importance of families reading together, as well as the significance of humanities content," Michael Sartisky, LEH president and executive director explains. "Our goals are to use humanities content to reinforce the role of the family, encourage parents and children to bond around the act of reading and learning together, and help parents and children learn how to select books and become active library users."

PRIME TIME programs have now been completed or scheduled in 38 of Louisiana's 64 parishes with additional parishes targeted for programs next year. Since 1998, PRIME TIME has expanded to new states with programs completed in Mississippi, Texas and Arkansas. PRIME TIME has now been adopted as the official family literacy project of the Mississippi, Texas, and Connecticut state humanities councils. Furthermore, pilot programs are scheduled for Connecticut, Montana, Georgia, and at least 7 other states, under a recent NEH grant, by Spring 2000. Sartisky noted, "It feels good to know that we represent Louisiana with an educational program that's effective, that other states want."

In each 90-minute session, a storyteller demonstrates effective reading techniques and a humanities scholar serves as a discussion leader, introducing families to methods of talking about texts during the eight-week program. Each subsequent session features three stories focused on a single theme, such as beauty, greed, promises and commitment, cleverness and deceit, fairness and responsibility, courage, and hope.

Each session also includes a five-minute library commercial -- an opportunity for the librarians to show families other resources at the library. These resources often include other books by PRIME TIME authors, encyclopedias for help with homework, GED materials for the parents, books on parenting and health care, as well as newspapers, magazines, and other items families unfamiliar with libraries might not know about.

PRIME TIME texts are selected in consultation with scholars and experts in children's literature to ensure that the humanities content of the works is accessible both to children and to new adult readers, and also that the content is substantive. PRIME TIME has been specifically designed to model good read-aloud skills, to provide an opportunity both for participants to practice reading aloud to their children and for their children to read aloud, and to teach discussion techniques that stimulate interest and knowledge of the books' content -- all skills fostering a lifelong love of learning through reading.

PRIME TIME staff are currently developing a sustainable evaluation system which will ensure that measurement outcomes are in place to track the success of the program.

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Additional support provided by
the National Endowment for the Humanities and the State of Louisiana



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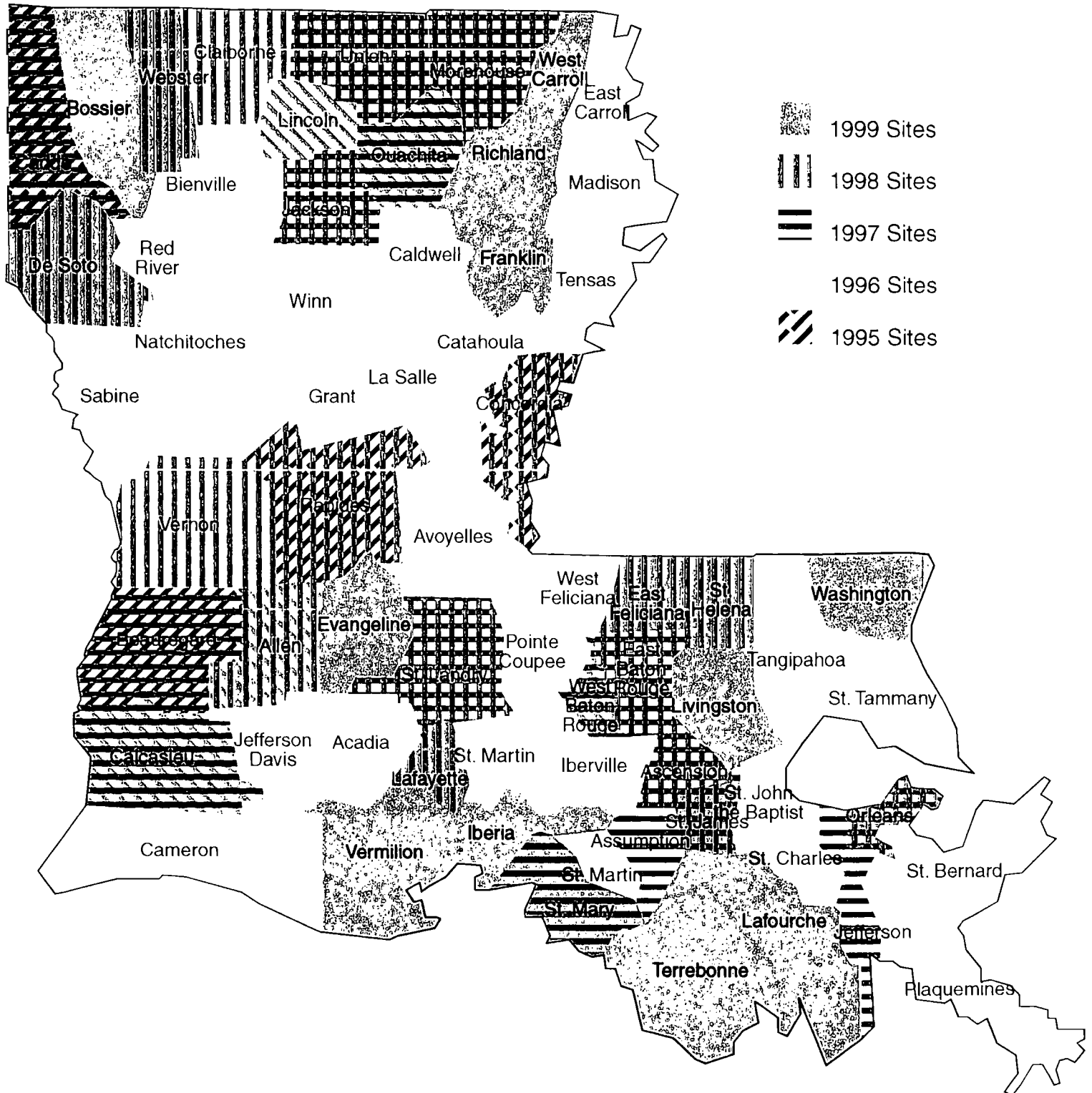
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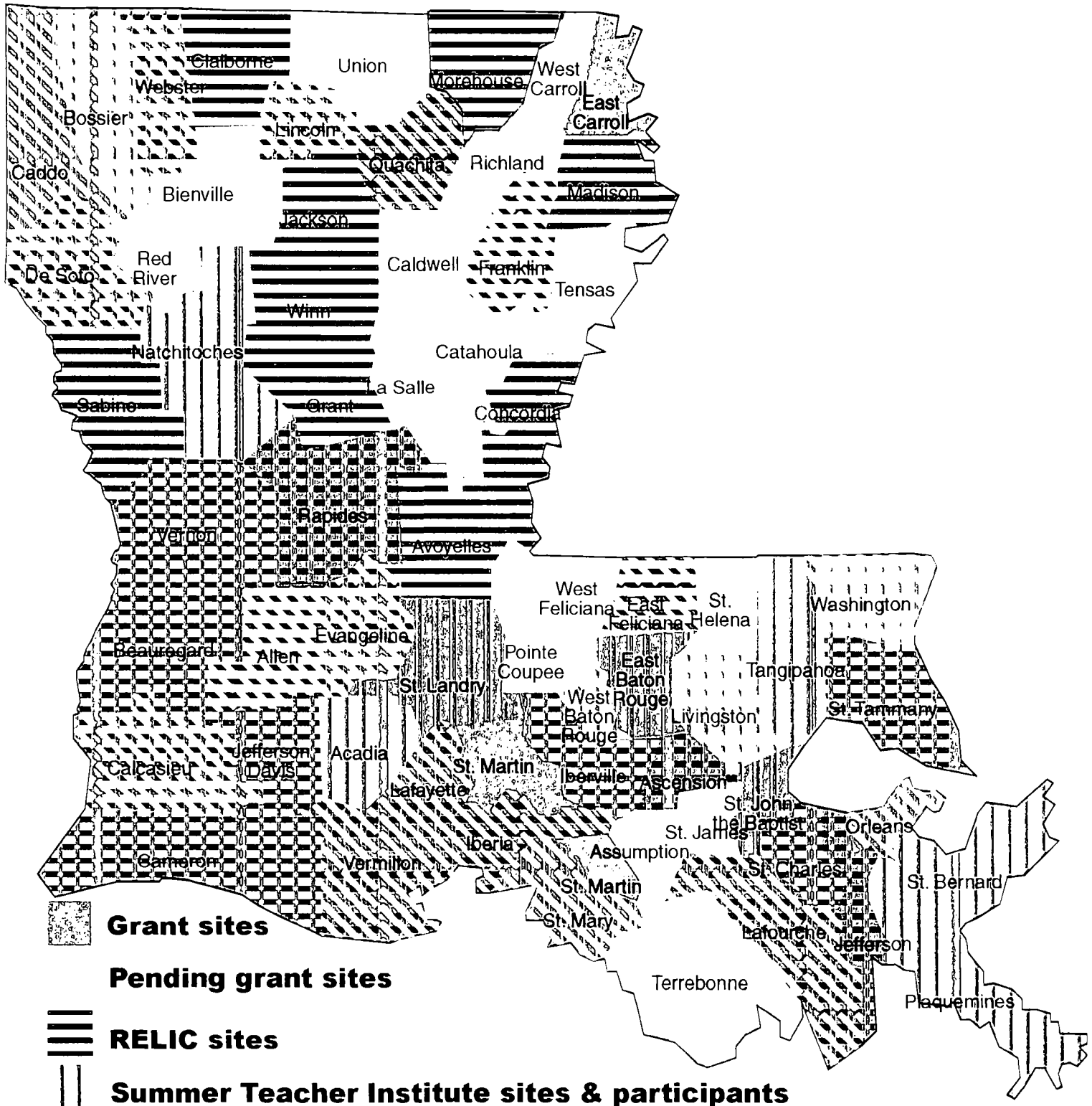
Prime Time Programs 1995-99





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LEH Programs 1999





The map displays the following sites and participants across Louisiana's parishes:

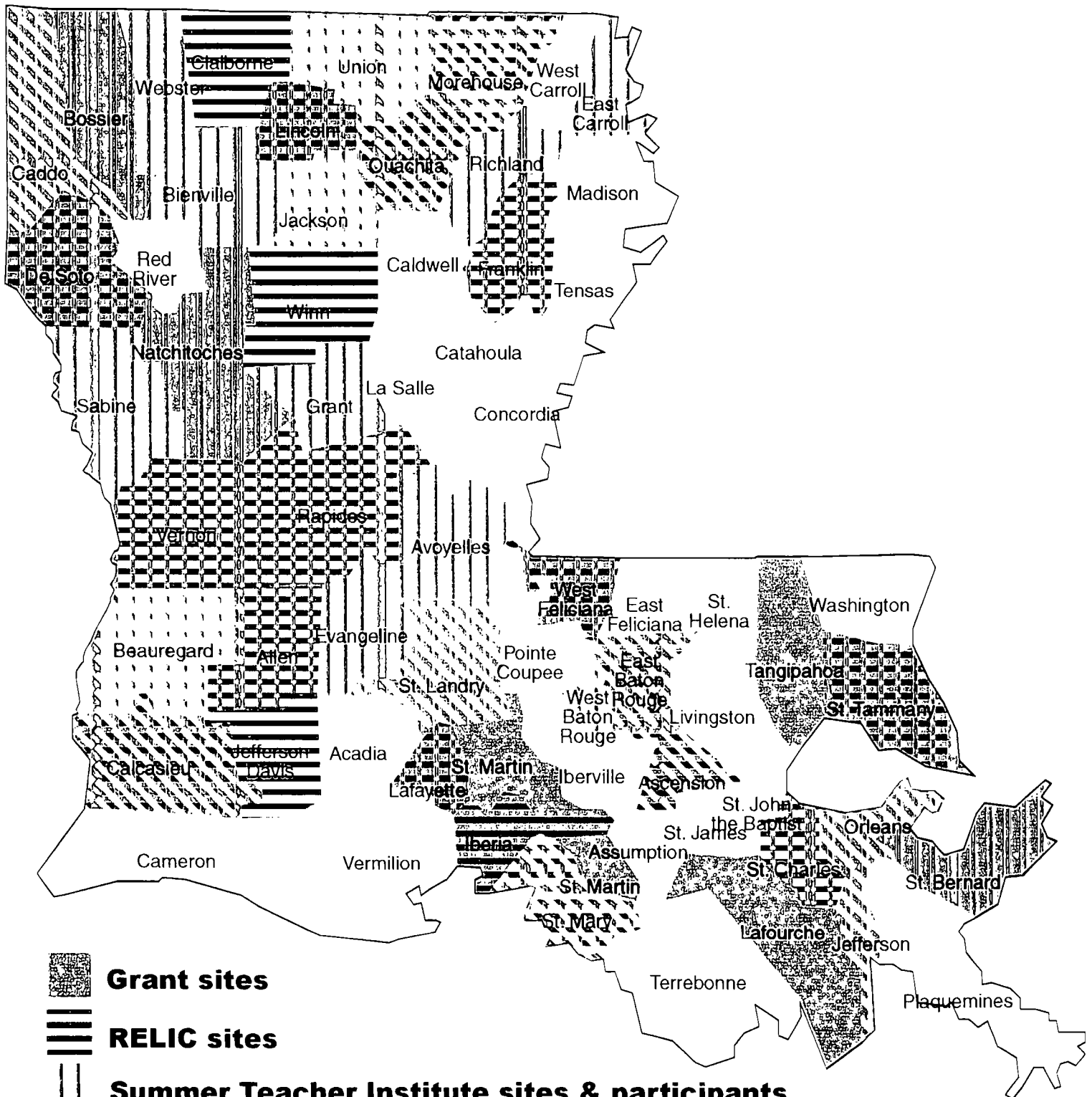
- Grant sites (stippled pattern):** Located in Bossier, Caddo, De Soto, Red River, Winn, Natchitoches, Sabine, Grant, La Salle, Avoyelles, Rapides, Vernon, Beauregard, Allen, Evangeline, St. Landry, Jefferson, Calcasieu, Davis, Acadia, Lafayette, Iberia, Vermilion, Cameron, St. Martin, Iberville, Assumption, St. Mary, Terrebonne, and Plaquemines.
- RELIC sites (horizontal lines pattern):** Located in Claiborne, Union, Morehouse, West Carroll, East Carroll, Lincoln, Ouachita, Richland, Madison, Jackson, Caldwell, Franklin, Tensas, Catahoula, Concordia, Avoyelles, and Washington.
- Summer Teacher Institute sites & participants (vertical lines pattern):** Located in Webster, Morehouse, West Carroll, East Carroll, Lincoln, Ouachita, Richland, Madison, Jackson, Caldwell, Franklin, Tensas, Catahoula, Concordia, Avoyelles, Rapides, Vernon, Beauregard, Allen, Evangeline, St. Landry, Jefferson, Calcasieu, Davis, Acadia, Lafayette, Iberia, Vermilion, Cameron, St. Martin, Iberville, Assumption, St. Mary, Terrebonne, and Plaquemines.

Prime Time sites

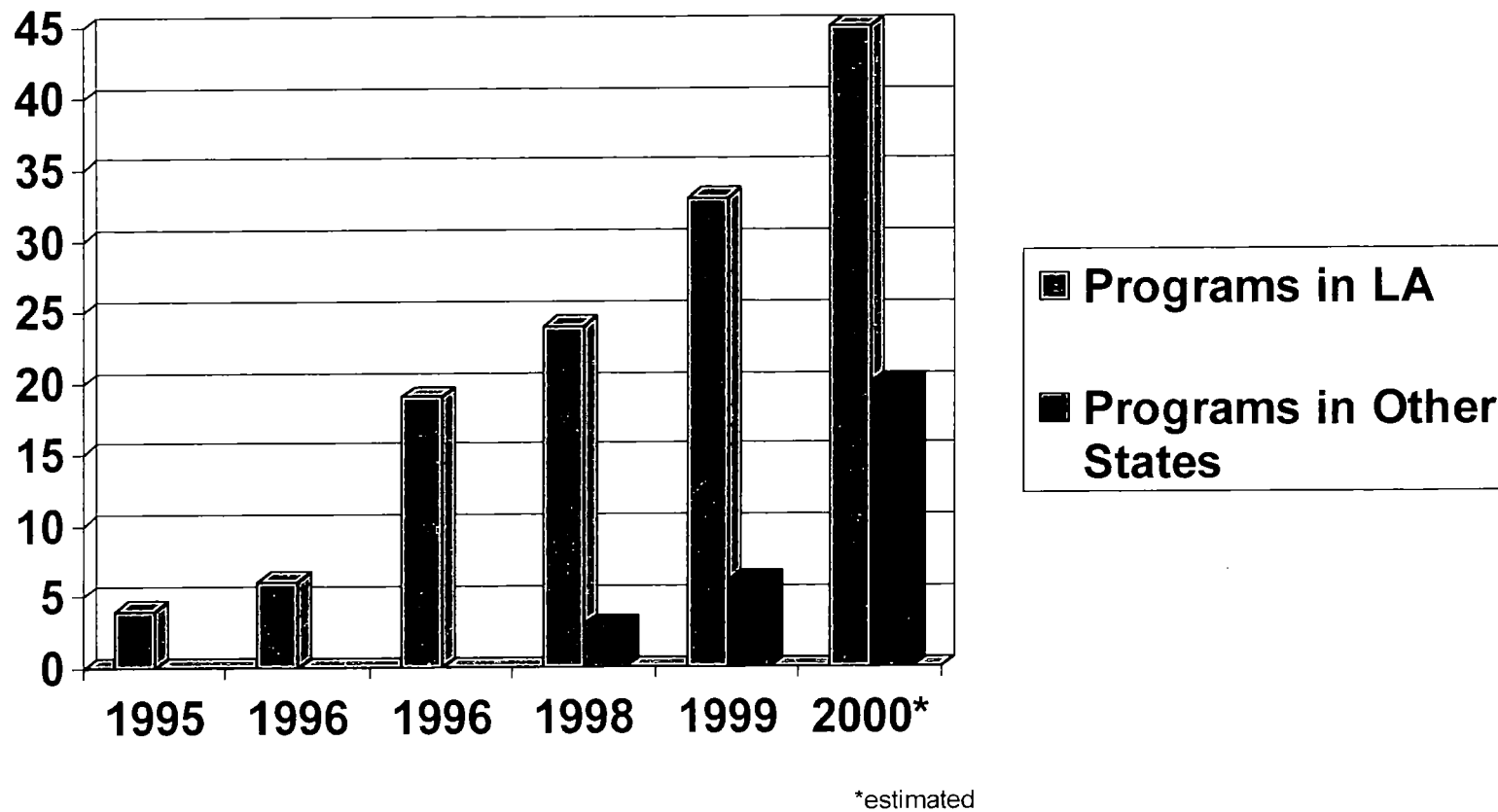


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LEH Programs 1997



Prime Time Growth 95--99



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Deputy Director

Rhonda J. Miller
Associate Director

225 Baronne Street
Suite 1414
New Orleans, LA 70112
(504) 523-4352
(800) 909-7990 toll-free in LA
eh@leh.org

Dianne Brady
Project Director

107 Bountiful Way
Oak Ridge, LA 71264
(318) 728-0026
bountifulW@aol.com

PRIME TIME FAMILY READING TIME

A Council-Conducted Project

of the

Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities



Since 1991, **PRIME TIME - FAMILY READING TIME** has empowered at-risk families to read books together and engaged them in serious discussions on humanities themes, such as fairness, courage, and greed. It gives families--not government--the power and responsibility for teaching values and encouraging reading.

PRIME TIME

- * reinforces the importance of the family's role in teaching reading,
- * helps parents and children bond while reading and learning together, and
- * trains parents and children how to select books and become active library users.

Unlike most current literacy efforts largely devoid of humanities content, **PRIME TIME** was designed as a literacy project with a public program involving scholars, books, and humanities themes and concepts--our normal program criteria--that would reach an underserved audience not already part of the humanities community. The program assists families by helping them develop critical thinking and by encouraging voluntary reading, the practice required to train proficient readers.

PRIME TIME now serves families in Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Texas with new programs scheduled for Connecticut, Georgia, Montana, and at least 7 other new states by 2000. This national expansion is co-sponsored by the American Library Association and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Program Description

Strongly focused on the humanities elements of reading, **PRIME TIME** currently presents 6 or 8 week programs based on two series of award-winning children's books: ***Favorites*** and ***Animal Tales***. ***Favorites*** uses only picture books and provides an overview of a variety of genres including African folktales (*Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*), a realistic experience of daily life from a child's perspective (*Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*), trickster stories (*Anansi and the Moss Covered Rock*), stories from other cultures (*Lon Po Po*), and a children's history of a wagon train family (*Wagon Wheels*).

Animal Tales is a sequel demanded by our families, whose only complaint about **PRIME TIME** was that it ended. Slightly more advanced, ***Animal Tales*** was designed to include picture books, as well as to introduce families to longer books, such as collections and chapter books. ***Aesop's Fables*** is the collection used for this series. The chapter book, ***The Cat Who Went to Heaven***, is a Newberry Medal winner that consists of short chapters that can be read aloud during the sessions, a way to encourage diffident readers to tackle more challenging texts.

In consultation with librarians, scholars, and community advisors, the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities developed a syllabus for each of these two programs, buying sets of re-usable books, identifying and training discussion leaders and storytellers, developing liaisons with social service agencies, and grass-roots organizations to target at-risk families, designing and distributing publicity, and coordinating administration and project implementation. We target these programs for the most endangered population, at-risk children and their parents, opening it to the general public on a space-available basis, only after the target audience has registered.

Each program begins with an initial session on the oral tradition and its transformation into written texts. Then each subsequent session features three stories based on a common humanities theme for that session. The ***Favorites*** series of picture books, for example, consists of consecutive sessions on fairness, greed, courage, dreams, cleverness, coping, and determination--values important to everyone in a functioning society.

We collaborated with libraries, with which we have cooperated for a decade on adult reading and discussion programs, because they are the only public, cultural facility existing in every parish (county) of Louisiana. The new audiences we reach through these libraries are mostly poor (rural and inner city) and minority. To serve our new audiences, we have also taken **PRIME TIME** to alternate sites since library branches are not always located in the neighborhoods or communities we want to reach. Accordingly, we have also established partnerships with the Minden Housing Authority, the Old Bonita Health Center, and the Kuji Center affiliated with the St. Thomas Housing Project in New Orleans. Each program conducted at a non-library site features a library field trip, so that our families can discover library resources and services.

Best Practices for Inter-generational Literacy

Both research and anecdotal evidence show that reading aloud to children is the single most important factor in preparing them to read. Unfortunately, many parents with poor reading skills themselves cannot effectively read to their children. Some do not even know the importance of reading to their children. Although Louisiana ranks lowest among the states on indicators of children's health and welfare according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the truly bad news is that even in other states the literacy scores for children are poor. Particularly troubling is that most literacy efforts are limited to lower-level skills: phonetics or word recognition for children, workplace literacy for adults

We offer more than literacy training. Rather than duplicate other programs, **PRIME TIME** is designed to accompany or to supplement education in reading mechanics. Once a week for eight weeks, reading and discussion leaders meet with grandparents, parents, and their children for ninety minutes to expand participants' understanding of reading through the use of a reading and discussion program. Instead of **telling** parents to read to their children, storytellers **show** parents how to read effectively to children, and do it with them. Scholars serve as discussion leaders, introducing families to methods of talking about texts--for example, comparing a traditional story of *Little Red Riding Hood* to the Chinese version in *Lon Po Po*. Asking how things are alike and how they are different is simple, but it is the basis for sophisticated comparative literature.

Research and Field Tests Validate a Humanities Approach to Literacy

Research documents the need for a humanities approach to literacy. The U.S. Department of Education's 1994 technical report titled *Reading Literacy in the United States* summarizes up-to-date findings. It reports:

One would expect discussions at home of what students read to become more important in the formation of critical readers. Recent research that looks at literacy as interactive, familial, and social in nature views the home as a crucial element in providing a dynamic and literate environment....[one researcher] argues that reading is a social activity, and that readers develop through participation in "supportive communities of readers."

NAEP [National Assessment of Educational Progress] results indicate that discussions of reading are not a frequent household practice. The results indicate that 45 percent of 8th and 12th graders talk to someone about reading at least weekly, while 30 percent never do. Those who never talk about reading at home had significantly lower reading proficiency.

The conclusion of the last sentence is hardly surprising, nor are these findings.

Two factors seem to influence students' voluntary reading. The first is the level of literacy in the home environment. This trait was related to such indicators as the

availability of books, the amount of reading done with the child, the amount of guidance provided, and the extent to which parents model good reading habits. The second factor influencing voluntary reading is the emphasis of the reading program at school....school programs emphasizing skills failed to promote voluntary reading.

In the humanities, we go beyond workbook exercise skills; we develop values and critical thinking skills by reading and talking about the ideas expressed in books.

The Evolution of a Family Literacy Program

Pilot programs of **PRIME TIME** began in 1991. Field-testing revealed the importance of direct participation by humanities scholars. Originally, program designers worried that college professors as discussion leaders would intimidate an audience with low-level reading skills. As a result, scholars were used indirectly to assure that the books chosen would contain substantial humanities materials and to train discussion leaders, themselves elementary school teachers and school librarians. Unfortunately, in practice, these non-academic discussion leaders asked questions which resembled fill-in-the-blank or multiple-choice tests. Such questions stifled discussion, rather than encouraging it. Even the initially skeptical librarians were converted when participants became far more engaged by the open-ended questions asked by university scholars recruited as discussion leaders as **PRIME TIME** evolved.

Based on the success of these pilot programs, the LEH received an NEH award in 1995 for statewide implementation. A second NEH grant supported regional expansion into Mississippi, Texas, and Arkansas. Now with a third grant from NEH and co-sponsorship by the American Library Association, we have begun national expansion with programs for Montana, Connecticut, Georgia, and at least 7 other states scheduled to begin by Spring 2000.

Since receiving initial NEH support in 1995, 73 programs have been completed in Louisiana and 5 in other states. Completed programs averaged 40 adults and children at each session, over 3,000 participants. To date, successful programs have included inner cities (including housing projects in New Orleans and Monroe) and rural areas like Bonita, which is so small the library is in the mayor's house. In rural Ferriday, near the Louisiana-Mississippi border, overall attendance averaged 68 people per individual session, excluding staff and volunteers.

Description of a Sample Session

In the ***Favorites*** series of picture books, designed for families with children aged 6 to 10, a storyteller begins the first session by demonstrating and discussing the oral tradition. Subsequent sessions feature texts grouped around a single concept, such as fairness. As our consultant, Dr. Robert Becker pointed out in his *Guide to Developing Humanities-Based Questions from Children's Literature*:

"Fairness" (or justice) is a theme that can be used to trigger discussion of a great many children's stories. And children almost always seem to have very clear ideas about what is and is not fair, and are not hesitant about expressing those ideas. Think of the number of times you've hear the lament from a child "that's not fair." That is an appeal from the child to the gods for justice that the people of ancient Greece or Rome would have recognized and understood instantly....Often, finding the humanities issue involves no more than asking the children, "Does anything unfair happen in this story?" followed by "Well, **why** do you think it wasn't fair "

Families read three stories for this session on fairness: *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*; *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*; and *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in*

People's Ears Below are some sample questions in the training materials provided to scholars and storytellers.

Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day

1. What happened to Alexander that was not fair?
2. Why did Alexander have a day such as the title suggests?
3. Did he do anything that helped cause his day to be so bad?
4. Do you think life would be any more fair in Australia?

The True Story of the Three Little Pigs

1. Were you surprised to hear the wolf's version of this story?
2. What's different about the wolf's version?
3. Which version do you believe, the wolf's or the pigs'?
4. Are there any clues in the story that can help us decide what is true or not true?

Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears

1. Why do the animals blame the mosquito?
2. Is it fair to blame the mosquito?
3. Why is the tiny mosquito blamed, rather than the big, powerful animals?
4. Why do you think that people need to tell stories like this?
5. Can you think of other stories that explain why things are the way they are?

Section Questions:

Have any of you ever had a really bad day?

Have you ever noticed how your story of something that happened is totally different from someone else's?

Parents, when your kids tell "their side" of a story, what are some clues you use to tell if it's true or not?

Who gets blamed when something goes wrong? Who decides who to blame?

Because Al the Wolf serves as the first-person narrator of *The True Story*, we get his version, not the usual version of the pigs, which Al claims is unfair to wolves. Discussion leaders then can ask a simple question: Does it matter who tells the story? The same question could be asked in a graduate class on historiography or in a seminar on Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. **In PRIME TIME**, we want to ask important questions, while using texts that are easier to read than most assigned in graduate school, and without the jargon.

Impact and Evaluation

Evaluating impact with a non-traditional audience presents challenges. Our audience does not respond positively to testing since most of the parents were not successful at school and many cannot read or write well enough to fill out surveys. Furthermore, sites are chosen for their accessibility to at-risk neighborhoods of cities and small towns. Such libraries do not have the tax base for lavish facilities and staff levels. Initially, we hoped to collect circulation statistics on participating families, only to be stymied when few libraries had computerized circulation capable of tracking this data. Other libraries resisted any tracking out of concern for privacy. When libraries could and would report data, the results were astonishingly positive. For example, the local coordinator in Lake Charles reported startling success in her final report: compared to the

previous year's circulation statistics, circulation of children's picture books increased 70% and juvenile fiction increased 60% at the inner-city branch after **PRIME TIME** was held there.

Anecdotally, the results reported to date are overwhelmingly positive. Surprised parents report that their children would rather read than watch television. Weary parents report that they wanted to stay home, but their children insisted on attending **PRIME TIME** that week. Proud parents report that their children's grades dramatically improved.

In Baton Rouge, site of the initial pilot, the library has invited the original families back to a Christmas party every year since 1991. While some library staff photograph children with Santa Claus, others talk with parents and the older children, now high school students, who attribute phenomenal results to **PRIME TIME**. In the Baton Rouge group, none of the children have been retained a grade in school. One of the most surprising early results was that parents reported that they were no longer on welfare because both their children and they themselves were succeeding educationally. While that correlation was heartening, the recent welfare changes have radically changed the larger world in which we operate, making any linkage to our program moot.

A formal outcome measurement is currently underway with families participating in focus groups and post-program telephone surveys. The study measures.

1. The number and percentage of families reading together after **PRIME TIME** compared to those before the program.
2. The number and percentage of families discussing issues (fairness, greed, coping) together after **PRIME TIME** compared to those before the program.
3. The number and percentage of families using the library after **PRIME TIME** compared to those before the program.
4. Attitude changes
 - toward reading
 - toward school
 - toward television
 - toward libraries

Since beginning **PRIME TIME**, we have continually tried to improve it. Accordingly, we keep asking families what improvements we should make. The most frequent answer still surprises us. They want another **PRIME TIME** series.

PRIME TIME

FAMILY READING TIME

FREE Family Reading Program

Hear Stories
Talk About Books

Fridays at 5:00 p.m.

October 16 - December 11

(skipping November 27, Thanksgiving week)

Kuji Center

800 Race Street

New Orleans

Call 598-6667
to sign up
today



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Book List for *Favorites*

Session 1

THE ORAL TRADITION

At the first session, a storyteller performs a story and discusses the oral tradition. Subsequent sessions feature texts grouped around a single theme, such as *fairness* or *courage*.

Session 2

Jon Scieszka
Vera Aardema
Judith Viorst

FAIRNESS

The True Story of the Three Little Pigs
Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears
Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day

Session 3

Robert SanSouci
John Steptoe
Eric Kimmel

GREED

The Talking Eggs
Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters
Anansi and the Moss Covered Rock

Session 4

Ed Young
Maurice Sendak
Pete Seeger

COURAGE

Lon Po Po
Where the Wild Things Are
Abiyoyo

Session 5

Mary Hoffman
Barbara Brenner
Caralyn Buehner

DREAMS

Amazing Grace
Wagon Wheels
Fanny's Dream

Session 6

Patricia McKissack
Molly Bang
William Steig

CLEVERNESS

Flossie and the Fox
Wiley and the Hairy Man
Dr. DeSoto

Session 7

Bernard Weber
Ann Grifalconi
Shel Silverstein

COPING

Ira Sleeps Over
Everett Anderson's Goodbye
The Giving Tree

Session 8

Jeanette Winter
Ruth Lercher Bornstein
Margaret Wild

DETERMINATION

Follow the Drinking Gourd
The Dancing Man
The Very Best of Friends

Book List for *Animal Tales*

Session 1

Phyllis Root
Elizabeth Coatsworth

INTRODUCTION

Coyote and the Magic Words
The Cat Who Went to Heaven
(a chapter will be read aloud each week)
Aesop's Fables
(a fable will be featured each week from the collection)

Session 2

Margot Zermach
Alice McLerran

FRIENDSHIP

Jake and Honeybunch Go to Heaven
The Mountain That Loved a Bird
Aesop's Fables: The Lion and the Boar

Session 3

Verna Aardema
Tony Johnston

TRICKERY

Rabbit Makes a Monkey of Lion
The Tale of Rabbit and Coyote
Aesop's Fables: The Old Lion and the Fox

Session 4

Rudyard Kipling
Chris Van Allsburg

CURIOSITY

The Elephant's Child
Jumanji
Aesop's Fables: The Lion, the Hare, and the Deer

Session 5

Kevin Henkes
Jane Yolen

RESPECT

Julius the Baby of the World
Owl Moon
Aesop's Fables: The Baby Crab and Her Mother

Session 6

Chris Van Allsburg
Nancy Hogrogian

FAIRNESS

The Sweetest Fig
One Fine Day
Aesop's Fables: The Fox and the Stork

Session 7

Ed Young
Charles Santore

INTELLIGENCE

Seven Blind Mice
William the Curious: Knight of the Water Lilies
Aesop's Fables: The Fox and the Crow

Session 8

Amy Tan
Kristine Franklin

TRADITION

The Chinese Siamese Cat
When the Monkey Came Back
Aesop's Fables: The Tortoise and the Hare

Logic Model for Prime Time Family Reading

Inputs	Activities	Outputs (LEH measurements)	Initial Outcomes (Participant measurements)	Intermediate Outcomes (Participant measurements)	Longer-Term Outcomes (Participant measurements)
• Funding: \$ per site/session • Staff: 3 support for planning, coordination & oversight • Scholar: 1 Humanities Ph.D. to facilitate discussion of universal themes/values • Storyteller: 1 to introduce stories & to model dramatic reading techniques • Books: 1 set per family • Community Coordinator: 1 to identify & recruit family participants (Optional)	• LEH organizes session with local library • LEH recruits & trains scholar and storyteller • LEH ships book sets to library/community site • Storyteller reads stories aloud to families • Scholar leads discussion and helps family participants to link story themes to their own lives	• Number of family participants through session • Number of first-time library cards issued • Number of books read/discussed	• Participants' attitude toward the library as a positive community resource improves • Participants learn improved critical thinking skills • Participants demonstrate an improved attitude toward reading & learning • Participants demonstrate an increased level of family interaction	• Participants read on their own • Children's reading skills are improved	• Participants sustain an increased level of reading & discussion • Families bond together through reading & discussion of Humanities topics

.....

Discussion: This logic model constitutes the first set of Outcomes targeted and tracked by Prime Time Family Reading, and will evolve over time as measurement efforts continue. Exit focus group with participants of a range (urban, rural, central, southeastern, etc.) of previous sessions provided background information for construction of this Logic Model prototype. Baselines are established for each control group following the initial meeting of each control session, and are based upon library registration records, a brief questionnaire and trained observer notes. Initial Outcomes are tracked at close of eight-week control sessions; Intermediate Outcomes are tracked at one, three and six month intervals following each control session; Longer-Term Outcomes are tracked at nine and twelve months. A representative sample of control sites based on appropriate geographic scattering will be tracked in Year One.

Outcomes

Indicator(s)

Data Source/
Collection Method*

Participants' attitude toward the library as a positive community resource improves (Initial)	• Number & percent of participant who exhibit an improved awareness of library as a "safe" place • Number & percent of participants who demonstrate a greater knowledge of library resources	Trained observer; librarian feedback; participant self-reports
Participants learn improved critical thinking skills (Initial)	• Number & percent of participants who demonstrate an improved level of facilitated discussion re: substantive themes & issues	Trained observer; scholar & storyteller feedback; participant self-reports
Participants demonstrate an improved attitude toward reading & learning (Initial)	• Number & percentage of participants who demonstrate an increased willingness to participate in facilitated discussion • Number & percentage of parents/guardians who read aloud to their children • Number & percentage of participants who demonstrate an improved attitude toward Prime Time leaders	Trained observer; scholar & storyteller feedback; participant self-reports
Participants demonstrate an increased level of family interaction (Initial)	• Number & percent of parents/guardians who read Prime Time books aloud to children • Number & percent of families who report additional conversation re: Prime Time topics at home	Trained observer; scholar & storyteller feedback; participant self-reports
Participants read on their own (Intermediate)	• Number & percent of participants who continue to read • Number & percent of participants who visit the library following the Prime Time session • Number & percent of participants who check books out of the library • Number of books checked out	Library records; participant self-reports
Children's reading skills are improved (Intermediate)	• Number & percent of participating children who demonstrate improved reading skills	Teacher reports; participant self-reports
Participants sustain an increased level of reading & discussion (Longer-term)	• Number & percent of participants who continue to read on their own • Number of books checked out of library • Number of books read	Library records; participant self-reports
Families bond together through reading & discussion of Humanities topics (Longer-term)	• Number & percent of families who engage in family activities	Participant self-reports

Indicators will be tracked and Outcomes measured against baselines established for each control session, using the most appropriate methods for each control group. Measurement reports will confirm Data Source/Collection Method for individual Indicators.

THE PRIME TIME
FAMILY READING TIME PROGRAM:
A
—
GUIDE TO DEVELOPING
HUMANITIES-BASED QUESTIONS FROM
CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Prepared by
Robert A. Becker
Department of History
Louisiana State University
for
The Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities

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I. THE PROGRAM AND THE GUIDE

The Prime Time Family Reading Time program was originally designed by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities to reach families whose members, adult and child, read at the fifth grade level or below, to introduce them to library services, to encourage the adults and children to read, and especially to encourage the adults to read to the children. Participants listened to stories told by story tellers, teachers, or librarians and they read a variety of children's books as well. Each week for five weeks, the participants took part in an hour-long discussion about what they read or heard (or, ideally, both), conducted by trained discussion leaders. The Prime Time program was also designed to raise for the participants themes and topics important to the humanities. This guide was prepared to help discussion leaders identify possible humanities themes and topics in children's literature that could be used to prompt discussion by Prime Time participants.

II. WHAT ARE THE HUMANITIES AND WHAT ARE HUMANITIES-TYPE QUESTIONS?

Q: What are the humanities?

A: Pretty much everything.

That's an accurate answer, broadly speaking, but not a very useful one. Even the hardest of the so-called hard sciences (small particle physics, for example, or microbiology) deal these days with questions of great interest to philosophers and poets (and so to the humanities) --- questions like "What is reality?" or "What is time" or "What is life, and how can you tell when you have it?" So the steeliest scientist locked in a lab is as awash in the humanities as the most other-worldly classicist, pondering an obscure line by Homer in some ivory tower.

But here, we'll have to use a narrower definition of the humanities, one that will help discussion leaders identify important questions to raise in the discussions with families of limited reading ability. The humanities I'll deal with can be grouped under five broad (and overlapping) headings: (1) Philosophy (2) History (3) Poetry, Theater and the Arts (4) the Classics and (5) Folklore. Much children's literature is admirably designed to raise questions directly related to all five of these areas of the humanities.

(1) Philosophy

Let's take philosophy first. It concerns itself with the nature of the good, the true and the beautiful. And it concerns itself with related concepts like justice and ethics. How can we know what is good? What is true? What is beautiful? What is just? How can we be sure? Can we be sure? Or, to work the other side of the street for a moment, philosophy asks questions like: What is evil? Why does evil exist? Why do bad things happen to good people? And so on. Much of the best children's literature deals directly with elemental and fundamental questions like these. To take an obvious example, among the many weighty topics touched on in Hans Christian Anderson's timeless children's classic "The Ugly Duckling" are these: What is beauty? How can we tell? And so on. It is partly because such stories do deal with such elemental questions that they have become classics and continue to fascinate children even today. If "The Ugly Duckling" had dealt only with matters of importance to the children of the time in which it first appeared, if in short, it was "relevant" to that time and place only, no one would read it -- or tell it -- today. Running a discussion of even so simple a tale as this touches on broader questions that can make a reading program not only an exercise in expanding literacy but a mini-seminar in the humanities as well. And it can make it a lot more interesting for participants too. One of the main goals of the Prime Time programs is to convince participants, young and old alike, that books and stories are fun not only to read or to listen to, but to think about and talk about as well.

A great many folk stories from many different cultures around the world possess exactly the same timeless quality, and so can be used very effectively to raise humanities issues in children's literacy programs. This is especially true of stories involving questions of justice, or as a child would probably put it, fairness. Take for example Verna Aardema's rendering of the African folk tale Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears (Dial Books, 1975). The story is funny and dramatic and grabs children's attention from the first, but it also deals directly with the matter of justice --- or as a child would put it --- "fairness." In the story, the mosquito shoulders the whole blame for the disastrous consequences of a long string of actions by nine different animals. Well, discussion leaders might ask, is it fair to blame the mosquito for everything? Shouldn't some of the other animals share some of the blame at least? Why (or why not)? Leave the question open ended. Are any as much to blame as the mosquito? Is what happened the mosquito's fault at all? (Ask about blame. Children know all about blame. And about assigning it, when they can, to someone else.) The useful thing about questions like these asked

of children's stories like this one is that none of them have obvious right or wrong answers. Or rather, all of them have several apparent answers, all different, and none unquestionably right or wrong. And so all of them can be talked about. If parents can be got into the habit of not only reading to words to their children --- a good beginning --- but also of talking about the stories they read, asking good questions about them, then they will do a lot to make reading come alive for their children. That's the nice thing about bringing philosophy-based questions into discussions with children about what they read: none worth asking has a definite answer like "three" or "blue" or "llamas". Virtually every question is an open-ended one that can lead to still more talking.

Or you can attack similar questions from the opposite direction. Ask about responsibility instead of blame. The Nkundo tribe of the Congo region uses what they call judgment tales, stories that pose a question for children to answer, a question that has no obvious answer and so must be discussed from several sides. It is an effective tactic and one that Prime Time presenters can use with profit. One Nkundo judgment tale goes something like this:

There once was a man who had three wives, and each went one weekend to visit her parents. Each returned with a gift for the man. The first wife brought him a steel tipped arrow. The second brought him a strong new bow. The third brought him a fine, strong bowstring. So the man strung the bow and took his arrow and went hunting. He killed a fine antelope and when he brought it home, his first wife insisted she should have the choicest part because she gave him the arrow that killed it. His second wife insisted she should have the tastiest part because without the bow she gave him, the arrow would never have killed the antelope. His third wife pointed out that it was the fine new bowstring that she got him that propelled the arrow through the air, and so she should have the best part. So --- to which wife did the man give the choicest part of the antelope and why?

A plausible case can be made for any of the three options above and there is no obvious correct one so the children who hear it must, guided by an adult, talk about all the possibilities, discuss them and then try to decide on the best answer. Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears can be used in precisely the same way.

Fairness (or justice) is a theme that can be used to trigger discussion of a great many children's stories. And children always seem to have very clear ideas about what is and is not fair, and are not hesitant about expressing those ideas. Think of the number of times you've heard a child complain "that's not fair!" That is an appeal from the child to the Gods for justice that people of ancient times would have recognized and understood instantly. Any children's story dealing with righting a wrong, or with getting even, or with fairness, no matter how seemingly small the issue ("She got two pieces of pie and I only got one!") teaches children something about justice, and so deals with matters of great import to philosophy and the humanities. Often, finding the humanities issue involves no more than asking children "Does anything unfair happen in this story" followed by "Well, why do you think it wasn't fair?"

Just to illustrate how important the issues raised by a folk tale like this are even today, consider that the courts are now debating just the moral and legal questions raised by Aardema's tale. If a bartender sells you the drink that makes you drunk, and you drive off and have a wreck, is the bartender in part responsible for the accident? If someone buys a gun at Walmart and uses it to commit a crime, is Walmart in some way responsible? Is the gun's manufacturer? Several cities are now suing gun manufacturers for the cost of controlling the crime done with the guns they manufactured and sold. Should the manufacturers be held responsible? These are all questions currently being pursued in the courts, and they all deal precisely with the question raised in Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears. The issues raised in children's literature --- the best of it --- are elemental but not trivial.

Clearly, this does not exhaust the possibilities of using philosophy as a way to trigger discussions in Prime Time II. A few other suggestions can be found in the Briefing Notes which follow this guide. You might also want to consult Gareth B. Matthews, Philosophy and the Young Child (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1980) for some useful suggestions about the kind of philosophy children do every day almost by instinct, and how to encourage and direct

their speculations. The Nkundo judgment tale given above is adapted from Jan Knappert, ‘What Do You think?: Judgment Tales of the Nkundo of Congo,’ in The World and I, September 1997, pp. 234-41. Knappert’s article gives other examples, some of which might be useful for a children’s program.

(2) History

Contrary to popular belief, history is not dull (though history professors have an uncanny ability to make it seem that way).⁷ If we have learned anything in our thousands of years on the planet, the record of what we have learned, and have failed to learn, is our history. And like any record, it can be consulted to see how we handled similar situations in the past, and to discover why we are the way we are and not some other way. Virtually any history book can be used to raise questions (philosophy again!) about free will and self-determination. Could history have turned out differently than it did? Suppose the South had won the Civil War? What would America be like now if it had? Who determines what happens in history? God? Or, as the ancient Greeks would have put it, the gods? People? Fate? Chance? Luck? Some combination of all of the above? These are questions that have been asked by many cultures throughout the centuries. History, then, can be used to raise questions about things people have in common despite their different locations, cultures and times.

Barbara Brenner’s Wagon Wheels (Harper Trophy Books, 1984), for example, is based on the true story of a motherless Black family that moves onto the Great Plains in the 1870s to homestead and start a new life. the story could be used to trigger a discussion about how children’s lives today differ from the lives of children a century ago. (Virtually any historically based children’s story can be used to raise that question. Any of the Little House on the Prairie stories for example,) Or Wagon Wheels could be used to begin a discussion of race and “American-ness.” to what extent are we Americans, regardless of our race? To what extent are we African-Americans or Italian-Americans or Jewish-Americans or what-have-you instead of just Americans? To get such a discussion going, you might ask this: “Suppose you are a librarian, and you have to decide where to put this book in your library. And in your library you have a shelf for American History and another shelf for Black History. On which shelf would you put Wagon Wheels?” Followed by: “Why there?” This is not a trivial question, and is one that can be used to draw parents into the discussion as well. It is not, in short, just a children’s question. [You could ask the same question of Jeanette Winter’s Follow the Drinking Gourd

(Alfred A. Knopf, 1988).] That these books raise real questions that are important here and now to all of us, one way or another, is one of the things we hope parents will take away from the program. Books, even the simplest of them, have ideas in them, ideas that matter, and that are interesting and fun to talk about --- with our children, with other adults. With anyone.

History is particularly useful as a way of getting children to look at something from another point of view. Any tale involving both Indians and pioneers, for example, invites questions like these: “What words might Indians have used to describe pioneers who were taking their land?” Followed by “Well, ok, but now tell me what words might pioneers have used to describe Indians who fought them and tried to drive them off their new homes in the west?” (Or reverse the order of the questions.) Open-ended questions like these often produce some interesting answers from children. And some uncomfortably honest ones sometimes too. And all of these are humanities-related questions of real importance. Children’s literature offers a very effective way to raise them, even with marginal and beginning readers.

(3) Poetry, Theater and the Arts

The latter two probably won’t come into play much in the Prime Time program, since the idea is to encourage reading, though theater has possibilities. It might be effective (and fun for children) to take, say, one of the stories and turn it into a play. You might ask them this: suppose you wanted to put on Maurice Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are (Harper, 1963) as a play. What problems would you have? How would you solve them? What can a play do that a book can’t? What can a book do that a play can’t? Why? The question you’d be addressing, of course, is: How do the different arts work and convey meaning? You’d be addressing them obliquely, but addressing them none the less. These are questions important in the humanities. And of course, you could bring the illustrations in a book into the discussion. Perhaps read the group a story they have not read without showing them any illustrations. Ask them to imagine what the animal or castle or ogre or dungeon or unicorn or what-have-you in the story looks like. Then show the illustration and ask if it looks like what they imagined or not? How was it different? Is it more fun to read a story with lots of pictures, or with just a few? Why? These are obvious and familiar tactics, I know, but it is worth pointing out that all of these questions relate directly to matters of some importance to literature, theater, the arts and the humanities in general. And that children’s literature offers a good way to introduce them to beginning readers for, perhaps, the first time.

Poetry is another way to raise for children the same questions. It's a hard sell for adults, though children take to it instinctively. They think it's fun, provided no one is going to give them a test on it Wednesday. The kids have got the right idea here. After all, some of the heaviest hitters of our English language poets have indulged themselves (with great glee) in what too many academics sneeringly call light verse. Even nonsense verse is part of our literary tradition. Sometimes even Pompous Professors need to kick back, forget meaning and just listen to poets play with sounds. Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" [Gavin Ewart, ed., The Penguin Book of Light Verse [Penguin Books, 1980] is just plain fun, and a fevered attempt to extract some deep meaning from it all seems to miss the point. In fact, that very question --- Does a poem have to have a meaning? A message? Does a song? If it doesn't, then what's it for? --- raises important questions about the nature of verse. And that's a humanities question. (Come to think of it, you could ask the same of a prose tale. Does a story have to have a moral, or a point? Does it have to mean something?) In any case, selecting a short funny or moving poem to highlight the evening's theme, or the theme of some particular tale, might pay significant dividends, and it would offer a chance to consider poetry and what it does as compared to prose and what it does. Shel Silverstein's Where the Sidewalk Ends (Harper Collins, 1973) is filled with good selections, many of which can be read aloud in only moments which make listeners both laugh and think at the same time. Now, how can a poet do that? A storyteller? In the same ways or different ones? And so on.

(4) The Classics

Homer. The Odyssey. The Iliad. Virgil. The Aeneid. Greeks. Romans. Mythology. The Old Testament. No definition of the humanities, however restricted, would be complete without including the classics somewhere. And since the ancient poets and tale-tellers dealt with universal questions like "What is real?" and "How should we live?" and "What is a good life?" and "Where do we go when we die?" and "Why are we here, alive, at all?" and "Where do we come from?", bringing them into any discussion takes us straight back to philosophy. A lot of classical literature has even come into modern American popular culture, but in ways most people don't recognize. There is something of the story of King Midas, for example, in the Disney cartoon "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" (a segment of the movie Fantasia). Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus stories about Br'er Rabbit are a kind of modern Aesop's Fables. And Br'er Rabbit is still around, though changed a bit, in Bugs Bunny. A particularly rich source of classical material that can be brought into nearly any discussion is the Bible. [For example, the

Greek myths include the myth of Persephone as an explanation of how pain and suffering got into the world. How does the Bible explain the same thing? Why do people suffer? Why is there illness, sorrow, death in the world?] If the subject is courage, there is Daniel in the lion's den. Or David facing Goliath. And so on. Linking modern tales to biblical and classical antecedents (and there are lots of ways to do it) can do two things for Prime Time participants: (a) it can drive home the idea that the problems a story deals with are timeless human problems, faced by most people at most times in history, across the centuries and around the world and (b) it can help highlight the fundamental questions (i.e. those not shaped by a particular time and a particular place) that underlay a story or folk tale. Most cultures, for example, have a story or two to tell children about greed and its consequences. Classical mythology offers up King Midas on the point. African folklore offers for children Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock (retold by Janet Stevens: Holiday House, 1988). And the Bible too discusses the drawbacks of an overweening interest in wealth. Something about rich men and camels and the eye of a needle (Matthew, XIX, 24).

Consider why, for example, the Greeks told myths. What did the myths do for them? What did they learn from them? (How to act rightly? Where they came from? What awaited them after death?) Where would a Christian in America go for answers to these questions? A Muslim in Cairo? A Jew in Tel Aviv? An Ibo in Africa before the age of colonization? An American Indian five hundred years ago? Such questions can be used to trigger discussions of humanities themes that range --- either directly or indirectly --- far beyond the more limited subject matter of a particular story or folk tale. The possibilities for discussion here, after reading one or two of the Greek myths, for example, are literally endless. [A good source for ideas on using the classics for discussion is Prima: Journal of the Elementary Teachers of Classics.]

(5) Folklore

Until surprisingly recently, folklore was a kind of barely acknowledged stepchild of the humanities, particularly in the United States. Many scholars looked down on the whole field. At historical conventions, if you said you studied folk tales, the real scholars smiled politely, suddenly noticed their wine glasses were empty and wandered off to find someone serious to talk to. All that has changed dramatically and historians wanting to stay up on things now plough

through thick volumes on anthropological methodology and material culture and, yes, folklore. This is good.

The available material is now vast, and it covers virtually every cultural group represented in the schools from Native Americans to African Americans to Hispanics, Asians, Pacific Islanders and nearly every variety of hyphenated American of European ancestry too. And the tales deal, on a more popular level, with the very questions the ancient philosophers pondered, and the Old Testament writers. Including folk tales from several different cultures for comparison is a good way to prompt discussion. What do the tales say about the cultures that produced them? How are they different? How alike? How is an American Indian coyote story like an Aesop's Fable? Or a Br'er Rabbit story? Or an Anansi story? Did the tellers all have the same purpose in mind in telling them? Or were they intended to do different things in the different cultures? How can you tell? Why are so many stories told by such different people --- say pre-Columbian American Indians living in the southwest and Black slaves in the American South two hundred and fifty years later --- so similar? About the same kinds of things? Why have they all been so popular for so long? Why can a Br'er Rabbit tale or one of Aesop's Fables or a Coyote story, well-told, still mesmerize a roomful of city-dwelling, movie-going, tv-addicted American kids today? All these are very much questions of interest to the humanities.

Or consider this: why are there so many stories in folklore and in the Old Testament (and in modern popular culture as well) that deal with the seemingly weak outwitting the powerful? Why might the story of, say, David and Goliath have appealed to ancient Jews? Or stories of Br'er Rabbit outwitting the much more powerful fox have particularly amused Black slaves in the United States? (There's history sneaking back into the discussion again.) Why do so many Americans today like to watch the Roadrunner outwit Wile E. Coyote over and over and over again? Can folk tales tell us something about a people --- a time in history --- a particular place and time --- that other literature does not? It might not be effective to raise all of these academic-sounding questions directly with Prime Time groups, but you can raise them obliquely, and as a result, the group may well end up chewing over some very meaty topics. Children's literature and especially folk tales are tailor-made to introduce substantive humanities-based questions into Prime Time discussions.

III. SOME FINAL THOUGHTS AND (UNSOLICITED) ADVICE

The questions suggested above are not necessarily intended to be used without change. They were written by a college professor used to pontificating before a hundred or more captive nineteen-year-olds, not to talking about books with at-risk children and adults who are there to read and talk about stories because they want to be. The questions here are only suggestions. No one can know the people in your program, and what will work for them, better than you. I hope these suggested questions are useful, but please feel free to take any question, any idea, and bend it, alter it, break it in two or combine it with something else, beef it up, dilute it --- whatever you think will work for your people and get them talking.

And don't hesitate to look for connections to an evening's readings in the daily news. If some late-breaking event can be related to what you are discussing, that is all to the good. [Encouraging children --- and adults --- to use what they are reading to help them understand the nightly news, and the nightly news as a way to illuminate what they are reading are both goals of the program.] Prime Time is a reading program, of course, but don't hesitate to draw on the movies or TV if they can help trigger discussion. A movie or TV reference can occasionally take the discussion to interesting places related directly to the readings. At a Prime Time I program I observed, the group was talking about John Steptoe's Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters (Lothrop, 1987). One parent likened the unsuccessful daughter in the story to Scar in Disney's The Lion King, suggesting that like Scar, she would be a trouble-maker, and would never be resigned to her sister being queen. Then she added that it wouldn't really have mattered if she had been picked to marry the prince in the story. She could never be a real queen because, like Scar, she did not have the character it took to be a real queen. From the book via Disney's movie, we went off on a discussion about the nature of kingship, or leadership. What gives someone the moral authority to govern others? . The point I want to make here is simply this: find connections with the books that will trigger discussion wherever you can: the news, TV, movies, whatever. Don't walk away from anything that works in tandem with the books because you might not think it suitable to bring in as part of a reading program. If you think it will work, go with it. Connecting what they read to the rest of their lives is exactly the habit we hope they will get into. (I wish I could get my college students into that habit.)

Finally, a plea: if you find that a particular book or question or line of discussion is working for your group some night, let it run. If your people get turned on by a book or an idea or a question, let them stay with it, play with it --- even argue about it a little if they like. Don't cut the discussion off and move on to something else just to get through the evening's readings. One story, one idea, well chewed over is worth far more, I think, than five stories lightly touched on just so that night's list can be covered. From a humanities point of view, books, stories and poems are things not merely to be scanned for content but to be thought about, mulled over, talked about, likened to (and contrasted with) the reader's own life and world. If something like that gets going some fortunate evening in your group, if the kids get fired up about something they've read or you have asked them about, or if the adults do, or better yet, if they both get started discussing something back and forth, let them go with it as far as they like. Please. That books are fun and interesting to talk about is precisely what Prime Time is intended to convey.



LOUISIANA
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE
HUMANITIES

225 Baronne Street
Suite 1411
New Orleans, Louisiana
70112-1782

504.523.4352

Educational Initiatives of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities

The Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities (LEH) has several strategies which are national models of excellence for humanities programming. Three LEH initiatives: *RELIC*, *Prime Time Family Reading*, and *Summer Teacher Institutes*, are dynamic and extremely accomplished at contributing to the enrichment to the people of Louisiana. Our innovative programs reached over 510,000 people in 1998 alone. Along with our regranting program, three **LEH** initiatives are succeeding in becoming models of excellence for humanities programming and our magazine *Louisiana Cultural Vistas* continues to win awards and praise for its beautiful and substantive representation of Louisiana culture. To excel in the future, we are exploring opportunities to best provide humanities programming to the people of Louisiana, building a catalyst for an informed, enlightened, tolerant, and civil society.

The **LEH** program **Prime Time - Family Reading** is an inter-generational family literacy endeavor, bringing together non-traditional audiences of low-income families for a series of reading, discussion and storytelling programs. Utilizing Louisiana's public libraries and more recently community centers, this program improves literacy skills and develops critical thinking skills through reading. Cited in the President's Committee of the Arts and the Humanities report *Coming Up Taller: Arts and Humanities Programs for Children and Youth at Risk*, LEH's **Prime Time** exemplifies educational initiatives that are positively affecting the state of Louisiana. The report, dedicated to celebrating programs that "provide crucial building blocks for children's healthy development" recognizes the innovative teaching strategies within the program that impart new skills and encourage new perspectives.

To date, 30 parishes benefit from the **LEH Prime Time - Family Reading** program. The states of Mississippi, Arkansas and Texas started **Prime Time** sites last year and this year the program has expanded again to include Montana, Georgia and Connecticut. With planned quality growth, **Prime Time** will reach new audiences every year, striving toward 50% growth in the next five years. This program is becoming a national model for family literacy with more states becoming interested in its success.

Louisiana Cultural Vistas is gaining attention and viewership each year with a current readership of over 80,000. As a vehicle for the educational and cultural community, we want to implement our plan to put *Louisiana Cultural Vistas* in the hands of 5,000 middle and high school teachers of humanities subjects teachers, providing an effective resource for new information about Louisiana. In addition to providing the resource to teachers, we wish to get this serious and substantive reflection on Louisiana culture to 1,400 journalists across the nation, widening exposure to our state's triumphs in art and culture. To date, *Louisiana Cultural Vistas* has provided twice as many pages as the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Our magazine is a way for promoting what is uniquely Louisiana. Advertising space is available in our award winning magazine should you wish to purchase advertising space.

Begun in 1983, **RELIC** is an acronym for Readings in Literature and Culture, an on going series of projects consisting of adult humanities reading programs. The program, developed and offered by the LEH, is administered by the Louisiana Library Association. RELIC recruits humanities scholars who have an aptitude for engaging the adult segment of a community, thereby creating an enthusiastic atmosphere for a lively discussion on the broader meanings of literary content. To date, over 50,000 people have been involved in the RELIC program. In addition, over 100 scholars from 22 institutions have led these programs. Seven different subject areas and accompanying syllabi are the topics of interest for the RELIC program, each probing the primary issues brought to bare by the literature.

Summer Teacher Institutes, begun in 1985, have been taught by some of the state's finest university professors. The LEH has funded a total of one hundred and sixteen (116) *Summer Teacher Institutes*, providing advanced knowledge of humanities subjects to high school and middle-school teachers. Through intensive graduate

seminars, teachers are able to utilize and enrich the subjects they teach children throughout the state. Over 2,300 teachers have enrolled in STIs since the program's inception. These teachers, in turn, teach 350,000 children annually. Educational initiatives like this one are so important to the health of Louisiana's culture, the intellectual strength of Louisiana's children and the prosperity of this state's communities.

Programming at the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities contributes significantly to the improvement of the quality of education and literacy in Louisiana. Every initiative is aimed at addressing needs at every educational, geographic and socio-economic level, making the LEH a national pace setter in humanities programming.

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Prime Time Family Reading Time

Press Clippings

Louisiana Cultural Vistas, *Editor's Column*, Spring Issue 1999

National quarterly magazine with a readership of 80,000

Today's Librarian, June 1999 Issue

National monthly magazine for librarians circulated to the nation's 10,000 largest libraries

New Orleans Times-Picayune, *Midtown Picayune* (local interest) section Thursday, September 17, 1998

Daily metropolitan newspaper, circulation 450,000

Denham Springs-Livingston Parish News, *Living in Livingston* (local interest) section, Thursday,

Weekly rural newspaper, circulation 10,500

The News Star, Monroe, Louisiana, Wednesday, October 1, 1997

Daily mid-size urban newspaper, circulation 40,000

The Daily World, Opelousas, Louisiana, *Letters to the Editor* section, June 25, 1998

Daily suburban newspaper, circulation 13,500

EDITOR'S COLUMN



Prime Time—Family Reading Time

To a literate person, the actual life situation of an illiterate parent is almost incomprehensible, however profound our sympathy or sincere our commitment to the idea of a literate citizenry. Those adept at reading and writing—especially if their parents and their parents before them were similarly literate—take reading and writing as much for granted as fish do water, birds do the very air, or the sighted take their vision. We read with and to our children in the company of books, secure in the naturalness of the bond we have between us, and comfortable in our ability to encourage and enlighten our children if they falter.

But imagine your quandary and your helplessness were your children to be studying Russian or Chinese and they came to ask your assistance with their homework. Imagine the opaqueness of the Cyrillic alphabet or the impenetrability of the ideograms and your absolute inability to order any of those symbols into coherent words, let alone phrases or sentences, which will assist your children's comprehension. Add to that your chagrin if you knew you were *expected* to have this knowledge. Yet this is a fair analogy for the situation confronting thousands upon thousands of our fellow citizens in the evening following every school day.

In Louisiana alone, nearly 1.6 million of our citizens—more than one of three—are estimated to be functionally illiterate. And while the child of literate parents almost never becomes illiterate, except in the rare instances of a true learning disability, there is an overwhelming likelihood that the child of illiterate parents will inherit their inability to read or write.

Families are the Solution

Here in Louisiana, we are fortunate in having a family literacy program that considers families—not schools, not government—as the true solution to the problem. **Prime Time—Family Reading Time** is the model family literacy program developed by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities which has now been conducted in 40 of the state's 64 parishes, mostly thanks to support from the State of Louisiana and the National Endowment for the Humanities. In addition, **Prime Time** is being piloted at eight sites in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Texas, and teams are about to be trained from the states of Montana, Georgia, and Connecticut. Pending is a grant request to the National Endowment for the Humanities, which in partnership with the American Library Association will further place **Prime Time** in ten more states throughout the country. For once, Louisiana may lay claim to being the source of a solution to illiteracy, not just being one of its most unfortunate and prominent examples.

Prime Time focusses on bonding families around the act of reading and discovering the public library as a resource to be enjoyed and thoroughly exploited. The primary target audience is low-income and low-literacy families with at-risk children. Our field experience has shown that parents are willing to do for their children what they had been unwilling to do for themselves. After graduating from the program, most families make the transition from not even owning a library card to borrowing on average a book a week per person. As Bertney Langley, one of our storytellers from Elton put it, "It is remarkable to see parents and children who clearly do not feel comfortable in the library setting initially, come 'out of their shells' enough to join in discussions about such topics as magic, fairness, greed, and death." The reading list for **Prime Time** is carefully culled from our research into children's literature which is exemplary in literary skill and which addresses important humanities themes and topics. This content is also what makes **Prime Time** that most rare of creations: both a literacy *and* a humanities program.

Only the Beginning

Mind you, those in dire need of literacy services are not always at the head of line to receive them. A library in Texas which approached its social services agencies to recruit its enrolled families on public assistance was rebuffed with the explanation that no one would be interested in participating in a literacy program until the little league season was over some six months later! While this appalls, it should not surprise, not in a country where virtually every daily paper has an extensive section on sports, and students spend more time practicing or watching sports than they are required to devote to study.

For all its initial success, **Prime Time** is still in its infancy. To move beyond being a pilot project and be truly effective in reaching the people who need it in significant and appropriate numbers, we need to be able to reach at least 10,000 people a year as compared to the 2,000 we do at present. Further investment in such cutting-edge programs will pay rich dividends for all our communities in the future.

—Michael Sartisky, Editor in Chief

LOUISIANA
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VISTAS

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Executive Editor
Nick Marinello

Managing Editor/Art Director
David Johnson

Design Assistant
Laura Ladendorf

Poetry Editor Photo Editor
Ralph Adamo John Lawrence

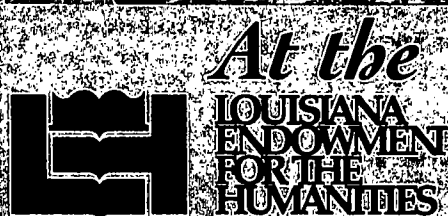
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Bill Plasse

Contributors
Jason Berry, Lee Estes, Gail Feigelbaum, Ernest Hill, Don Lee Keith, Deborah Luster, Doug MacCash, Kevin McCaffrey, Kevin Murphy, Ben Sandmel, Jonathon Slack

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Our grants support both popular and classical humanities. Since 1971, the LEH has provided over \$9 million for more than 1,700 projects. More than 2,000 middle and high school teachers from across Louisiana have attended LEH Summer Teacher Institutes, bringing back to their 250,000 students new perspectives on humanities subjects ranging from the Harlem Renaissance to Chinese culture and history. Louisiana history, Southern folktales, Southeastern Native American culture, and literature of the American West are four of the subjects currently covered in the LEH-funded reading program for adults. *Readings in Literature and Culture* (RELIC) has yet rolled 48,000 readers in 61 parishes. *Louisiana Cultural Vistas* quarterly magazine brings LEH grant projects to the printed page for 80,000 Louisianians. *Prime Time Family Reading Time*, a unique LEH literacy program, brings at-risk families together with storytellers and scholars to improve literacy skills and to share new worlds through reading. Call 1 (800) 909-7990.



photos, from top, painting by Clementine Hunter, courtesy of New Orleans Museum of Art; antique clock, courtesy of Louisiana State Museum; Streetcar, courtesy of Historic New Orleans Collection; Mardi Gras Indian by Sydney Byrd.

Irish New Orleans

LEH-funded film premieres on public television

Irish New Orleans, an LEH-funded documentary that chronicles Irish-immigrant history in the Crescent City from the late 1700's to the present, premiered on WYES public television March 10.

The film's exploration of the local Irish influence begins in 1769 when Alexander O'Reilly, an Irish expatriate, was appointed by the King of Spain as the second Spanish Governor of Louisiana. The earliest Irish immigrants to New Orleans in the late 1700s and early 1800s were affluent settlers looking for opportunity. During the mid-1800s, thousands more landed in the city, escaping from their homeland during the potato famine.

Irish New Orleans features several New Orleanians reminiscing about growing up Irish including Joseph McKay, who, at age 106, is the oldest active member of the Ancient Order of Hibernians; James E. Fitzmorris, Jr., former lieutenant governor of Louisiana; William J. McCrossen, superintendent of the New Orleans Fire Department; and Mary Ann McGrath Swaim, director of the New Orleans School of Irish Dance.

Malachy McCourt, an Irish storyteller, recounts the horrors of the potato famine and the ensuing mass immigration.

From St. Patrick's downtown to the Irish Channel's St.

Alphonsus, the parish church was the center of Irish community life. *Irish New Orleans* visits several of the city's historic Catholic churches. The film traces some of the religious history of the local Irish population, such as the Sisters of Mercy, a religious order founded in Dublin in 1827 whose members cared for yellow fever victims in the Irish community, provided job training to Civil War widows, and established free day-care centers.

Many facets of Irish culture have faded in the successive generations, but local groups such as the Ancient Order of the Hibernians, the Irish Cultural Society and two Irish dance schools keep traditions alive. *Irish New Orleans* looks beyond stereotypes to present a culturally authentic portrait of the Irish in the Crescent City.

Check your local television listings for future rebroadcasts.

The documentary Irish New Orleans explores the Crescent City's Hibernian heritage.



TODAY'S librarian

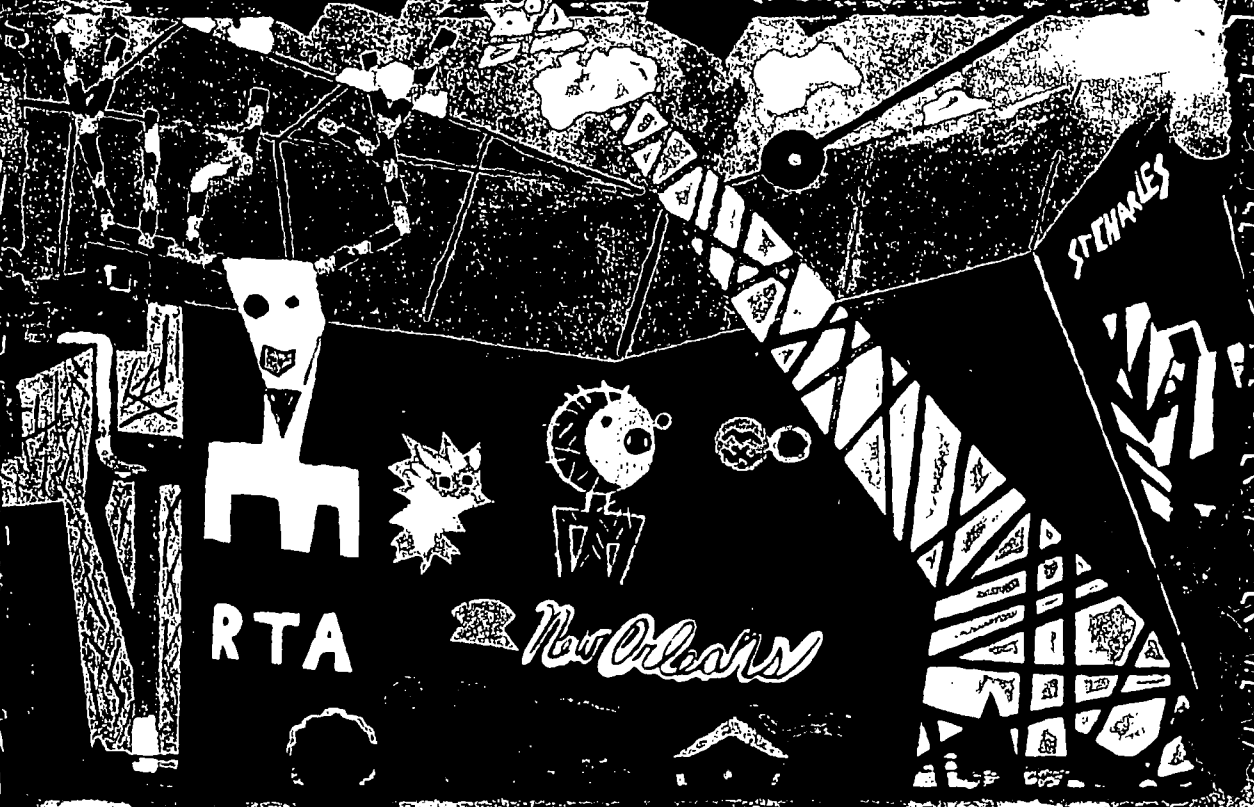
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Volume 2, Number 6

Art by Doug McCash, *The Day the Animals Took the Streetcar*. Photo provided by Louisiana Public Library.



cover story

II Literacy and Libraries ... Finding the Niche

Nine years ago, New Orleans Public Library served as the test site for a family literacy program funded by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. Today "Primetime Family Reading Time" is active in libraries throughout Louisiana with outreach versions in three states. The program could go nationwide next year.

by Kimberly Hundley

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Literacy and Libraries .. finding the niche New Orleans gives rave reviews to 'Primetime' family program

by Kimberly Hundley



The "Primetime" program brings smiles to participants at the Broad Street Branch Library.

program called "Wake Up and Read!" sponsored by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities (LEH). Today the eight-week program, geared for low-income families with poor reading skills, is offered in libraries throughout the state with offshoots in Mississippi, Texas and Arkansas.

Unlike "Connections" and other projects that encourage adult literacy, this one requires the presence of children and expects family members to read as a unit. Libraries are also more involved—librarians do the recruiting, get families to sessions and strategize on how to keep them coming back. Content of the hour-long meetings is left to a professional storyteller and a discussion leader, both funded by the LEH, which also buys storybooks for readers to keep.

"Primetime Family Reading Time," as the revised program is called, may be coming soon to a library near you. Proponents with the Louisiana Humanities Council and American Librarians Association will learn in July about their co-bid for a federal grant to take the project nationwide.

The small Broad Street branch hosted New Orleans' most recent chapters of Primetime. Branch Manager Geraldine Harris says the program not only improved reading skills and relationships among family members but also built trust between the library and community. "The people loved it," Harris says. "Of those who were in Primetime I in the fall, we got three-fourths of them into Primetime II this spring. They loved it. They wanted more of it, and they wanted the programs to last longer."

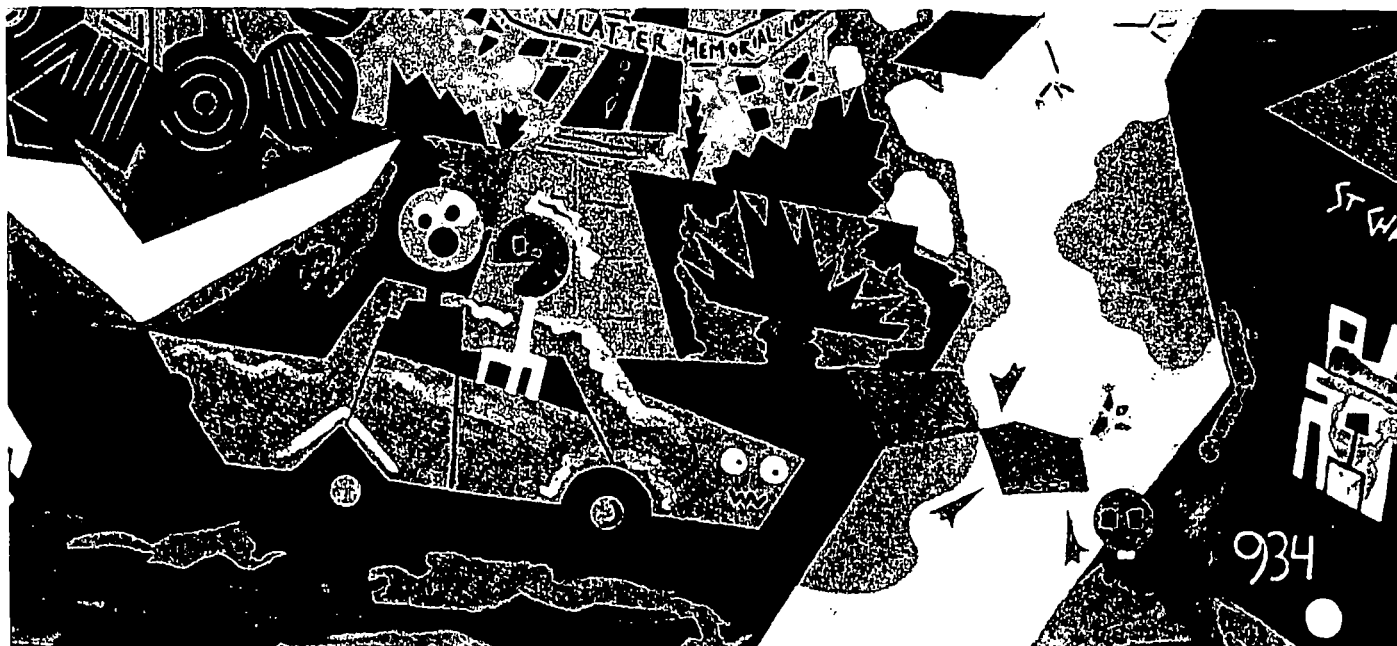
Recruitment was undeniably staff intensive. "I can't even begin to tell you," Harris says by way of description. Press releases were sent out, churches contacted and library visitors approached. The most fertile source for participants turned out to be the nearby elementary school.

"My library is in a very diverse neighborhood," Harris says. "We have upper-middle class and low income. We have a housing project less than a mile from us. The way I approached it was to contact the elementary school and ask 'Chapter One' teachers (who work with children reading below grade level) to find candidates. The teacher then approached the parents of those

"See mommy and daddy read. See them read to baby. Smile, baby, smile! See mommy and child read together. Read, child, read!"

With apologies to Spot, Dick and Jane, the story of literacy is just about that simple. Caregivers who are able to read, and who read to their small charges, are far more likely to produce children who will be reading adults. The truism certainly isn't news to librarians, who grapple with a more puzzling question: Where do libraries fit in the movement to boost family literacy?

New Orleans Public Library Acting Director Tiana Williams believes she has one answer. Nine years ago, her library agreed to be the pilot site for a new



Doug McCash's mural *The Day the Animals Took the Streetcar* enlivens the children's section at NOPL's Latter Memorial Library.

“Parents trust us more now. We have a base we can work with when we have other programing.”

**Geraldine Harris—
Broad Street Branch Manager**

children. The school also happens to have a strong PTA that encouraged families to come.”

Of the 24 families who signed up, most were single-parent with more than one child. Weekly attendance averaged about 15 families, with 11 completing the entire program. Sessions were lively, full of laughter and rapid discussion. Harris provided refreshments and door prizes to encourage attendance and arranged a separate story time for younger children. During breaks, Harris and her staff took the opportunity to make presentations about the library's other services.

“We did get new users out of it. I believe we issued 14 library cards, which is a lot for us,” Harris says. “Parents trust us more now. We have a base we can work with when we have other programing. Parents will come in now and say ‘Oh, so-and-so has an assignment. Where can I find this?’ Or in some cases, they know how to find it because we showed them how to use the computers.”

Acting Director Williams can't keep the enthusiasm out of her voice when she talks about the program's success in New Orleans. She has good reason. U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, after attending the Primetime graduation at Broad, heralded the project as more than a boon for literacy.

“She saw it as an intervention program, the quality was so high,” Williams says. “When I left Broad library that day my buttons weren't literally popping off my chest, but metaphorically I was that proud. The children, the teachers, everybody had enjoyed it.”

Peter Lollis, his wife and their two children attended the “Wake Up and Read!” pilot in 1990 when Lollis could barely read. Today Lollis, 45, has

earned a GED and plans to enroll fall semester at Delgado Community College. Speaking from his home in New Orleans, he described the literacy program's impact on his family, and the pivotal role it played in his ongoing struggle to master reading.

“It really gave my children a boost up on reading,” says Lollis. “They've still got their books around here somewhere. We used to go every Saturday and they really enjoyed it. It showed me how important it was to read. I was just coming into reading then. It really helped me out—I was coming into the knowledge of reading but not to the understanding of it, of seeing how people put things together. It set us off in a whole new direction with me making sure that they (the children) knew how to read.”

Key to the program's popularity with families, Williams believes, is the high quality of people brought in by LEH. Often storytellers are professional actors who use theatrics and song in their readings, and discussion leaders are university professors who know how to ask open-ended questions that spark critical thinking.

The LEH developed Primetime partially out of a concern for literacy—The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that one of every six Louisiana adults is unable to read at any level. As a federally funded organization, however, LEH must follow its mandate to support the humanities—literature, culture, the human experience—not the ABCs. Like many libraries, the Louisiana Humanities Council was struggling to find its place in promoting literacy.

“As people who love books, we had some responsibility but we weren't sure what our niche would be,” explains Kay Mettelka, LEH deputy director of



Photos Provided by Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities.

*"I am alone,
but surrounded by people.
They talk and instruct.
I watch and hear
but they can't stop me.
Nobody can stop me
from being who I am."*

Kristina Cangemi, 14
Gloucester, Massachusetts



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programs. "At the Humanities Council we didn't think of ourselves as teaching the mechanics of reading, but comprehension and critical thinking. What we focus on is reading books and talking about ideas." The original Primetime program was crafted as a happy medium. It would reach out to a nontraditional audience, encourage literacy and fulfill the endowment's directive.

"We have two goals: One is to change attitudes toward reading," Mettelka says. "Many of our families have seen books only in school—for the most part shabby textbooks or stories that no one who is really smart would like to read anyway. We want to show them the really good books, the Corretta Scott Kings, the ALA notables—that are beautifully written and illustrated. Second, we want to change behavior. We want to get people who are not normally library users to get cards and feel comfortable to go back.

"We're not naïve enough to think we can make major changes in children's reading levels over an eight-week program, but if families continue to read together that will bring about noticeable changes."

The LEH takes great pains to measure the effectiveness of its programs. Mettelka says families are telling the endowment they are having fun with Primetime. They like reading as a family. And they like it more than TV.

Three times in the past, the National Endowment for the Humanities has given a thumbs up to LEH grant requests to expand Primetime. Currently the NEH is funding a nationwide expansion of Vermont-based Connections, which is now in 40 libraries throughout the country. Tom Phelps, who heads the division of public programs in Washington, D.C., declined to speak in detail about his vision for Primetime because the Louisiana grant request is pending before his office.

"I think there is great interest in literacy programs on the part of libraries, per se," Phelps allows. "If we can fund a couple of these, like Connections and Primetime, to do nationally we will in fact have great influence on the field, because either or both of them will, I think, become models for this kind of work."

Phelps says he's attended a few classes himself and witnessed debates about such books as *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, in which the wolf

claims he was framed. It's these kinds of discussions that get people thinking "on a new plane" about their place in society, he says—and that's exciting for the NEH. "One who says that democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizenry, as Jefferson did, meant that we have to be able to discuss issues and we have to think about them critically," Phelps says. "In order to do that, we have to think about what the points of view on the issues are.

And you get that not only by reading but from discussing."

If the NEH grant comes through, about 20 additional libraries could be involved in Primetime, according to ALA Director of Public Programs Deb Robertson. Librarians should look for an announcement this fall, with applications accepted through early spring. Programs could actually be under way in libraries by Fall 2000, Robertson says.

'Primetime Family Reading Time' Primer

A Adult caregivers and children 6 to 12 years old are invited to attend hour-long reading sessions at the library once a week for six to eight consecutive weeks.

B Each family is given three or four picture books per week and instructed to read them at home before the next meeting. The books have a common theme, such as honesty, courage or greed.

B A professional storyteller starts the session by reading a book aloud. Sometimes the story is acted out and the audience members play roles.

C A discussion leader, usually a university professor, draws the group into talking about the books, asking open-ended questions such as "What is fairness?"

C Stipends and book costs are paid by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. The librarian's responsibility is to provide space and recruit families to participate.

D Primetime has an optional Part II, building on the first eight-week session, featuring myths, fairytales and folktales. A third part focusing on animal stories is under development.

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New Orleans Public Library, Main



Tiana Williams
NOPL acting director

Harris will be doing her best to bring Primetime back to the Broad branch next September. The positive of humanities' edification aside, Harris likes what the program does for her library.

"It's a lot of extra work but I would like to do it again, mainly because it brought people into the library and it

involved everyone on my staff," she says. "It made us a part of the community. The only way we are going to survive as a library is to have people use us. And the only way to get people in here is to show them that we are willing to work with them, that we are here, and that we want to be part of their community." □

Circulation: 1 million annually

Employees: 87

Book-buying budget: \$1 million in 1999, an all-time high due to budget carryover

Size: 148,000 square feet

Branches: 12

Founded: In 1843, a wealthy merchant bequeathed this Bourbon Street house to the city on condition it be used as a library. This sparked a string of events leading to the 1896 ordinance establishing a "great free library" for the city.

Electronic access policy: No filters; parents are expected to monitor their children. A guide to appropriate use is posted on display screens with computers placed in high-traffic areas to encourage good behavior.

Website: Officially dubbed NUTRIAS, the library's site has attracted nationwide attention as a model home page and excellent source for genealogists. Thanks to the city's rich trove of historical records—and a couple of ambitious webmasters—NOPL offers an

outstanding collection of online data, including marriage records dating back to 1846; suit records from district court; slave emancipation records; and building plans from city archives. The site's humorous name was inspired by Louisiana's version of the gopher—a WEB-footed, nasty, furry, yellow-footed nutria. Louisianians have steadfastly endured various PR campaigns to transform the pest into a source of state pride and (gulp) food. Witty webmasters even posted a picture of the rodent at the site: www.gnofn.org/~nopl/.

Programs: Enrollment in the children's summer reading program increased 144 percent from 1997 to 1998 due to efforts of a club committee. Other offerings include book discussion groups, strong Black History Month presentations, and a current Franco-Pete exhibit celebrating the 300th birthday of Louisiana's connection with France.

Tidbit: Louisiana was one of a handful of states to benefit in 1998 from the Gates Library Foundation, with New Orleans receiving \$218,000. Not only was the library system able to buy 67 computers, but Gates provided technical support for a year and training for staff members.

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THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 1998

FAMILY LEARNING



Discussion leader Earle Bryant, associate professor of English at UNO, asks young program participants for their comments on the day's stories.

PHOTOS BY JOSEPH T. McCONNELL III

Family reading program a real success story

by ELIZABETH DONZE
contributing writer

Last spring, when Sandra Moore heard about a family reading program at the Broad Branch Public Library, she thought it would be just another outing to occupy her children on a Saturday morning.

The eight-week program offered Moore and her sons, Christopher, 10, and Terrence, 11, the opportunity to read and discuss with other families stories focusing on themes such as greed, courage, fairness and cleverness.

"It turned out to be much more than I expected," said Moore, a parent aide and crossing guard at Andrew H. Wilson School, which her sons attend. "I found out how much enjoyed it. It was nice to be read to for a change after reading to the boys for so long. It's nice to have it turned around."

Families citywide will have another opportunity to immerse themselves in great stories when the free Prime Time Family Reading Time program returns to the Broad Branch, 4300 S. Broad St., for eight consecutive Saturdays beginning Oct. 3.

Developed through a grant from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities and first tried out in some of the state's libraries in 1991, the program operates on the premise that group reading

"Not only did we get the parents, we had uncles and aunts and grandparents in here discussing books with the children."

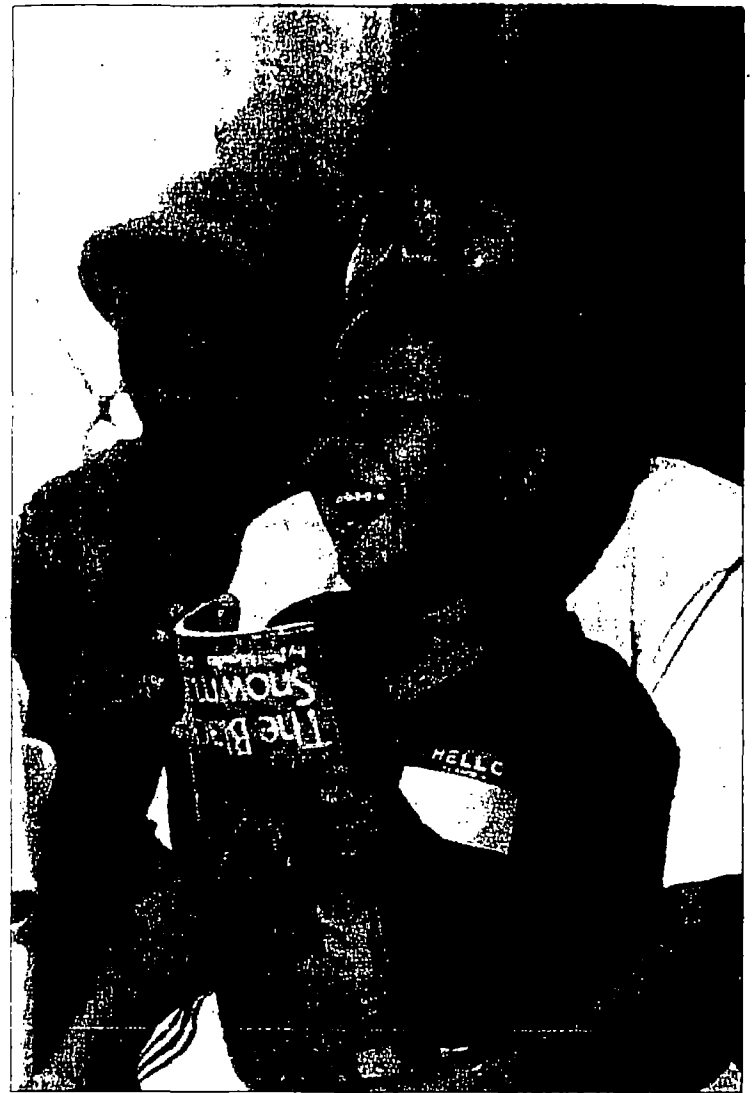
GERADINE HARRIS
Broad Branch Library
manager

and examination of literature can be springboards to a family's lifelong love of books and appreciation for the public library.

"It teaches families, especially those that may be at risk or who may not have had the experience of being read to as children, the sheer joy of reading," said Broad Branch Manager Geraldine Harris, who saw 14 families through the program last spring.

"Not only did we get the parents, we had uncles and aunts and grandparents in here discussing books with the children. If the parent couldn't come on a given Saturday, they traded off with another adult relative. They made sure that those children came," Harris said.

Targeted at parents and children 6 through 12, Prime Time applies an approach that is part book club, part storytelling hour and part English course . . . without the exams.



Luzviminda Baker holds her 4-year-old son, Luther Baker Jr., at the reading session.

At each session, parents are assigned three or four stories from children's literature and folklore to read aloud at home with their children.

At the next session, the assigned stories are re-read for the participating families by local storyteller and dramatist Chakula cha Jua. The group then spends 40 or so minutes dissecting the stories with the help of Earle Bryant, a University of New Orleans associ-

ate professor of English.

During last spring's program, "the families had to compare and contrast the stories, interpret themes and examine things like the action of the protagonist. They had, in effect, a moralistic discussion about the books," Harris said.

For example, during a session examining fairness, the group probed "The True Story

See READING, Page 2

CONTINUED

Reading

From Page 1

of the Three Little Pigs," a retelling of the popular tale from the wolf's point of view. Also underscoring the fairness theme was the story of "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day," which revealed that adults do not hold a monopoly on stress. Children feel it, too.

"We had read a few of the stories already. But the way they presented it — with Chakula's enthusiasm and getting to talk about it with Dr. Earle — it was like hearing it for the first time," Moore said.

Harris thinks the program also succeeds because of what it is not.

While many ethical and cultural topics are examined during the literary discussions, the group is never allowed to turn into a rap session. Moreover, she said, Prime Time is not a class on the importance of reading.

"Prime Time is not about preaching to parents about what they should do. We never tell them things like, 'You'd better cut that television off at home,'" Harris said. "They come to realize the joy of family reading time by doing just that: reading together as a group."

The theme of the upcoming Prime Time-Family Reading Time series will be "Stories From Long Ago." The readings, pulled from world mythology and folklore and arranged around themes such as beauty, commitment and hope, will include classics such as "Echo and Narcissus," "St. George and the Dragon" and "The Frog Prince."

The program also acts as a natural plug for the library, with Harris and her staff of Prime Time volunteers registering participants for library cards and

highlighting the Broad Branch's other offerings, such as weekly storytelling sessions, a Learning Center offering GED exam preparation for adults and a newly enhanced computer center.

"Many of our families in the spring program stayed 30 minutes or more after the (end-of-session) refreshments," Harris said. "We showed them the computers and how to access the Internet. A lot of people didn't know that they could check out videos from the library, or that their children came here after school to do research on the computer."

"The most rewarding thing was the amount of interaction that happened. Families were reading together, talking about books together, eating together. You really couldn't tell one family from another. It crossed racial lines; it crossed economic lines," Harris said.

Scheduled to take place in a dozen towns and cities in Louisiana this fall, and already making waves in Texas, Arkansas and Mississippi, Prime Time-Family Reading Time has become a model in the campaign against illiteracy.

Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities Director Michael Sartisky said the program, which the endowment recently copyrighted for national franchising, marks the beginning of a solution for Louisiana's estimated 1.6 million functionally illiterate residents.

"We see the family — not schools, not special programs — as the most effective unit for spreading literacy," Sartisky said. "Almost never are the children of literate parents illiterate."

The Broad Branch is the only area library to offer Prime Time this fall. Registration is limited to 25 families.

For information, call 596-2676.

Section

C

THURSDAY

Living

IN LIVINGSTON

INSIDE



Watson
scouts attain
Eagle rank

CA

Ready for Prime Time



Members of Cindy Gill's classes at Levi Milton Elementary, presented a skit, "Book Characters" as part of the Library's Prime Time — Reading Time program. Pictured are (back row, from left) Nathan Forte, Kayla Arnold, Greg Hall, Tonya Williams (librarian),

(center row) Cindy Gill (teacher), Anna Gill, Jess Forte, Cameron Priest, Victoria Priest, Joshua Dominick (front row) Megan Williams, Delaina Arnold and Nesa Rico.

Library turns out better readers

BY LEQUITA DICKS
THE NEWS

LIVINGSTON — What stereotype do many people carry around about the public library?

Somber? Dull? No talking allowed?

The Livingston Parish Library has been anything but that for the families showing up on Tuesday evenings for the last several weeks. To them, the library is a place you go to change your life.

Their six evenings included story-telling, being encouraged to talk about the story and even their feelings, plays in which they are the performers, beautiful books to take home, pizza, fruit, and pop.

Families will bond with each other, become friends. They won't want it to end. This is one of the few family activities available.

Dianne Brady
Statewide project director of
Prime Time Reading Program

and even cheerleading. And ... by the way ... they learned to read better.

With grant funds received from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, the Library hosted a six weeks long program, "Prime Time Reading Time" between Feb. 23 and March 30. Children were recommended by their teachers, many because of their reading difficulties. They came to the weekly meetings at the library along with their entire family to hear a professional actor and storyteller, Oneal Isaac, read and tell stories, followed by a discussion

time led by Dr. Jill Brody, LSU anthropology and linguistics professor.

The Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities is a private, statewide, non-profit affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The LEH's mission is to provide and broaden access to an appreciation of history, literature, language, philosophy, and culture to all the people of Louisiana.

Prime Time is a six week series of reading and discussion programs and includes sessions on such themes as families, independence and self-reliance. Folklore and fairy tales are used to introduce parents to the benefits and pleasures of reading aloud to their children.

The program aims to expand participants' understanding of reading through the use of children's literature. It focuses on expanding the teaching of literature, history and cultural values.

Allen Cunningham, director of the Livingston Parish Library System, and Alex Kropog, assistant director, oversee the program. Kropog said attendance, which has grown steadily, averaged about 70 for this past session, with a high of 80 one night.

"We tell the story, discuss, and try to apply everyday situations," Kropog said. "It is a different way of teaching. We have kids from Walker, Doyle, Holden, Albany and Springfield attending."

This is the first time Livingston Parish has offered this program and Kropog hopes to be able to begin another series in the fall.

At the fourth session on March 16, students in Cindy Gill's Title I classes at Levi Milton Elementary in Walker opened the meeting with the presentation of a "Book Character" play. Tonya Williams, the school's librarian, portrayed Mother Goose while narrating the play. The young actors were beautifully and fully costumed.

Oneal Isaac, professional actor and storyteller, read and told stories. Dr. Jill



Allen Cunningham Alex Kropog Oneal Isaac Dianne Brady Dr. Jill Brody



Dr. Jill Brody, Discussion leader, and Oneal Isaac, read and tell stories and lead discussion of same with children at the Livingston Parish Library.

Brody, LSU anthropology and linguistics professor, was an enthusiastic and pixie-like discussion leader. After reading "Fanny's Dream," the participants, both children and parents, were invited to share their own dreams with the group.

One young mother expressed her yearning to "finish school, to be a scientist, and coach children." The rapport between leaders and listeners was evident.

Dianne Brady, statewide project director of the Prime Reading Program said Louisiana presently has 12 of these programs. Workers are provided training.

"Alex Kropog has been wonderful getting community support and contributions," Brady said. "We are about building community and reinforcing family, through Prime Time Reading and Discussion Program."

Brady said that the program even pro-

vides funds for transportation for those who have no way to get to the library. A child care storyteller has a separate session with the 3-to-5-year-olds.

They do pre-reading activities. They may be given such aids as finger puppets in connection with the same stories the older children are hearing. This makes it possible for the little ones to join the family discussion later.

"We are really pleased with the response from this small community, so many coming out," Brady said. "The leaders' enthusiasm is contagious and gets across to participants. Alex opens the library in the most welcoming way. Oneal is a marvelous actor and storyteller. His rapport with people is wonderful."

See PRIME TIME, Page C3

PRIME TIME: *Families bond during unique reading experience*

FROM PAGE C1

She explains that the books used in this program are award-winning children's books.

"We don't want them to think of this as school," Brady said. "We want it to be fun. We encourage them to respond and see there is no right or wrong answer. It is what you think."

Brady said the program is working on another series with another set of books, so the children can come back.

"Families will bond with each other, become friends," she said. "They won't want it to end. This is one of the few family activities available."

Brady emphasizes that these are caring parents.

"They want what is best for their children," she said. "They want to know how to offer them programs that will stimulate them to read. They need confirmation that they are doing the right things."

As parents and children came into the library, Velva Trask, librarian at Doyle Elementary and a program volunteer, gave each family a packet containing three children's books and

a copy of the Baton Rouge "Advocate" to take home and read the following week. When the books are returned at the next meeting, new packets are passed out. All books featured during the meeting are placed on a rack with opportunity to check out.

Door prizes are awarded after the readings and discussions.

When asked what he liked best about the meetings, Justin May, age 10, said, "I like Mr. Oneal's stories."

Amber May, 5, said, "When they talk about stuff." Michelle Thomas, 5, likes taking books home and enjoys the stories Isaac and Brody tell.

At the end of the meeting, the Doyle High School cheerleaders led a resounding library cheer, with children selected randomly from the audience holding the letters spelling out L I B R A R Y. The families then ate pizza, cookies, and apple punch donated by local businesses and supermarkets.

Other volunteers serving the food, registering participants, and assisting in the evening's activities were Daisy Smith, Donna Bencaz, Joyce McIntyre and Terri Oxley.



The News-Star/Michael Meeks

Storyteller Wanda Ellard uses her baby lion puppet to catch the attention of Ivan Manning, left, Corey Chnceol and his sister Courtney in

the opening session of the Prime Time Family Reading Time program at the West Monroe Branch of the Ouachita Parish Public Library.

Reading goes Prime Time

The first session of Prime Time Family Reading Time began at the West Monroe Branch of the Ouachita Parish Public Library Tuesday. The eight-week program is designed to recruit families to the public libraries for discussions and library orientation. The families check out sets of books which are discussed at the following session. The parents and children will learn to read and discuss the underlying meaning of the books in relation to humanities topics. Also in each session participants will learn what is available at the library and how to use the facilities. The sessions, which continue each Tuesday through November 18, will begin at 6 p.m..



Manning, 4, listens closely to the story of "The Magic Box" at the Prime Time program.

Micro Press Clipping Bureau
P.O. Box 66061
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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

LEH helps families read

(Re: "Illiteracy rate is the enemy," June 2, 1998.) Kudos for challenging the Opelousas community to actively address the problem of illiteracy which must be solved, not only in Opelousas but in every community across the state. The Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities (LEH) recognizes that the cycle of illiteracy must be broken and has responded with a statewide family literacy program that works!

Prime Time — Family Reading Time, referenced in your editorial in conjunction with the South St. Landry Community Library in Sunset, addresses the literacy needs of the whole family. Prime Time targets parents with low-level reading skills and their at-risk children, aged six and older, who will benefit from an enriched reading experience.

Once a week for eight weeks, parents and children meet at the public library for an hour of reading and discussion which uses children's books as tools to help parents improve their own reading skills, while learning to read to their children. Importantly, Prime Time also nurtures critical thinking skills in children and can help to engender a

lifelong love of reading.

To observe families learning to engage each other in conversation and to talk with each other about important issues such as Fairness, Greed, Honor, and Deceit — often for the first time — is truly a remarkable event. Because of its emphasis on humanities content dealing with culture, history and values, Prime Time is unique among literacy programs. Simply put, Prime Time teaches families to bond together around books.

The LEH believes that families, not government, are the answer to many societal problems and the feedback from our programming in communities across Louisiana supports that belief. For instance, parents in Prime Time programs across the state report that closer bonds are created between them and their children, and entire families are introduced to the many resources and services available to them at their public library.

Prime Time proves that even parents with low literacy skills can learn to read to their children, thus breaking the cycle of intergenerational illiteracy. Prime Time effec-

tively ties multiple generations together in a unique program where the cycle of low family literacy is addressed.

According to a recent report from the National Adult Literacy Survey, "fewer than one of every two adults in Louisiana can read well enough to fill out tax and welfare forms or help their children with fifth-grade homework." Because the family unit is the primary source of knowledge, language, values, and social relations for young children, and because children's early experiences are primary predictors of later direction, the LEH began statewide implementation of Prime Time — Family Reading Time in 1995.

Prime Time programs have now been conducted in 22 parishes and the LEH has scheduled programs for eight additional parishes. In fact, the South St. Landry Community Library's third Prime Time program is scheduled for next fall. Prime Time is funded by the LEH, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the state of Louisiana.

Morgan Goudeau
Member
LEH Board of Directors



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Brochure, "Prime Time Family Reading Time," 2 pgs.

What is PRIME TIME – FAMILY READING TIME?

PRIME TIME is a unique eight-week program of reading, discussion, and storytelling at public libraries. A discussion leader and storyteller conduct weekly book discussion and storytelling programs.

The award-winning children's books introduce fairy tales and folk tales from around the world, stories about problems children encounter, and tales from history told for children.

PRIME TIME

reinforces the role of the **family** as a major social and economic unit.

trains **parents and children** to bond around the act of reading and learning together to improve skill and achievement.

teaches **parents and children** to read and discuss humanities topics (history, literature, and ethical issues, such as fairness, greed, honor, and deceit) as a way of fostering high academic expectations and achievement for children in low-literacy, low-income families.

encourages low-literacy, low-income **parents** to enter or continue their own educational programs, whether GED or other training, and enter the workforce.

helps **parents and children** learn how to select books and become active library users.

All programs are free and open to the public. For more information and advance registration, call your library.

Sponsored by
The Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities,
the National Endowment for the Humanities and the State of Louisiana.



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October 30

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Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good,
Very Bad Day

GREED

“WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME”

The Talking Eggs,
Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters,
Anansi and the Moss Covered Rock

COURAGE

“NO GUTS, NO GLORY”

Lon Po Po, Where the Wild Things Are, Abiyoyo

DREAMS

“DARE TO DREAM”

Fanny's Dream, Amazing Grace, Wagon Wheels

CLEVERNESS

“FIND A WAY”

Flossie and the Fox,
Wiley and the Hairy Man,
Dr. DeSoto

COPING

“DEAL WITH IT”

Ira Sleeps Over,
Everett Anderson's Goodbye,
The Giving Tree

DETERMINATION

“JUST DO IT”

Follow the Drinking Gourd, The Dancing Man,
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